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## **Transforming Mindsets: The Impact of a Social Entrepreneurship Program on Students' Sustainable Fashion Business Development.**

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Social entrepreneurship education is a popular field that combines entrepreneurship education with social and environmental objectives. It aims to equip students with the skills and knowledge to create and manage businesses that also address social and environmental problems (Lynch, 2021). Empirical research suggests that social entrepreneurship education can positively impact students' mindsets, including their attitudes toward social problems and innovative solutions (Tu, 2021; Sousa-Filho, 2023; Zulfiqar, 2019). Factors like interdisciplinary teamwork, problem-solving skills, and creativity can influence idea generation in social entrepreneurship education (Tang, 2020; Nechkoska, 2023). Instructors and teaching methods, such as experiential learning and mentorship, also significantly shape students' mindsets and idea generation (Thomsen, 2021). Evaluating social entrepreneurship education programs is crucial to assess their effectiveness and identify areas for improvement. Best practices in social entrepreneurship education include experiential learning, mentorship, and partnerships with local communities and businesses (Amundam, 2019; Kim, 2020).

The Fashion Impact Challenge (FIC) is a unique program designed to teach high school and college students interdisciplinary teamwork, problem-solving, and social entrepreneurship skills through a sustainable fashion challenge. The program is held annually over three days and two nights at a large Northeastern public university campus. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the program was suspended for two years and resumed in March 2022 in an in-person format.

During the program, students were divided into four groups, each consisting of an equal number of high school and college students. The participants were tasked with identifying a problem related to social, cultural, or environmental issues in their communities and developing a textile based product or service that generates income while addressing the problem. In essence, the

challenge was to design a sustainable fashion model that promotes circularity and supports local communities.

To evaluate the effectiveness of the FIC program, a case study approach was used to analyze the context, participants, and various factors influencing outcomes. The Fashion Department faculty provided mentorship and guidance to students throughout the challenge, offering real-world fashion design and business insights. The Business Entrepreneurship Department faculty provided information and guidance on applied innovation, Lean Canvas documentation, and investor pitch communication. The Extension Service faculty provided expertise in community engagement, family and consumer sciences, and youth development, and collaborated to design a program that engaged high school students from rural areas through interactive activities that supported the primary programming.

Sixteen students participated in the *challenge*, comprising eight high school students and eight college students. Most of the students (70%) identified as White/Caucasian, and 76% were female. The students were divided into four groups, consisting of an even number of high school and college students. The results from the pre and post surveys showed that attending the FIC increased students' beliefs about the importance of community building and addressing issues affecting their communities. All four groups focused on the challenges of alleviating poverty, promoting equity and disability rights, and engaging community members, particularly the youth. Additionally, the concept of circularity was incorporated into each of the four business plans, which involved using resources and materials in a closed-loop system to minimize waste and regenerate resources. This concept is crucial for creating a sustainable future by reducing waste, conserving natural resources, and mitigating environmental impacts, for future generations.

In conclusion, we found the Fashion Impact Challenge to be an effective program that helps students develop sustainable fashion models that promote circularity and support local communities. The case study approach used to evaluate the program's effectiveness provides a comprehensive understanding of the various factors that influence outcomes, making it an essential tool for future pedagogical study.

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