



## Use What You Have: Cross-Campus Collaboration for Effective Teaching

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Active learning is critical for high quality education, especially for a Visual Merchandising course in which students have to learn to apply basic design elements and principles to retail store displays and merchandising. Different campuses use different strategies. On our campus, there are several display windows in the Department building. Usually, the instructor assigns each student group to dress up those windows three times throughout the semester to apply the course content and practice visual merchandising skills. However, this strategy cannot give them the sense of real life challenges. In addition, as a small program, there is no budget nor resources for such student projects. Students have to provide all the tools and materials, which can be challenging for some because of their social and economic situation. In order to overcome these challenges and implement the Affordable Learning Solutions Initiative, the instructor experimented with cross campus collaborations to provide students real life projects that do not cost students much money. The Affordable Learning Solution is a program from California State University Office of the Chancellor that enables faculty to choose and provide high quality, free or low-cost educational materials for their students.

For the purpose of this project, the instructor of the Visual Merchandising course, working with the faculty and staff from the library Diversity Committee, designed a class project that required students to use library display cases located in the library's Diversity Lounge, and library collections of books and objects to create visual displays. The Committee gave students a very broad topic to work with – diversity and fashion. Students were free to interpret the theme, and then identify and use library resources for the display. If materials were not available from the library's collection, they could explore the interlibrary loan and compile a “suggested purchase list” so that the library may be able to expand its special collections to support the Fashion Merchandising program and students in the future. This project met the Affordable Learning Solution Initiative requirement because it involved campus resources to help students learn the course content using a hands-on approach. It is important to note that the library's Diversity Lounge is a high foot traffic area due to its location on the main path where students, faculty and staff pass everyday on their way to Starbucks, study areas, and a gallery that houses various exhibits throughout the year. Because of the high visibility of this location, the instructor also encouraged students to use their displays to market and promote the Fashion Merchandising program on campus.

A qualitative research methodology was used to identify the impact and effectiveness of this project. Students were required to fill out a questionnaire with nine open-ended questions after the presentation of the project. The survey questions asked students to share their thoughts on the project based on their experiences, including aspects of the project they liked and disliked, as well as the challenges and strategies used to overcome them. In addition, all Diversity Committee members filled out another questionnaire with open-ended questions to share their experiences and insights on this collaborative effort. The content analysis method was employed to analyze the data (Spiggle, 1994).

Several themes emerged from the data. First, the project helped students understand the essentials of visual merchandising; that is, visual merchandising skills are applicable to many different industries and areas. It is not all about fashion. Students appreciated the opportunity to work with a different setting, this time with challenges from the restraints of stand long and enclosed glass display cases. To be effective, students had to develop different strategies and try out a number of techniques, which made them more creative and better problem solvers. Second, students liked the purposefulness of the project. They worked harder on this project because the members of the Diversity Committee evaluated the quality of the displays, not the instructor alone. In fact, students liked being able to present their work to a larger audience and gain feedback from the Committee. They were proud of using their talents to promote their program. Third, the project helped students to learn more about the resources and services in their library, and use these readily available resources to support this course project as well as their other research needs. The library Diversity Committee members enjoyed their experiences because it offered them an opportunity to work directly with faculty and students. The project allowed them to learn their effectiveness, and to help students learn more about library resources. Meanwhile, the project helped the instructor to incorporate low-cost, high impact teaching strategies, thus implementing the Affordable Learning Solutions. Overall, the data revealed this project was a success.

With the increasing cost of education and the needs for high impact teaching strategies, it is critical for instructors to be creative, seek resources, and identify alternative solutions. Across-campus collaborations like this one can be an effective solution, especially for small programs that lack resources and financial support. As the center of university campuses, libraries usually launch different events, including art exhibits. Depending on the themes, it will not be too difficult to develop joint projects. From the pedagogy perspective, this study represents an important step in examining how open educational resources (OER) impact student learning effectiveness. It offers insights on how students use library resources to support education. Additional research is needed to gain more knowledge on the effectiveness using open educational resources in lieu of the traditional course textbook.

## References

Spiggle, S. (1994). Analysis and interpretation of qualitative data in consumer research, *Journal of Consumer Behavior*, 21, 491-503.