



Developing a Community Service-Learning Project: Sustainability in the Apparel Industry **Sara Stevens and Dr. JongEun Kim, California State University, Northridge**

Keywords: Community, service-learning, social responsibility, sustainability

Social responsibility and an emphasis on serving the community are key tenets in the future of the apparel design and merchandising (ADM) curricula of the 21st century (Dickson & Eckman, 2006; Baugher et al., 2000). Project-based service learning in apparel design and merchandising has the potential to instill agency in students and contribute to their commitment to citizenship, social justice, and social responsibility. While the importance of these attributes as related to the apparel and textile industries has been expressed, a practical tool for university educators is needed. Despite the growing demand for educators in higher education in related fields to increase awareness of environmental and social issues related to the apparel and textile industry, there is no practical source or guide of how to do so in authentic, meaningful, and realistic ways for students. Studies show that sustainability coursework, global technology-based learning, and experiential learning models are well-established in ADM curricula, but incorporating the hyper-local needs of a community partner and including teaching strategies and evaluation into the coursework are less so (Cao, Frey, & Farr, 2006; Hendricks & Kari, 1999; Karpova, Jacobs, Lee, & Andrew, 2011; Ma & Lee, 2012). This project provides educators and community stakeholders a practical tool for beginning, implementing, and assessing a community service-learning project related to the apparel and textile industry.

(1) Innovative strategy, approach, or practice that merits sharing with others

Community service-learning (CSL) is an innovative teaching strategy that allows students to learn and develop through active participation in service experiences. CSL enhances what is taught in school by extending student learning beyond the classroom into the community, which helps students to foster the development of a sense of caring for others and provides feedback and guides improvement for students' classroom learning. Finally, CSL is an experiential pedagogy that involves students in learning outside the traditional classroom while providing a needed service in the community.

(2) Purpose/Objective of strategy for identified audience

This study is aimed at developing, implementing, and assessing a service-learning project in an apparel design and merchandising program that enhances students' learning outcomes, fosters agency in participants, and serves the community partner. The goals of the study were twofold: first, to create and implement a service-learning project, and second, to apply Carver's *Conceptual Framework for Experiential Education* to assess the success of students' learning outcomes after the implementation of the developed project and provide a framework for educators looking to incorporate service-learning projects into their curricula (Carver, 1997).

(3) Implementation of strategy/practice

The project was a collaboration between the university and a community partner. Students from all disciplines in Family and Consumer Sciences participated by taking different roles. The first action was to provide students the tools to choose an appropriate community partner. The

instructors helped students organize into small groups, research a short list of community partners, and discuss their choices. Continuous communication with the instructors, students, and community partners helped to develop the mission and project details. Each small group generated a sustainability proposal for its chosen community partner to improve the partner's program in terms of a sustainability perspective of view. Based on lectures, interactive discussions, a site visit to the community partner, and independent research, the students generated proposals with clothing as the main focus related to sustainability. After the presentation, the community partner gave feedback and assessed the feasibility of the proposals. Students were also asked to reflect on the experience.

(4) Description of effectiveness of the strategy in fostering desired learning outcome

Project-based service learning can be harnessed to promote civic engagement, strive for an active approach to working toward social justice in diverse students, support the learning and later career success of at-risk and underserved populations, and encourage reflection in participants (West & Simmons, 2012). Social justice education – broadly, teaching students that we must work for a society where equity and opportunity permit each citizen to reach his or her full potential – must be “student-centered, collaborative, experiential, intellectual, analytical, and multicultural” (Wade, 2004). Through this approach, students possess the power to take on activist roles. They can go out into the field and make a positive difference in the lives of community members through securing strategic community partnerships and project-based service learning. Any subject matter can be taught through the lens of social justice education, as well as current socio-political issues, because social justice education is tied to the desired curriculum and authentic perceived community needs (Wade, 2004). Successful project-based service learning initiatives can reinvigorate students, faculty, and the community (Lattimer & Riordan, 2011).

Students in the sustainability course discussed the process of project involvement through oral presentations and formal project reports, both of which were assessed for academic merit. Individuals used peer evaluations to assess teamwork and the degree of participation. A separate survey was used to gauge the community impact. The analyzed results were positive and have been shared among stakeholders who participated in the project.

One of the outstanding outcomes for sustainability students was learning how to work with community partners in the real world by applying knowledge from the classroom. In addition, sustainability students became aware of the pressing issues of social and environmental responsibility in the apparel and textile industry. The community partner was also introduced to these issues, which will inform their purchases and design in the future. The community partner students were exposed to the advanced experiences of a university, which could guide them in setting future goals.

(5) Indication of plans for continuation, revision, or follow-up.

This project strategy will be utilized in the Sustainability in Family and Consumer Sciences course and also in other service learning oriented courses. This procedure will help future lead instructors to develop, implement, and assess a project-based service learning project and maintain awareness and advocacy for social and environmental responsibility in the apparel and textile industry.