



## Fashion and Optometry: A Collaborative Partnership

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Keywords: design, product/specification development, collaboration

**Background/Purpose.** The task for the Fashion Management Department was daunting, but exciting. How do you make a lab coat functional yet appealing to optometry students? The Dean of the Optometry School approached the Fashion Department about designing a laboratory jacket with direct input from the students. In a focus group eight students representing all levels of the Optometry School expressed their needs, concerns and visions for their future lab coat. The major deliverables included: better garment fit for male and female students, comfort, additional pockets, launderability, added length in garment, removable collar, embroidered name, and different locations of the two patches.

**Project design.** A timeline was developed to document the deliverables, determine the participants and their accountabilities, and monitor the project. A contest to design the lab coat kicked off the Optometry Project within the School of Media & Design at the university and an incentive bonus was offered to the creator of the winning lab coat design. After the design selection, the Fashion Faculty Professor sought the involvement of the Textile Product Analysis class. Technical flat drawings showing the front and back views of the lab coat were developed as were the two garment prototypes. The major difference between the two garments was the front closure; one had a separating zipper and one had buttons.

While the prototypes were being constructed, the garment specifications were developed by the fashion faculty in conjunction with the Textile Product Analysis class. Information on the annual order volume, garment sizing, size ranges, and delivery time was obtained from the Optometry School to begin the bidding process with vendors. Secondly, faculty and students sourced fabric, findings, and evaluated the overall costing. A critical requirement in this project was the desire to partner with a reliable U.S. manufacturer.

**Effectiveness of activity.** The effectiveness of the collaboration between Optometry and Fashion students was evident through the focus group activities and the active involvement of the students. From the original concept design, to the “wear test”, and the final choice of lab coat design, the Optometry students took ownership in the creation of a new lab coat. They expressed their appreciation for having someone “listen to their needs” and actually deliver most of their “must haves” on their wish list.

From the perspective of the Fashion students, they felt a sense of ownership in having participated in the focus group with the Optometry students as they made their choice of styles. They listened to the comments about fit, the aesthetic appeal, and correction issues and ultimately, they were able to take an active role in three of the four phases of the manufacturing cycle: Concept definition and design, sourcing, and the garment manufacturing.

In recognition of the Fashion students' role in the delivery of the new Optometry lab coat, the Dean of the Optometry School requested their attendance at the ceremony celebrating the graduation of the students from the classroom to their internship. The collaboration of the Optometry and Fashion students was solidified and celebrated by faculty, friends and students at this ceremony.

Future direction/continuation. Plans are underway to begin using the newly designed lab coat for the incoming freshman for the 2012-2013 school year, and at the two year and four year milestone in the students' Optometry careers. The potential exists for the other medical degree programs to partner with the Fashion Department to design custom uniforms for their respective fields. In addition to the Optometry School, the University has a Nursing School and a Pharmacy School with Physical Therapy and Physician's Assistant Schools both in beginning stages. As the coalition between the medical fields develops into a center of health sciences for the University, the opportunity exists to partner with each to provide custom uniforms/coats.

From a community and social justice perspective, sourcing the manufacturing of future garments to a newly formed coalition of former Levi-Strauss employees in the local area could provide a win-win partnership between the health science schools, the Fashion Department and the coalition. The opportunity for just-in-time orders/deliveries of garments, and on-site quality control of manufacturing would benefit the customer. From the manufacturer's standpoint, a steady stream of work would provide continued jobs for workers, lower shipping costs and provide an economic boost to the local economy.

From the Fashion Department's viewpoint, the opportunity to participate in a real world case study by taking a garment from concept to manufacturing and delivery to the customer is an excellent learning experience for design students. From a teaching perspective, this project integrates the rubrics from the following courses: Introduction to Fashion Management, Textiles, Textile Product Analysis, Apparel I, Apparel II, and Flat Pattern.

In summary, the collaboration of the Fashion Department and the Optometry School created a win-win situation for both schools and opens the doors for further collaboration with the additional health science careers at the university and with the local community.