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A Cotton Sustainability Learning Circle: Using Interschool Collaboration to Enable Student Success

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A Cotton Sustainability Learning Circle:
Using Interschool Collaboration to Enable Student Success

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Globally, the U.S. has been the top cotton exporter since 1989, accounting for nearly one third of world cotton production (USDA, 2013). In Mississippi, the cotton industry plays a significant role because of its size and importance within the state economy. Mississippi is the fourth largest cotton producer in the U.S., and cotton is Mississippi's third largest crop (USDA, 2012). As the world struggles with overpopulation and growing water shortages, sustainability in the cotton industry is becoming more and more important socially, economically, and politically. However, despite the importance of cotton in Mississippi's economy, and despite the growing demand and support for increased sustainability, there has been no state-wide effort to educate college students about how the cotton industry or sustainability efforts impact their lives, or how both the cotton industry and sustainability movements present students with career and business opportunities.

Driven by the importance of cotton in Mississippi and the growing importance of sustainability, three Mississippi universities have partnered together to teach students about the importance of cotton and sustainability in the apparel and textile industries. Supported by the Cotton Incorporated Student Promotion Program, faculty have organized a series of seminars, workshops, and competitions which will take place in fall, 2015. This collaborative project is named "Mississippi Cotton: Weaving Futures (2015)." Each participating university will take turns hosting on-campus events in order to create opportunities for Mississippi college students to network and interact with each other. In addition, high schools and community colleges located around each university will be invited to participate, creating opportunities for university students to collaborate with and mentor students from high schools and community colleges. The purpose of this presentation is to share procedures developed to facilitate inter-university collaboration and to share knowledge and details regarding planning, teaching, research, and outreach activities.

To develop the Mississippi Cotton project, faculty members from the three participating universities arranged bi-monthly teleconference meetings to enable and drive collaboration. Events, projects, and methods to evaluate student learning were developed with a focus on sustainability (e.g., Hill and Lee, 2012) and experiential learning (e.g., Manav & Eceoglu, 2014). Sustainability literature identifies lack of knowledge and understanding of environmental impacts to be one of the barriers making consumers hesitate to buy eco-conscious apparel products (Hiller Connell, 2010). Therefore, participating faculty decided to facilitate three experiential learning events (consisting of competitions, workshops, and seminars) to increase awareness of the importance of cotton and sustainability as factors creating career and business development opportunities across the state.

A central component of each university experiential learning event is a competition focusing on cotton and sustainability. In the first event (September 25, 2015), during an Eco-Dyeing/Up-Cycling Competition, a fiber artist will host workshop focusing on up-cycling and printing and dyeing with natural dyes. In the second event (October 9, 2015), for an Up-Cycling Design Competition, students will exhibit an up-cycled product using a cotton t-shirt or denim jeans. In the third event (November 20, 2015), for a Merchandising Plan Competition, students will present merchandising plans to sell sustainable cotton products.

Four criteria will be used to judge the three competitions: Creativity/Originality, Aesthetic Value, Functionality, and Construction/Quality. Two of the competitions, the Up-Cycling Design and the Merchandising Plan Competitions, were adopted to be used as experiential learning class projects, allowing students adequate time to complete their entries before the events. Reflection questions, guided by experiential learning literature, will be used to measure student understanding and perceptions of the projects.

Invitations have been sent to high schools and community colleges across the state inviting them to participate in the events and competitions. A Facebook page was created to: (a) help promote the events by increasing awareness among community college and high school students, (b) initiate interactions among students at participating institutions, and (c) build a community for students who are interested in the textile and apparel industry. Additionally, press releases for the three statewide competitions were prepared and will be released by an extension service office, each university, and local media outlets.

The Mississippi Cotton project was developed to address the necessity for students to actively engage in discovery regarding the importance of cotton and sustainability. An expected outcome is increased student knowledge, both theoretical and applied, regarding the importance of cotton and sustainability, and their interrelatedness. The Mississippi Cotton project has strengthened relationships among participating universities, and is expected to increase student motivation and retention. Ultimately faculty anticipate an increased interest in the many exciting careers and business development opportunities available within Mississippi's cotton industry and the textile and apparel industries.

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