



What skills and knowledge do clothing and textile graduates need for the workforce?  
Qualitative reflections from clothing and textile faculty and industry professionals

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The question of how to best prepare students for jobs in the fast-paced and ever-changing clothing and textiles (CT) industry is important because students face an increasingly competitive job market upon graduation. CT scholars have consistently conducted research with this question as their foundation (e.g., Albloushy, Frazier, & Yun, 2012; Hodges, Yurchisin, Karpova, Marcketti, Hegland, & Yan, 2012; Kean, Eckman, Ellis, Miller, & Vineyard, 2013; Ma & Hahn, 2014). The purpose of this study was to provide an updated assessment of the skills and knowledge that CT faculty and industry professionals have deemed critical and marketable for students to succeed in industry jobs. In so doing, the work of the aforementioned scholars is updated and available for faculty use to assist with teaching and curriculum development processes.

Data were collected from a purposive sample of clothing and textile faculty and industry professional participants using an online qualitative survey. Industry professionals were invited via email through professional organization listservs (e.g., International Textile and Apparel Association) and CT/fashion-related social networking sites (e.g. Facebook and LinkedIn). Faculty and industry professionals were asked the following question in an open-ended format: What topics need to be covered in more detail for students entering the workforce? Industry professionals were also asked a second question in an open-ended format: What skills make potential and current employees more knowledgeable and competitive in the CT industry? Forty-nine responses were collected ( $n_{\text{faculty}} = 31$ ,  $n_{\text{industry professionals}} = 17$ ). A coding guide was developed for all qualitative questions after initial theme review; constant comparison was used to analyze data.

The faculty responses regarding critical knowledge and skills for students were categorized into 14 thematic topics, including soft skills (43.7%), business topics, design topics (25.0% each), and technical skills (21.8%). Industry professional responses for the first question were categorized into 11 thematic topics, including textiles (47.0%), industry practices/processes (35.2%), apparel construction, soft skills, and business topics (23.5% each). Industry professional responses for the second question were categorized into 12 thematic topics, including soft skills (41.1%), technical skills and knowledge (35.2%), and apparel construction (23.5%).

Subtopics related to soft skills included multi-tasking, leadership skills, self-motivation, presentation skills, collaborative skills, being flexible/adaptable, and being open-minded. Subtopics related to technical skills/knowledge included translating technical knowledge into a format that everyone can understand. Subtopics related to apparel construction included knowledge of seam and stitch types, pattern making and grading, and knowledge of fit. Subtopics related to business topics included understanding of target customers, how to conduct market research, and customer service. Subtopics related to textiles included care of textiles, textile identification, weave structure, and textile testing procedures. Subtopics related to design topics included methods for design and

innovative thinking. Subtopics related to industry practices/processes included knowledge of production and manufacturing processes and understanding of American Society for Testing and Materials guidelines.

There was some agreement among faculty and industry professionals. Soft skills were ranked most necessary to cover in coursework by faculty and to make current and potential employees most competitive by industry professionals. This finding aligns with that of Ma and Hahn (2014) and Albloushy, Frazier, and Yun (2012), who found that soft skills were among the most important skills for new graduates. There was also variation among the two sample groups. Industry professionals expressed that textile-related skills make employees most competitive, while faculty ranked this as the sixth most necessary topic to cover in coursework. Industry professionals expressed that knowledge and skills related to industry practices and processes make employees most competitive, while faculty ranked this as the eighth most necessary topic to cover in coursework.

The findings of this study point to the importance of (1) conducting frequent assessments of this nature and (2) incorporating the teaching and practicing of soft skills into assignments that also emphasize CT content knowledge. Several of the thematic topics can be incorporated into one course or assignment for an optimal learning experience. The variations in the findings point to an ongoing need to partner with industry professionals in a variety of capacities, including industry advisory boards within CT departments. Further research about how industry professionals suggest these thematic topics should be covered in CT curriculum is needed. Further research about how faculty members incorporate industry-suggested topics into their CT curriculum is also needed. The authors suggest that an ITAA conference session be offered in an interactive discussion format each year to provide faculty with a forum to discuss updates from their industry advisory boards and how the suggestions of industry professionals are being incorporated into CT curriculum.

Albloushy, H., Frazier, B., & Yun, Z.S. (2012). *What employers want: Soft skills required for entry level fashion designers*. Paper presented at the meeting of the International Textile and Apparel Association, Honolulu.

Hodges, N., Yurchisin, J., Karpova, E., Marcketti, S., Hegland, J., & Yan, R.N. (2012). *Identifying the skills that students need to succeed: Perspectives of US and global apparel entrepreneurs and small business owners*. Paper presented at the meeting of the International Textile and Apparel Association, Honolulu.

Kean, R., Eckman, M., Ellis, J., Miller, N., & Vineyard, C. (2013). *Building a forward vision: How do we best prepare our students for success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?* Special topics session presented at the meeting of the International Textile and Apparel Association, New Orleans.

Ma, Y.J., & Hahn, K. (2014). *Industry expectations of newly graduating college students in the fashion businesses*. Paper presented at the meeting of the International Textile and Apparel Association, Charlotte.