

Community engagement in two fashion merchandising and apparel design courses to motivate students to learn about sustainability

Abigail Clarke-Sather, University of Delaware, USA

Keywords: Sustainability, community engagement, pedagogy

Introduction & Purpose. Students seeking a degree in fashion merchandising or apparel design may be unaware of the sustainability implications of many aspects of the fashion and apparel industry. This paper considers two courses and efforts at community engagement with sustainability oriented nonprofits and businesses in order to motivate students to acquire fashion specific sustainability knowledge. In order to show a mastery of sustainability as a concept, students need to recognize the following ideas: sustainability as consisting of environmental, social, and economic aspects; the product life cycle from cradle to grave; the global nature of sustainability problems; and the sustainable consequences of design, sourcing, and retail decisions. Learning about any concept, including sustainability, in the abstract is not very motivating. The two classes assigned classwork with nonprofit and business partners to motivate students to learn about sustainability.

Implementation & Outcomes. The two courses considered in this research were quite different – one was an elective course focused on textile waste, the other a required course for fashion merchandising majors. The first course, taught in spring of 2015, partnered with Goodwill Industries to work on the Recycled Goods Manufacturing Initiative. Goodwill approached a variety of university departments to collaborate. Clothing and textile donations have increased to Goodwill thrift store donation centers dramatically over the past decade prompting the nonprofit focused on getting people back to work to open a recycling center for unsold donations. In the recent past the price of secondhand textiles has fallen dramatically making increased recycling financially unviable. The class focused on innovating new ideas for Goodwill to grow into business opportunities for their unsold textiles. The course assignments included a weekly design challenge for a specific item, a technical feasibility, economic feasibility, poster presentation, and business plan remaking or remarketing Goodwill's discarded and unsold apparel and textiles. The required course, *Merchandise Planning*, was taught in spring of 2016. The partner organizations included; Water is Life Kenya (WILK) a nonprofit focused on bringing clean water to Masai people in Kenya that sells Masai beadwork including jewelry and accessories made from handmade recycled paper beads, lolahSoul a metal and precious stone jewelry business startup focused on sourcing materials from US based small businesses, and Andean Hands a jewelry and accessory business that works with rural Peruvian handicraft artisans to produce handmade goods from materials harvested and extracted in Peru. Each partner was a women-run organization, further showing alternative career options to the all female class. The partner organizations were found through university connections and through a local women's business center. The course assignments with the partners included product pricing and a 6-month merchandise plan. Student work and media coverage were used as the

evidence to weigh whether and why or why not students acquired in depth knowledge of the four sustainability concepts identified.

Analysis & Results. Students showed mastery of sustainability concepts through their coursework and from media coverage. Student work for the Goodwill project showcases mastery of the four aspects of sustainability by considering environmental, economic, and social goals of the nonprofit client for their work, as well as product life cycle impacts, the global interrelatedness of textile waste as an issue, and externalities associated with tackling the problem as showcased in the following quote from a student's assignment for a business plan: "in 2014, Goodwill had 6,326,077 pounds (lbs.) of unsold textiles that was bailed and sold for a price ranging from 12-22 cents per pound. Goodwill's rate of return on these sold bales is not worth their time and investment, so they are looking for; an alternative to selling the bales and reducing the amount sent to landfill waste, while trying to increase its revenues but most importantly sticking to its mission statement of providing jobs to the local community."

For the *Merchandise planning* course students' grasp of sustainability concepts is apparent from media coverage. Two students were quoted after hearing nonprofit WILK director introduce the Masai jewelry business to the class for the first time. These students made the connection about the global nature of sustainability and the sustainable consequences of the specific sourcing decisions made as shown in Razzano's (2016) news article : "I am really looking forward to the pricing project, as it will not only help me in my field of study but also has the potential to help Water Is Life Kenya grow. ... The nonprofit, she said, "not only provides people with clean water, but the organization also helps many women pay for their children's education." Students showed an understanding of how the beaded jewelry sales relate to clean water, which has further ramifications for the ability of Kenyan Masai children to go to school by increasing economic opportunity for their mothers.

Plans for Continuation. The challenge to incorporating community engagement in a course is always maintaining relationships for future semesters. In the future community engagement focused on sustainability will be incorporated into a required course taught every semester so that an ongoing impact to both the students and a nonprofit or business can be made. Maintaining the relationship between the instructor and nonprofit or business is essential to keep this type of project going. Community engagement projects show the potential, in these two course examples, to engage students to grasp sustainability concepts and to introduce students to women leaders as career role models.

References

Razzano, C. (2016, March 16). Fashion merchandising students work to help Kenyan nonprofit improve lives. *UDaily*. Retrieved from <http://www.udel.edu/udaily/2016/mar/fashion-philanthropy-031616.html>