A Lower Division General Education Course in Fashion:
Revisit Curricula in Fashion/Apparel/Textiles Programs

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Background

In fall 2013, FASH 30 Fashion and the Human Environment was created in a fashion program at a four-year university serving as an introductory course to the fashion students. PEST analysis served as a foundation of the development of this course because PEST refers to a strategic method for understanding external environment by following the framework including Political, Economic, Socio-cultural and Technological components. Built on the PEST Model, FASH 30 takes a critical look at the complex human environment by using fashion as a common thread that links the diverse facets of it together. FASH 30 provides this integrated philosophical method; and more importantly, it introduces an interdisciplinary perspective to students by utilizing fashion, a phenomenon closely connected with the millennials today.

Since FASH 30 was offered, it has become a popular class for all majors on campus. Students have been fascinated by how the human environment can be examined through the lens of fashion. Based on the student comments and feedback, in fall 2017, FASHS 30 was converted to a General Education (GE) course. In fall 2017 and spring 2018, one mini-mega section with eighty students was offered, respectively. In fall 2018 and spring 2019, two mini-mega sections were offered. Since fall 2019, three sections have been offered each semester.

Purposes

People often associate fashion solely to clothing styles, fabrics, and colors. However, in the 21st century, fashion is a popular style in many different forms. It is a prevailing style in behavior or lifestyle, or the newest creation of designers, technologists, engineers, and design managers. The traditional principles of fashion have extended to toys, music, movies, language, sports, diet, furniture, automobile, home decoration, and many parts of our lives. These trends are not only a visual representation of aesthetic and social values, but also a manifestation of significant social, psychological, cultural, environmental, economic, and global aspects of the human environment. Our curricular in many apparel/textiles programs, historically, tended to be more career oriented. In the 21st century, however, it is the time to broaden our horizon to a larger student body. Because it can weave a fascinating factual account of the interaction between fashion and the psychological, social, anthropological, historical, business, economic, global, and natural environments in which we live

The purposes of creating, developing, and offering GE courses in fashion/apparel/textiles are three-fold.

First, offering GE courses will create an opportunity to our programs to serve a bigger student body on campus, which ultimately benefits more students by educating them to become responsible citizens of the world. In the 21st century, the ultimate goals of higher education are not only to produce graduates who will be effective leaders in their chosen professions, but also to produce graduates who are valued members of their communities and responsible citizens of the world.

Second, it is an effective tool to promote our programs. Many textiles/apparel/fashion programs nationwide have been struggling with limited resources due to the relatively small size of the programs. How to promote, develop, and expand our programs have been an ongoing challenge. Offering GE courses can generate higher FTEs and recruit more students, which will create opportunities for more hiring and more budget.

Third, if GE component is added and strengthened to our curricula, our discipline will not only attract non-fashion students, but also attract scholars and researchers from other disciplines. Ultimately, it is also an effective tool to promote ITAA because a curriculum with a broader spectrum can lead to a more multi-discipline research field, which can eventually make ITAA a more interdisciplinary professional organization.

Discussions and Implications

Currently, several textiles and apparel programs in universities in the U.S. offer a very limited number of GE courses targeting all majors. The majority of those courses are more specialized in limited aspects rather than being as complete and comprehensive as FASH 30. For example, one group of GE fashion courses only cover the social, psychological, and cultural perspective. Another group of introductory fashion courses are more tailored to students who eventually aim for a career in the fashion industry

The recent organizational structural trend in many four-year universities in the U.S. shows the demand for courses focusing on fashion in the human environment. Many textiles and apparel programs in the U.S. once were subsumed under the college of design or college of textiles back when textiles and apparel were still dominating industries in the U.S. Due to the increased labor cost and advanced technology, outsourcing has been the industry trend in the U.S. for several decades. As a result, many textiles and apparel programs have been relocated to other colleges. For example, the textiles and apparel program is under College of Human Sciences at Iowa State University. A similar program in the Ohio State University is under the College of Education and Human Ecology. At the University of Missouri, the textile/apparel department is under the College of Human Environmental Sciences. A similar program in Auburn University is under the College of Human Sciences. In East Carolina University, their textiles/apparel program is under the College of Health and Human Performance. With this ongoing theme of human environment and human health, GE fashion courses targeting all majors with a comprehensive approach to the relationship between fashion and human environment in a more general spectrum become necessary.

The potential strategies can come in different formats, ranging from creating new lower division or upper division GE courses, to editing an existing course to a lower division or upper division GE course, or other formats depending on each campus' policy, budget, and resources.