



The impact of study away in the Fashion Merchandising curriculum informed by student and alumni experience

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The question of how to best develop and align curriculum to prepare students to meet ever-changing fashion industry expectations has been an ongoing research stream. Numerous scholars have surveyed industry professionals, including their own graduates, to determine the knowledge and skills required for current and future success (Reeves-DeArmond, Mower, and Nishida, 2015). Recent studies, including Frazier and Cheek (2016) indicate industry professionals place importance on soft skills such as teamwork, leadership, and communication, pointing out the critical role of experiential and collaborative learning environments in enhancing competencies. Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) proposes that learning is a process which “touches all the bases”—experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting (Passarelli and Kolb, 2012, p.140). ELT elaborates the importance of experience-based learning and its positive relationship with student and professional success. Experiential learning is inherent in study away programs, which have been found to be valuable on many levels (Passarelli and Kolb, 2012; Root and Ngampornchai, 2013; Williams, 2005). It is well-established that the apparel industry is one of the most globalized, requiring future professionals to have global understanding and competencies (Karpova, Jacobs, Lee, and Andrew, 2011). Yet, little research on the impact of study away experiences is found in Clothing and Textiles literature. Since study away programs have a bearing on curriculum development research, the purpose of this study is to explore links between the knowledge/skills graduating seniors and alumni perceive they acquired in a Fashion Merchandising program and relationships with participation in a study away experience. Findings from the current research are expected to inform study away infused curriculum development to strengthen its relationship with knowledge/skills needed for the workplace.

The setting of this research is a large Fashion Merchandising program with multiple in-house study away programs: semester-long, exchange, summer, and short-term. Recognizing the substantial benefits resulting from these learning experiences, a study away requirement was established for all majors beginning in 2016. To explore effectiveness of study away within merchandising education in providing industry-relevant competencies, this study was developed based on the existing literature with items addressing knowledge/skills. Utilizing purposive sampling, graduating seniors and alumni were recruited via email invitation through senior-level classes, an alumni listserv, and a professional social network site (LinkedIn). Data were collected from a total of 259 participants and usable data retained from 215 subjects after excluding incomplete responses. Among the 215 respondents, 64.5% are graduating in Spring/Summer 2017 and 35.5% are alumni (72% from 2008 through 2016; 18% 2007 and earlier). More than half of the participants had experienced study away (60% graduating seniors

and 58% alumni). Respondents were presented with a series of items adapted from Eisner (2010) on a Likert Scale (1=not at all important 7=very important) including: Skill in dealing with people, Critical thinking (creativity, decision making, and problem solving), Reading speed or comprehension, Basic use of computers, Public speaking, Basic math, Writing ability, Advanced use of computers, Physical strength, Artistic skills, Knowledge of history, Advanced mathematics, and Knowledge of science or scientific principles.

Results of participant comparisons between those who experienced study away and those who did not revealed statistically significant differences on several items. The student and alumni group who studied away provided higher ratings of knowledge and skills gained in the Fashion Merchandising program in critical thinking skills ($p=.02$), writing ability ($p=.05$), and artistic skills ($p=.05$). Findings of this study were similar to Passarelli and Kolb (2012), Root and Ngampornchai (2013), and Williams's (2005) findings on the positive effects of study away experiences on student success. In accordance with ELT, participants in the study away group increased competencies through experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting. These findings align with ITAA Meta-Goal Competencies: Critical thinking (creativity, decision making, and problem solving); Leadership/management (Critical thinking skills); and Analysis/synthesis (Communicate in writing and Communicate in visual form), further justifying a study away curriculum requirement. Future study is encouraged to investigate specific components of the study away experience and relationships with critical thinking skills, writing skills, and artistic ability to further develop curriculum and operationally implement in course learning objectives.

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