

## Internships Strengthen a University Dress & Textile Collection

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With a mission of supporting fashion-related academic programs, university dress and textile museums and collections (DTMC) provide a wide range of learning opportunities for students (Welters & Ordoñez, 2011). Experiences with collection items can vary depending on course needs, faculty training, and collection access (Marcketti & Gordon, 2019). While museums and collections the world over often struggle to obtain adequate resources, small university DTMC can be particularly vulnerable to tight academic budgets. These under-resourced collections typically have no paid staff and are often managed by faculty who oversee the DTMC as part of service requirements within their work contracts (Marketti et al., 2011). Despite these challenges, university DTMC must demonstrate usefulness and relevance to justify occupying valuable space (Ashby, 2009). One way this has been achieved is focusing a separate course around the DTMC (Blanco, 2010; Reddy-Best et al., 2023). It can also be beneficial to identify ways a DTMC can be utilized when a limited number of students is available each semester for training. The purpose of this presentation is to describe how the development and implementation of a structured internship experience for undergraduate students at one university dress and textile collection has strengthened the internship site while fulfilling a crucial need for students.

The internship site is a teaching collection of more than 2,000 items of dress, textiles, and associated objects and is part of a university department in the Midwest United States that includes a fashion design and merchandising program. One tenured faculty member with specialized training in museums and working with historic dress and textiles directs the collection as part of service expectations. The department requires all students to complete an internship experience in their field of study for course credit prior to graduation and that each faculty member oversees a minimum number of internships as part of additional teaching expectations each semester. While most fashion-focused students opt for internships in corporate settings and in larger metropolitan areas, more than 30 have interned in the collection since 2011 under the supervision of the collection director.

Any senior-level student who has earned at least a “B” in one of three fashion-focused history courses may apply for the internship, which ensures a basic understanding of fashion history and experience handling material culture. The application includes written prompts to answer, an abbreviated transcript, and a current résumé. Applicants are majors in fashion design or fashion merchandising and typically identify skills they would like to improve through their work in the collection. The director reviews applications and selects up to two interns each fall and spring.

Interns earn course credit for working ten hours each week in the collection during a 16-week semester. In the process of achieving an established list of learning outcomes that address museum operations, collection care, exhibitions, and public relations, interns gain valuable leadership, time management, teamwork, and research experience that is transferable to career paths throughout the apparel industry. Interns meet each week with the director but conduct

much of their work independently at the collection site. A detailed list of responsibilities is accomplished each week and is similar in timing from semester to semester. Interns manage at least one social media platform, install the current gallery exhibition, lead the planning of the following semester's gallery exhibition, and monitor open hours in the gallery for visitors. They may also accession new items into the collection, give tours, and prepare small displays of items for courses. While most responsibilities are new for interns, templates, examples, and detailed instructions are provided for training purposes and to communicate expectations of the final products. A student's final grade for the internship is based on degree of professionalism and quality of work, in addition to dependability, timeliness, and communication.

Since 2011 the primary way this collection site has been managed is through the work of student interns. While the director teaches, mentors, allocates resources, and oversees all work, the student interns are responsible for the hours of work involved in educating through gallery exhibitions, connecting through social media, and preserving through collection maintenance.

Between 2011 and 2014 interns organized the collection, launched social media channels, and designed and installed large-scale exhibitions off-site to promote the collection. Efforts of these interns were instrumental in the process of obtaining permanent gallery space, expanding storage and workroom space, and the installation of a climate control system in 2015. Beginning in 2015 exhibitions began to be held in the new gallery adjacent to the collection.

Thirteen full-scale gallery exhibitions were installed between 2015 and 2023 with an average of one each semester in most years. The first four exhibitions were director-led, with student interns carrying out the director's goals from initial idea in week 1 to final installation of the exhibition by weeks 15 and 16. This model was reimaged in 2017 so that each exhibition could be student-led from topic to installation. Each semester now begins with the installation of the exhibition planned by interns the previous semester, following all instructions created. Any challenges experienced in the process are problem-solved by current interns as supervised by the director. The benefit to this timeline is that students have experience with the facets of an exhibition before planning their own and can focus on a topic of their choice, though the drawback is that they do not experience the finished product for themselves during the internship. Interns choose their subject, select items to be displayed, write all signage, gallery text, and news releases, plan layouts, and create publicity fliers. Each task has a due date throughout the semester and is reviewed and edited by the director.

Though the same overall tasks are learned and practiced with each internship, there is a great deal of flexibility in how each internship experience can be tailored around an individual student's interests as well as the collection needs. For example, while each intern manages a social media channel and must follow basic guidelines for content, they have creative control over topics and can choose to focus in-depth on one particular kind of item each week throughout the semester if they choose. This flexibility, freedom, and creativity have motivated students with a wide variety of career goals to complete an internship at the site. Learning outcomes from the internship reflect Fink's (2013) taxonomy of significant learning, cited as an ideal framework for learning within DTMC (Marcketti & Gordon, 2023).

A future goal is to shift the internships from unpaid to paid. Though industry internships are commonly unpaid, hiring practices are an equity issue to address since many students cannot afford to work an unpaid internship (Stanciel, et al., 2022). As a result, valuable student perspective can be lost at sites and students can miss out on exceptional learning experiences that could enhance their future career.

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