



Seeking Sustainability in the Global Cotton Supply Chain: An Experiential Learning Opportunity by the Case Method

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The cotton supply chain is one of the most complex supply chains in the world, and stakeholders and consumers alike are demanding methods of measuring and reducing the environmental impact of textile products and the social responsibility of textile firms (Lindskog & Roth, 2011). Graduates entering the workplace need to know and understand the complexity of the global supply chain and how a fiber, like cotton, interact within the complex supply chain to meet consumer's demanding needs. Today's professionals will be tasked with ensuring consumers' needs are met while mitigating the environmental impact of the global apparel complex and demonstrating their social responsibility efforts. Therefore, the purpose of this project is to provide students with an opportunity to explore and understand cotton sourcing and cotton supply chain transparency through a leading textile focal company. This project, funded through a competitive grant from the *Importer Support Program* of the Cotton Board and Cotton Incorporated, was developed for students to 1) gain knowledge about cotton fiber; 2) understand how the quality of cotton fiber may impact the final product; 3) understand cotton industry and sustainability practices in different countries including U.S. and China; 3) select and apply the global supply chain framework to appreciate the complex interrelationships among supply chain partners; 4) explore global apparel supply chain transparency; and 5) make recommendations for appropriate future sourcing plans for the case company to achieve its sustainability goals.

To motivate students to bring their interests, curiosities, and abilities to class and to provide them the most relevant and practical ways to learn about the global cotton supply chain, the case method of teaching is used for this project. The case study method is carried out during the 2020 academic year in two different classes, including *Global Sourcing* and in *Textile and Apparel Industry and Softgoods Quality Evaluation*. There are two parts of case teaching in both classes. First, written cases covering key topics are introduced to students in a graduated order of complexity. After learning each chapter, students are required to complete a case discussion with their peers. Second, in the sourcing class, a group project exploring cotton sourcing strategies for Lufeng Co., Ltd. is developed to help students apply course content to the real world. In the softgoods quality evaluation class, a group project exploring global apparel supply chain transparency using the *Who Made My Clothes* project from *Fashion Revolution* will be deployed. A leading textile focal company (Lufeng Co., Ltd) in the cotton supply chain was chosen to

allow students to have a direct conversation with cotton farmers, workers, and executives. Lufeng Co., Ltd. share their first-hand industry experience and trends with students by providing the case challenge, speaking in classrooms, providing feedback, and participating the a panel discussion.

Table 1. Course activities for both courses

Time	Spring 2020: Global Sourcing	Fall 2020: Softgoods Quality Evaluation
Phase 1: Introducing the case challenge		
Weeks 1-3	Identify the general global sourcing process Introduce Lufeng Textile Co., Ltd and case teaching method Review cotton sustainability topics on Cotton Work™ and Cotton Today™	Introduce Fashion Revolution and the Who Made My Clothes project Introduce Lufeng Textile Co., Ltd and case study and experiential teaching method Review cotton sustainability topics on Cotton Work™ and Cotton Today™
Phase 2: Case study preparation		
Weeks 4-5	Understand global trends, business types Discuss global sourcing options . Written Case 1 discussion Continue learning cotton sustainability topics on Cotton Work™ and Cotton Today™	Understand supply chain transparency and apparel quality Discuss supply chain transparency reality Continue learning cotton sustainability topics on Cotton Work™ and Cotton Today™
Phase 3: Student reflections and mid-term presentations		
Weeks 6-9	Articulate the seven core steps of global sourcing Begin research to choose cotton suppliers for the given case challenge Written Case 2 and 3 discussion	Articulate initial understanding of brands supply chain transparency Begin research to discover the story behind their garment workers
Phase 4: Expert panel discussion and interview		
Week 10	Continue research on cotton suppliers for the given case challenge Understand the role and the importance of a purchase order	Continue research on the supply chain transparency project Begin building the story of the garment worker for your Who Made My Clothes project
Phase 5: Final project check points and Q&A sessions		

Weeks 11-13	<p>Understand the objectives of the various processes that take place during the pre-production and production stages</p> <p>Understand the definition of logistics and its core functions</p> <p>Comprehend basic exporting and importing processes</p>	<p>Interview at least one US based fiber manufacturer to understand working conditions in the U.S.</p> <p>Compare working conditions of U.S. worker to that of a worker overseas</p>
Weeks 14-16	Complete the group project for the driving case challenge	Finish story of Who Made My Clothes
Phase 6: Final presentations		

Table 1 shows course activities for both courses. Through an innovative case teaching method and a direct dialogue with farmers, workers, and executives, this project excels student learning in the areas of cotton farming, production and manufacturing, cotton sourcing, cotton sustainability, and supply chain transparency. Students would not have these learning opportunities elsewhere in the curriculum. To evaluate the course format and topic, the instructors measured student learning and engagement through a mid-semester survey with four open-ended questions and a semi-structured group interview with each team at the end of the semester for both classes.

Teaching Effectiveness: Since this is an on-going project, instructors were only able to access teaching effectiveness for the global sourcing course. In total, 49 students participated in the mid-semester survey and 48 out of 49 students provided very positive comments about case teaching. Students “enjoy learning cases” as it gives “real-time examples”. Case discussion reminds students “to read the textbook” and helps students “understand the challenges of being a sourcing personnel.” Case method gives students “great insight to problems that we might see when we get into the Textile and Apparel industry”. However, students found it challenging to communicate and complete group project when they’re forced to switch to online learning. As case teaching requires more effort in communication and discussion, the instructors may need to redesign communication strategies to help students overcome difficulties when they work on group projects to accommodate different learning environments. Also, helping students prepare cases and get the most out of the case-method process is another area for further exploration.

References

Lindskog, L & Roth, M (2011). Controlling Sustainability in the Cotton Supply Chain. Retrieved from <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/16332826.pdf>