

# Turning a Fashion Show Event into an Event Planning Class



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The Iowa State University Fashion Show is the most public event in the Textiles and Clothing (TC) Program. It is currently in its 26th year and is attended by over 1,800 guests, including Iowa State University's president, local dignitaries, elected officials and minor celebrities, and industry executives and has an annual budget of \$30,000. Every aspect, from the development of apparel designs to the planning and promotion of the runway show, is completed by undergraduate students.

In 2006, when I inherited the role of faculty advisor, I was given the additional responsibility of creating an event planning and public relations course to

support the show. As a trained historian with little to no experience in event management, I laughed, then cried, then laughed again at the task of not only serving as the liaison between the students planning the show and the TC faculty, but also formalizing the learning situation. The purpose of the course was to provide students with the opportunity to synthesize concepts and skills and actively communicate these skills by producing a professional-level fashion show.

What follows are strategies that I employed while turning a successful event into a meaningful class. The two-credit course met for three hours one day a week during the spring semester. The fashion show event was the culminating experience for the class.

## Strategy #1: Consider outcomes and learning objectives

Fashion show students were involved in all aspects of the show, including publicity; fundraising; coordination of models; organizing the jury process for evaluating the fashion designs submitted to the show; merchandising the products associated with the show; designing and building the stage and set; and organizing the music, choreography, and announcing for the show. Since students were involved in such a plethora of activities involving the sourcing of services and supplies, organization of people and property, and the creation and production of an event with a complex audience, I decided to focus the class on the concept of professionalism.

With each topic that I con- ➔ 4

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end-of-camp banquet on Friday. We think that we are prepared for this, but very little can prepare you for trading your desk job for a week as a dancer.

Morning samba with Tony introduces new ways to move our hips and legs to achieve that characteristic samba bounce; mambo with David is fast and furious, making the smooth and elegant foxtrot with Urs feel like a vacation for the feet. I change heel height at lunch, add socks for padding, and carry on. Cha cha with Valentina is a tour de force of technique, as she regularly drops to the floor to move a student's foot a millimeter or two into correct position; she suggests that if we are really doing cha cha correctly, our legs will feel like they begin at our bottom ribs.

Back to Urs for waltz technique; I want to have proper foot technique, but what I want worse is to have a nerve block of some sort to put the balls of my feet back on speaking terms with my body. By the seventh hour of classes, we are auditors, sitting on the sidelines taking notes.

"The hardest problem is very

minimal," Wakefield says of her camp. "Sometimes it is hard for [the campers] to endure the physical demands of the dance instruction. They give out after about four hours. The best reward is that they keep coming back for more the next morning and are practicing long hours after the classes."

We top out at five and a half hours of dancing in any one day, an endurance mark we are unable to break for the rest of the week, and one that holds even after we return home. Tuesday night, I do yoga and go to bed. Just before dawn, I wake my husband with the news that my legs have tightened up painfully. "The good news," I groan, "is that my legs feel like they start just under my ribs."

### The rest of the week: Little extras

For the rest of the week, we enjoy the little extras planned into the camp at BYU. Wednesday morning we each buy new dance shoes from the on-site guest vendor, adding an eighth pair and a much-needed alternate heel height to my arsenal, and we soldier on. Wednesday night's camp banquet and social dance featured some of the best food, and some of the best amateur

dancing from the BYU student team, of the entire week. Thursday was all about serious study, with plenty of time for practice.

Friday, nearly everyone was preparing for the camp closing banquet, at which students would have the opportunity to perform as part of their classes in both foxtrot and samba. The performance was a nice touch for the campers who live in more isolated parts of the country, where opportunities to perform as an amateur are limited.

The highlight, however, was the professional show, in which three of the four instructor couples performed some of their best routines. The pros made themselves available for photos after the show, and some even joined the campers at an after-hours party, proving that Wakefield knows what she is doing when she hires these accessible dance faculty members.

Wakefield and BYU have succeeded in creating a camp experience for adults that other campuses with other focuses would do well to learn from and to emulate. It is the perfect melding of university culture and academic strength to provide a unique summertime activity. ■

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sidered, lesson that I prepared, guest speaker that I invited, my purpose was to increase the awareness, appreciation, and practice of professional behavior. For me, professionalism encompasses ethical and process-oriented decision making, punctuality, respect for self and others, and positive enthusiasm. The emphasis on professionalism permeated both the classroom setting and the show planning. Faculty, longtime attendees, first-timers, administrators, and alumni all commented on the notable professionalism of the show. I believe this was a result of the class emphasis on creating an event to be proud of.

### Strategy #2: Network, network, network

As mentioned in the March Campus Events Professional, networking is part and parcel of the day-to-day work of the event planner. Rather than just lecturing my students on the importance of building relationships, I modeled networking by inviting community leaders, local apparel industry members, and alumni of the Textiles and Clothing Program as guest speakers to the class. By inviting these guests to the classroom and modeling professional behavior (handshakes, formal introductions, hand-written thank-you notes, email follow-ups informing the guests of the class progress) I demonstrated and reinforced networking skills.

Further, students witnessed the results of networking. The local convention and visitors' bureau representative promoted the fashion show on the bureau's Web site; an alumnus informed the students of stores where they could purchase inexpensive set materials; a local business person donated food, flowers, and decorations for a fund-raising event; and a student in the class received a summer internship based on meeting and networking with one of the guest speakers.

### Strategy #3: Treat the class as an event

Because the fashion show itself is planned, produced, and promoted by students, it seemed incongruous to lecture for three hours each week

during the class period. Instead, the class was organized by committees covering all aspects of show production and promotion, including alumni relations/hospitality, design, modeling, fundraising, operations/logistics, public relations/marketing, set tech, and budget management. Students interviewed during the fall semester to be the co-producers for the show, responsible for providing the overall direction of the show and the class. The co-producers in consultation with the

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faculty advisor then hired the directors for each committee. Approximately three to seven students were then assigned to committees, based on their preferences and experience. The directors for each committee were responsible for developing three assignments for their committees.

Further, students volunteered for classroom roles: introducing guest speakers; organizing thank-you notes for guest speakers; or becoming class timekeepers, attendance monitors, technology specialists, or even custodians of the room. Involvement in all operational aspects of the class empowered active participation. Students took responsibility for the successful running of each class period, evidenced by occasional student-to-student complaints about others' tardiness or talking and the degree to which students recommended other guest speakers and activities for the course. By treating the class as an event, students became aware of the importance and challenges of teamwork, cooperation, and sharing a common vision and goal for an event.

### Strategy #4: True-to-life activities

This event management and public relations course had a distinct advantage over other classes: we had

an actual event to serve as our true-to-life case study. Each week of the semester was contextually focused on a skill students would need or a challenge they were likely to encounter during the planning of a fashion show, including development of goals and objectives, designing and staging the event, marketing and promotions, operations and logistics, risk identification and management, budgeting, and leadership development.

In-class activities included short lectures by the instructor, guest speakers, case studies, student-created assignments, and reflection activities. Students in the class were responsible for creating and maintaining a journal/binder documenting their involvement in the fashion show production, completing weekly quizzes based on course readings and the reflections of guest speakers, and writing a final report that summarized their involvement in the fashion show class and offered instructions and advice to the next year's class members.

Students were also expected to formally reflect on their understanding of their leadership and teamwork growth during the course. The activities of the course became so much more meaningful for the students and the instructor when we considered how important each session was to the success of our fashion show. Students were no longer answering questions for points or credit, but rather debating and discussing the merits of one promotion strategy over another for the betterment of our show.

In all, the class has been an immense success. The structure of the course helped students bring together all the technical skills learned in other courses with the challenge of applying new material to an actual event. The class has facilitated leadership development of students, increased communication with community and apparel industry members, and enhanced the professionalism of the Iowa State University Textiles and Clothing fashion show while promoting the event to regional, national, and international audiences.

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