Ready-to-Wear Shift Dress: A Real World Design Problem

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How can we best prepare apparel design students for challenges they will face as assistant designers?  As an assistant designer, our graduates will be working to execute someone else's design vision rather than their own.  They need the skills to be able to do so.

Interviewers want to see that an applicant for a design position understands the target market of their firm and can design for that person.  Relevant groupings in a graduate's portfolio will help them get beyond a first interview.  Often at this point they are asked to design pieces for the firm's next collection as a way for the firm to judge the abilities of the prospective employee to design to fit into their style.

The purpose of this real world project for our apparel design by draping students is to design a dress that can fit into the current retail offerings of a specialty store brand.  Rather than allowing the student to design a dress and make up their target market, for this project the professor assigns a retail store as the subject of each students' design focus.  The students each research a specified target market by observing the customers and product assortment of a mass market retail firm.  They must then design and execute a sleeveless shift/sheath dress of woven fabric that will fit into the current season's product assortment of their assigned retail firm.  The selected silhouette, fabric selection, color, and details must have the potential to work into the current merchandise assortment.

This project requires students to research their assigned retailer, its current product assortment and its consumers.  They then develop thumbnail sketches of design details for design ideas and consult with the professor regarding their design direction.  One challenge in this project is that not all of the stores currently offer dresses in a basic shift/sheath of woven fabric. Students must see beyond this to develop garments that can fill this "white space" in a firms' offerings.

Students drape a basic shift or sheath dress.  After correcting any fit or patterning issues in their draping based on the professor's comments, they then re-design the basic dress to reflect the aesthetic and seasonal styling important for their target market as observed at the assigned mass market retail firm.  The draped pattern is traced onto paper, and then the pattern is trued and finalized.  A sample garment is constructed and any necessary adjustments to the pattern are made.  The final garment is constructed in fashion fabric.

 At this time they develop detailed flat sketches (front and back) of their final design.  Students are required to illustrate their design and develop flat sketches of three design variations.  They

complete a Specification Sheet by taking measurements of the garment to develop specifications and providing details on fabrications, pattern pieces, and so forth.

The students develop a presentation board to accompany an oral presentation about the completed design. The presentation board includes the following information: title/theme, a description of the target market and design aesthetic of the mass market retail firm, an illustration of the executed design, flat sketches of three variations (front and back), fabric swatch(es)/color story, and the season and year.

This project has been refined slightly over the three semesters it has been used in our junior level apparel design by draping course.  Most recently, the project was finalized just before our industry advisory board meeting on campus.  After hearing a summary of the project requirements, board members visited the classroom and viewed the garments displayed on dressforms and the related presentation boards.  Positive comments were received from the board about the real world applicability of the project and its results.  In particular, one board member a vice president of a women's specialty retailer found the garment designed for her firm "very saleable."  Students in the first group completing this project are graduating this spring.  This project is proving a significant component to their portfolios as they share the design criteria and their output.

To expand this project and increase its real world relevancy, an industry critique will be built into the course.  One option being considered is having students design for one company based on a current or future line and then have a representative of that firm provide critique of their understanding of the aesthetics and target consumer through an on-campus visit.