

Expanding Horizons: A Case Study in Cross-Collaborative Curriculum Development

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Keywords: curriculum, collaboration

As evidenced in previous discussions and meetings at ITAA -, many apparel and textile departments are facing challenges in curriculum development, particularly the implementation of cross-collaborative curricula. In the United States, current trends indicate a push for universities to redesign organizational structures and management flow to increase cross-collaborative links and to foster an environment in which these collaborations can flourish (Kezar, 2004). Often, curriculum development remains a fragmented process with a multitude of stakeholders, which include accrediting organizations, governmental agencies, employers, faculty, and university administration. The diversity in expectations as well as the disparity in business models create disconnect between the various stakeholders (Foskett, 2005). The nature of collaboration and partnerships presents major challenges in developing a curriculum that satisfies the needs of various stakeholders. Although cross-collaborative curricula may resolve some of these challenges, pressures include credit transferability, maintenance and advising of undergraduates, accreditation requirements, assessment of learning outcomes, and overall student assessment and knowledge development (Bird, van de Mortel, Holt, & Walo, 2015). Curriculum adaptations are often undertaken by academics at regular intervals. However, risks involved with this methodology include curriculum drift, fragmentation, lack of collaboration and a single vision for an area of faculty expertise (van de Mortel & Bird, 2010). Additionally, curriculum revision incurs considerable resources including time, funding expectations, university protocols and procedures for adoption, and a willingness to collaborate. In an effort to address many of these challenges, the purpose of this presentation is to provide a blueprint for a cross-collaborative curriculum developed at a public, four-year university. The curriculum presented originated through needs identified by an industry advisory council and developed in conjunction with eight departments across four colleges.

Each year, an industry advisory council is invited to participate in a full-day session to review and assess the program accomplishments and needs of an apparel and textiles undergraduate degree. Representatives from the apparel industry across disciplines include designers, product developers, human resource personnel, retailers, fiber artists, ecommerce practitioners, manufacturers, and entrepreneurs. Eight to 10 industry professionals are usually present. Following meetings with administrators and students, they spend the afternoon with the faculty to discuss industry trends and curricular needs. Based on feedback from our Advisory Council, there is a need for critical assessment of degree content, modifications to delivery methods, and increased academic standards in order to best serve the millennial undergraduate. In our most recent Advisory Council meeting, the demand for specific emphasis areas which highlight the cross-collaborative nature of the industry was a major deficit in the current curriculum. The faculty was charged to develop a new cross-collaborative curriculum based on the business practices most frequently found in the apparel industry.

The faculty set aside two full days to address the curricular needs identified by the Advisory Council. The following areas were identified based on recent graduate job placement and desired skills needed for graduate job placement: Art (designers, fiber arts, textile design), Business Administration (pre-MBA, retail management, executive trainee), Communication (public relations, fashion journalism, style editor, social media), Entrepreneurship (small-business owner, independent designer), Finance (buyer, assortment planner, strategists, business analyst), Information Technology Services (IT,

ecommerce, mobile commerce), Management (retail management, event planner), Marketing, and Sociology (stylists, trend forecaster). Each of these areas represented existing departments on campus and satisfied skills needed for specific jobs, based on a review of current job postings and feedback from industry alumni.

Prior to this modification, the curriculum was similar to many of the four-year public university curricula. The program (Fashion Design and Merchandising) resides in the school of Human Sciences under the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. While students received a degree in Human Sciences, the concentration area was listed as Fashion Design and Merchandising with an emphasis either in Design and Product Development or in Merchandising. In the newly design curriculum, the degree was separated from Human Sciences as a bachelor's degree in Fashion Design and Merchandising. Similar to our pre-existing degree, students select a concentration area in Design and Product Development or in Merchandising. However, newly instituted emphasis areas include Art, Business Administration (Pre-MBA), Communications, Entrepreneurship, Finance, Information Technology Services, Management, Marketing, and Sociology. Following the first-year, students will select an emphasis area based on their knowledge of the fashion industry (from two introductory courses in the freshman year) and assistance from their advisor. Each of the emphasis areas represent a minor in their respective departments, further supporting the cross-collaborative efforts between colleges. Lastly, a preliminary agreement was reached with the Office of Graduate Studies in the College of Business to offer a 4+1 Fashion Merchandising MBA, through this program, students will complete a 4-year degree in Fashion Design and Merchandising and graduate with an MBA after an additional 12 months.

This process was not without its challenges, namely the development of trust among the stakeholders. Productive working relationships require trust and communication (Richards & Horder, 1999). Faculty were challenged to relinquish much of the curriculum direction and discussion to the industry partners, providing guidelines to ensure the curriculum met university and legal requirements. During the Advisory Council sessions, faculty listened and documented suggestions--sometimes conflicting--without judgment or immediate dismissal. The phrases "We cannot do that" or "That would never work at a university" were not part of the discussion. Faculty took the suggestions and worked collaboratively to find solutions, satisfying almost all of the criteria for an industry-led curriculum. Once developed, faculty leveraged individual resources and networks to receive approval and letters of support from eight department heads and four deans. In order to achieve this lofty goal, open communication and presentation of the benefits to respective departments was presented with a willingness to make modifications, if deemed necessary. The prior investment of time by faculty in previous networking opportunities facilitated this process. The time from the initial needs assessment to university administration approval was approximately seven months.

Recommendations: While these results may not be typical, the procedures and cultural dynamic fostered enabled various stakeholders to come together for a unique student-focused, cross-collaborative curriculum. Recommendations for cross-collaborative curriculum development include (1) clear identification of stakeholders; (2) building of trust between stakeholders and faculty but not necessarily among stakeholders; (3) openness and willingness to relinquish control of the curriculum; and (4) selfless communication and trust between faculty members to establish student-focused objectives within an industry-directed curriculum (curriculum before individual needs).