



A Model for Creating Sustainable Corporate Partnerships in Design and Merchandising Education

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Key Words: design, education, merchandising, partnerships, sustainability

United Airlines (United) donated upwards of \$25,000 in materials, resources, and prizes to an arts college in the Midwest through a design challenge, “Design for Change.” The donation consisted of 1,764 square feet of promotional banners previously used as marketing collateral for the “Fly the Friendly Skies” campaign, two round trip airline tickets to New York City for the winner, production of the winning design, and proceeds of design sales donated to two internationally recognized social enterprises. The aim of this project is to create a model for sustainable corporate partnership that supports ethically focused design and merchandising education. This concept is reflective of business and engineering programs that have long relied on corporations to support student engagement (Martin & Samels, 2015). The initial steps of the project were focused on identifying corporations that have waste and surplus materials that could be repurposed into garments or accessories. Once a corporate partner has been identified, build a relationship that is mutually beneficial. In the process of relationship building identify a long-term vision that can sustain the project for 3 or more years, and ultimately use this model to engage with other corporate partners.

In the spring of 2014 an assistant professor in fashion design requested surplus materials from United for a lesson and project on sustainable design. Through negotiations for materials United Senior Strategist for Environmental Sustainability and the Managing Director for Environmental Affairs and Sustainability became interested in the overlap between design education, sustainability, and United’s surplus materials. Due to United’s vested interest in the project, a workshop was piloted, which was the vehicle for the design challenge. The workshop had four guiding learning outcomes (a) practice design skills competently in an organized design challenge, (b) demonstrate creative problem solving when addressing the design challenge, (c) create informal peer learning networks to address problems with design and construction, and (d) formally showcase completed student work.

The workshop ran formally for 3-days and informally for an additional two days during the summer semester of 2015, enrolling 8 students ($n = 8$) from the fashion major. Students spent a majority of their time in the design studio, however a one-day excursion to O’Hare International Airport Terminal One (ORD), a United hub, gave the students insight to functional design issues (i.e. storage dimensions, fixtures, and closure issues). At ORD students were also confronted with the multi-level marketing strategy United uses to engage with their customer base, which became crucial when utilizing repurposed marketing collateral in their designs. The design brief challenged students to create a travel bag for an overnight trip based on one of two themes: technically-speaking or off the beaten path. “Technically-Speaking” was a carry all of the essential gadgets and gear needed to survive in the urban jungle: tablet, phone, chargers, adapters, and camera, not to mention the change of clothes for the flight home. “Off the Beaten

Path” would carry all of the essentials needed for a hike or trail run just outside of town: water bottle, phone/GPS, camera, sunglasses, and running shoes. The bag must fit under an airplane seat and the dimensions could not exceed 9” x 10” x 17.” The bag needed to be cost-effective to produce, aesthetically pleasing, durable, and wearable. Finally, the bag had to utilize surplus materials from United’s “Fly the Friendly Skies” (ffs) marketing collateral. When students completed their prototype bag (made of oak tag) they presented to a juried panel represented by United and affiliated partners.

Student feedback from course evaluations, review of learning outcomes, and informal conversations indicated the results from the design challenge were overwhelmingly positive. The four guiding learning outcomes measured student success in the project. (a) Each student created at least one bag from start to finish using the parameters of the challenge, keeping the theory of sustainable design central to their work, and using the recycled material as a central element to the bag design. (b) The challenge helped and hindered with student creativity, students felt they had aesthetic freedom with regard to what style of bag they created, however the size parameters caused all students to create very similar bags. It was not until the course instructor intervened that students began to truly engage in creative problem solving with the design of the bag. Additionally, the oak tag leveled the playing field during prototype development and it created a universal look for presentation to the panel. (c) All students who participated in the design challenge used one another for problem solving. The course instructor was available to answer questions and provide guidance, however the students relied primarily on one another for technical and creative assistance. (d) All 8 students presented their work to the panel this created an opportunity for students to present juried work as part of their professional development. Positive feedback related to professional development included technical and creative growth, a better understanding of juried design, and excitement around unique materials and non-traditional fashion products.

United reported equally positive results, this was observed through their investment in two finalists in lieu of one, and more importantly the commitment to sponsor an annual design challenge. United also produced a promotional documentary featuring the “Design for Change” workshop which ran on EcoSkies website and in Terminal One at ORD. Further, because of the positive feedback the National Football League and Southwest Airlines are other corporate partners that have expressed interest in working with fashion students specifically with surplus materials to create fashion products and/or accessories. In future iterations of this challenge a half or full semester course will provide students more development time resulting in stronger design, and a more diverse representation of majors with a greater focus on the merchandising and marketing aspects of the project to truly engage design and merchandising. This pilot project is ultimately the blueprint for unique and sustainable corporate partnerships. This partnership concept is transferrable to colleges and universities across the country and invites design and merchandising programs nation-wide to participate in the challenges.

Martin, J., & Samels, J. (2015). Corporate university partnerships: No longer barbarians at the gate. Retrieved December 13, 2015, from <http://www.universitybusiness.com/article/fs-cobrand>