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Fashioning Future Leaders: Student Leadership Development through Fashion Show Production

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Teaching students to be future leaders has been a major emphasis of today's education system (Eich, 2008). It is anticipated that to survive and thrive in the intensely competitive and hyper-dynamic work environment of today's global marketplace, students will need to be able to be leaders and manage themselves as well as empower others (Hay & Hodgkinson, 2005). In response, several college leadership programs and activities are being developed to focus on teaching leadership skills of negotiation, problem-solving, networking, communication, conflict management, and others to students (Hay & Hodgkinson, 2005). Particularly, literature indicates that experiential exercises are most useful for teaching and honing leadership skills (Hawley, 2005). Experiential learning engages students at the emotional, physical and cognitive levels and helps a student create personally meaningful learnings (Hawley, 2005).

A common form of experiential learning activity practiced in many US textile and apparel programs is fashion shows, which mostly provide platforms for design/ product development students to display their design work. However, Marketti, Arendt and Shelley (2011) showed that event management opportunities, particularly, organizing fashion shows, provide hands-on opportunities for students to hone their leadership skills. Despite the potential positive impact of fashion shows on students' leadership skills, most studies have centered on the benefit of fashion shows for promoting student designs. This results in a gap in our understanding of how fashion shows can serve as experiential learning tools to help students acquire various leadership skills. Consequently, as the initial stage of ongoing research in this area, we explored the various challenges faced by students and the leadership skills that they learn by actively participating in student-run fashion shows.

Semi-structured 20-25 minute long interviews were conducted at a state university in mid-western U.S. Fifteen textile and apparel students with prior experience in participating in at least one student-run fashion show in various management roles were recruited. Interview questions focused on what kind of skills they acquired through fashion shows and how these skills supported them in their future positions. For example, participants were asked in what capacity they participated in fashion show(s), what their responsibilities were, the challenges they faced and how they overcame those challenges, and, if they learned any skill(s) by participating in the fashion show(s). The interview data was transcribed and analyzed for recurring themes.

Results showed three broad themes: the challenges faced, the skills learnt and the benefit of those skills for future purposes. First, participants (all identified by pseudonyms) faced several challenges during the fashion shows, which required interaction between multiple teams. Effective "communication became a big issue" (Anna, coordinator) since a "lot of people" (Lucy, model coordinator) with "different skill levels" (Linda, public relations) and "a lot of opinions" (Lucy) were involved in the shows. Additionally, "last minute challenges" arose from people being late or "not showing up" (Mary, co-producer). Second, in the process of overcoming these

challenges, the study participants seemed to develop several leadership skills, such as teamwork, acting as facilitators/activators, time management, organization, communication, problem-solving and stress management. Participants understood that since fashion show is a *teamwork*, it is important to “trust your team” to work together and “create one cohesive vision” (Ashley, co-producer). Therefore, participants acted as *facilitators* to “keep everyone [in the team] on the same page” and “bring everything down to a basic level so people can understand the process” by focusing “on the overall concept to develop the best idea” (Linda). They also learnt to be *activators*, or “take charge” (Shaun, coordinator) and “make sure everything is working fine” whenever needed by “stepping up” (Ashley) and helping others. In order to become efficient, participants “learnt to *manage time* [emphasis added]” by ensuring that “everyone was dressed on time, with the quick changes, the lineup and everything” (Shaun). With multiple responsibilities, participants largely depended on their *organization* skills “to stay track and keep doing the right thing” (Anna) by diligently keeping notes because they believed that “if (they) didn’t write it down, it would be gone right away” (Ashley). Participants also seemed to be “on top of [their] *communication* [emphasis added]” (Lucy) through “constant text and email” (Anna). They were able *trouble shoot* problems and overcome “the last minute issue[s]” by “being reasonable” and prioritizing tasks by “refocusing on what was important” (Mary). As the final skill, participants learnt to *manage stress* and “do [everything] with a smile” (Ashley) and “a positive attitude” because “there is always going to be issues and challenges” and being disturbed “will just cause more and more problem” (Shaun). Third, these skills seemed to benefit the participants in their future endeavors. They “felt more confident” to network and “reach out” (Ashley) to people due to their enhanced “communication skills” (Anna). They were open to accepting “any job with a smile on [their] face and do it right” (Linda) by utilizing their ability to “oversee people, manage projects and time” (Ryan, co-producer). Overall, they perceived their experience in working for fashion shows as “a great resume builder” (Ryan).

Therefore, the study results indicate that even management opportunities, such as student-run fashion shows can act as platforms for students to be actively engaged in the learning process and develop personally meaningful learning outcomes. Fashion shows not only act as avenues for displaying the design work of students but can also help students, both design and merchandising to develop their leadership skills which can help in their overall professional development. Further study involving a larger sample size and a wider population will be beneficial.

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