



Making Cotton More Relevant: Challenging Students to Design
New-Age, Cotton Travel Wear That Can Compete With Synthetics

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Keywords: Cotton, design, functional, travel

Each year, Cotton Inc. awards grants to university programs through the Cotton Student Sponsorship Program. The program's stated purpose is "To further the awareness and understanding of cotton fiber and cotton textiles among students preparing for apparel and textile-related careers." However, making students, designers, manufacturers, and retailers aware of cotton is not enough to convince them to use it. There must be a compelling, lucrative reason to do so. Hence, this university created a grant program that educated students about cotton and challenged them to design for a market segment that is a heavy user of synthetics: travel and adventure wear. The purpose of the design competition was to design and construct a travel garment that was cotton-rich (60%+ cotton) that could compete with and surpass comparable garments composed mostly of synthetic materials. An additional competition challenged students to create storyboards that marketed and promoted cotton as suitable for the travel-wear market.

First, students learned about cotton growing, production, and processing and its impact on the economy through visits with Extension service representatives, researchers, brokers, and large-scale farming operations in Mississippi, which is a major cotton-producing state. During the harvesting season, students engaged in experiential learning activities at cotton farms and ginning facilities, where they witnessed how cotton is picked, bundled, processed, and graded. Students attended additional trips to Cotton, Inc. and TC² (Textile Technology Corporation) in North Carolina to learn more about cotton processing, printing, and marketing. They also learned about body scanning, which is important in the production of custom-fitted jeans. To teach students about functional garment design, the professors gave presentations on functional design and travel wear, during which students examined various travel garments.

Students were instructed to use and document the design process in *Visual Design in Dress* (Davis, 1996), the textbook for Visual Design and Dress, which is one of the first courses in the curriculum. The first step is "Set the Goal," during which each student was to become familiar with the various types of travel wear and to determine the kind of garment he/she wanted to design. To "Examine Outside influences," the second step, students visited REI (Recreational Equipment, Incorporated), where they learned about functional design from company representatives and examined travel garments. An REI designer also visited the campus to give

presentations on functional design and to meet with individual students to review their designs. Students were also instructed to conduct internet research on other companies, such as Tilley Endurables, that produce travel wear; to interview frequent travelers about their preferences; and to research travel conditions that would impact garment choice.

The third step in the design process is to “Establish Criteria,” during which students were to develop a list of features and characteristics for the garment. These included a consideration of weather conditions; items to be transported; appearance and personal concerns; care procedures and drying times; range of motion requirements; comfort and safety features; and theft deterrents. Step four is “Make the Plan,” during which students developed a list of specifications for the garment, which described how it would meet the criteria. These specifications, which could be tested or measured, were used by the judges to evaluate the garment. During the fifth step, “Carry out the plan,” students constructed the garments, which were made from fabrics donated by Cotton Inc. and others purchased with grant funds or by the students.

During step six, “Evaluate the Product,” students were to use the criteria and specs to evaluate and test the product. They were to include textile tests, laundering, wear testing, and user evaluations and any suggested changes in their final reports.

Nineteen students submitted garments, which ranged from rain gear to business wear. An additional 28 students submitted storyboards. Judges included local business owners and faculty members. More than 250 people, including farm owners and members of the Cotton Board, attended the exhibition, fashion show, and award ceremony. Students enrolled in the Merchandising and Promotion Strategies planned and staged the event, which took place in the union ballroom. Prizes included money and dress forms donated by PGM Industries. The top three garments were also sent to Tilley Endurables, which plans to consider them for production.

The grant was considered a success, as it fostered an awareness of cotton’s versatility for a unique market among students, the public, and the business community. Students learned the value of preliminary research, testing, sourcing, and evaluation and were exposed to the functional design process. However, students require more training and opportunities to utilize this process and to appreciate its potential for improving overall design. Similar programs and competitions, which focus on both function and fashion, are planned for future Cotton, Inc. grants.

Bibliography

Davis, M. L. (1996). *Visual design in dress* (3rd ed.). Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc.