



The Impact of a Formal Partnership between Industry and Fashion

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Strategy. Partnerships between a fashion program and the fashion industry are usually developed based on alumnus' success at a workplace. These partnerships endure as the alumni are promoted to positions with increasing responsibilities. Employers also conduct in-house surveys to determine the relationship between an employee's degree program/university and career growth. But, there are other stakeholders who also select a university based on a graduates ability to get jobs—the parents of prospective students as well as the students, themselves. In recruitment meetings with parents and potential students, one of the most common questions asked: Where do the graduates work after college? Successful recruiting is no longer strictly dependent on the quality of the university program—employment rates of graduates are tethered to the evaluation of what is a “good” university or a “good” major. This push down effect from prospective parents and students places downward pressure on any professional degree program to build and maintain strong industry partnerships.

There is another method to develop an industry partnership. The partnership can be pursued through a metropolitan area economic development board. Economic Development Boards work with prospective companies to bring new businesses based on several factors such as: educational opportunities; universities as a resource for employees, cost of business, and quality of lifestyle.

The strategy presented is how to work with an economic development board to develop long term, formal, working partnerships. A formal partnership requires a commitment by the university program to work directly with the corporation because it will provide students with real world experiences and faculty with professional development opportunities. In contrast, traditional partnerships are informal for purposes for the faculty to bring in guest speakers for classes, as advisor board members, or internship locations for students.

Use of Resources. This partnership began with a request from a local government agency for a presentation on the United States apparel industry and a focus on San Antonio, Texas, in particular at North American Textile and Apparel Business Development Strategy Forum for the Hai Yang Sweater Industry Association. Delegates from the sweater manufacturing capital of China were looking for a location in the United States to complete garment finishing, move into design, and eventually a storefront. The delegates' goal was to find the best location for their business and the county's goal was to bring jobs into the area. The delegation not only reviewed an area's economic support and manufacturing systems, but also reviewed online the researcher's fashion program website which had course syllabi posted. Based on analysis of the (researcher's) fashion program, the delegation made an inquiry through the economic



development board for a faculty member to make a presentation about the status of U.S. apparel production. Upon completion of the presentation, questions were asked about the program and discussions occurred as to how a partnership could develop with the sweater manufacturing association and the university. How could this be mutually beneficial?

A pilot project was initiated to test protocol between the fashion program and the sweater manufacturer. Students would design knit garments and create the samples. The patterns and samples would be sent to Hai Yang, China for manufacture and then return the finished garments in time for an upcoming fashion show. Developing a project as soon demonstrated to the manufacturer the commitment the fashion program.

University protocol was also addressed since a signed partnership was desired. Internal discussions were not limited to curriculum development among fashion faculty; simultaneously discussions were held with the university legal department. A formal partnership must also establish boundaries protecting educational integrity, student rights, and faculty rights. Most importantly, the agreement must be written in its most basic structure to allow for future growth.

Impact on Curriculum Development. Reviewing the fashion curriculum in light of the partnership revealed a need to develop a “knits” course. This course would focus on sweater manufacturing (as compared to wovens) highlighting different techniques in design, patternmaking and sample making. This course would formalize the pilot project into an ongoing commitment to supply original design work. A new undergraduate major was also developed to support the partnership: Product Development (currently the fashion program offers fashion design and fashion merchandising). The product development major will focus on manufacturing processes with about a 5//50 mix of fashion design and fashion merchandising courses. A partnership between a fashion program and a Chinese manufacturer allows students to apply what is taught in class and how business actually works. Future needs include merchandising students for store front development and as account representatives. In addition, the manufacturer wants the faculty to develop a certificate program to train executives in US retailing and manufacturing business practices.

Impact on Student Employment. Within the discussions for a partnership was how students could be employed during and after graduation. Inclusive of the partnership discussions were how students (while in school) would be employed such as contracts if a design went into production; internships (both paid and unpaid) and permanent employment.

Conclusion. Given the infancy of the partnership (6 months at time of publication), it is only appropriate to delineate how to work with an economic development board: 1) if not approach, then approach local board to discuss what part of the fashion industry could be developed within the university metropolitan area. 2) Work with the legal department to determine parameters of the partnership. 3) Identify curriculum flexibility to meet the needs of the partnership and to change content as needed. 4) Identify opportunities for faculty development. 5) Emphasize the impact of employment due to the partnership not only for the metropolitan area but for students in a fashion program.