



Development and Implementation of an Apparel Retail Pop-up Store: An Undergraduate Apparel Marketing Capstone Experience

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Background and Purpose: Undergraduate capstone experiences are a key culminating component of many apparel and textile (AT) curricula. Defined as, “a crowning experience coming at the end of a sequence of courses with the specific objective of integrating a body of relatively fragmented knowledge into a unified whole” (Durel, 1993, p. 223), the intention of a capstone experience is to facilitate reflection on the skills and knowledge gained throughout an undergraduate program of study. However, in order for the capstone to be optimal for student learning, the experience must be carefully designed and implemented. Previous research identifies student preparation, project selection, and mentorship (Marin, Armstrong & Kays, 1999) as key elements to effective capstone experiences. Scholars also emphasize the centrality of learning, not teaching, to the capstone (Moore, 1994). Unfortunately, there is limited published research on the design of capstone experiences within AT programs, particularly for those concentrated in the apparel marketing/merchandising areas. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to detail a two-semester capstone experience developed for apparel marketing students, including an analysis of students’ perceptions regarding application of previously acquired knowledge and skills and new knowledge and skills they acquired through the experience.

Teaching Strategy and Implementation: Collaborating with a local apparel retailer, faculty developed a problem-based team project that spanned two senior-level courses (Principles of Buying and AT Business Strategy) over two semesters. The students were charged to plan and execute all elements of the retailer’s pop-up store that would operate at the university’s football stadium during the spring game. During the fall semester the teams conducted market research and trend analysis, created a concept for the pop-up store, determined merchandise assortments (utilizing the retailer’s inventory), and created financial plans. For the spring semester the teams established a marketing plan (heavily focused on social media marketing), designed the visual merchandising, and developed a store management plan. The project culminated with implementation of all elements and launching of the pop-up store. Key throughout the capstone experience was the partnership with the local retailer and mentoring of the students by the retailer’s director and buyer, marketing director, and store managers – who presented information to the students several times each semester, attended multiple presentations of and critiqued students’ proposals, and met with teams one-on-one to refine ideas and plans. At the conclusion of the project, the students provided structured, written feedback as a reflection on their learning throughout the experience.

Effectiveness of the Strategy: Overall, the students responded very positively to the capstone experience and perceived it as effectively contributing to their professional development. Within their reflections, students commented on the application of knowledge and skills learned in previous courses in addition to new competencies acquired. Among their responses, students

mentioned further development of previously learned teamwork and communication skills. More specifically, the students stated they gained additional experience working in larger groups and communicating appropriately with industry professionals. The students also reflected that the experience provided them with the opportunity to apply previously acquired principles of design in creating planograms (a newly acquired skill). Additionally, students discussed the value of having a working knowledge of Adobe Creative Suite in the creation of marketing and visual merchandising plans, as well as the significance of observing consumers' reactions to their strategies in 'real-time.' The students also commented on the necessity of being adaptable and flexible throughout the experience and acquiring further experience in using social media as a marketing tool.

Recommendations and Future Plans: Although, the students felt very positive about the capstone experience, they did provide valuable feedback. The most consistent comment by the students was their desire for greater autonomy over decisions and execution of specific elements throughout the project. For example, although the students developed the social media marketing plan, they were reliant upon the retailer to post the content to the store's social media. This limited the control the students had regarding when and how frequently posts were shared. Many of the students also stated the expectations of the retailer were not always understood and that the project would benefit from improved communication with the retailer. Therefore, based on this feedback, it is recommended that, in future semesters, students arrange weekly meetings with appropriate individuals from the retailer.

From the faculty members' perspectives, further advice and strategies should be provided to students ahead of time about remaining flexible when presented with challenges. Oftentimes, students were flustered with having to adapt planned ideas and strategies. Moreover, while students determined the merchandise assortment to be incorporated into the pop-up store, the employees of the retail firm made several substitutions when pulling inventory for the pop-up, which necessitated that students modify their visual merchandising plans as the pop-up store was being set up. Therefore, in future iterations of this project, it would be important for students to be involved in inventory pulling. Faculty also believe that a visual merchandising workshop with the retailer would have been helpful prior to the students developing their visual merchandising plans because students had difficulty in reproducing the visual aesthetics and standards of the retailer. In a similar vein, students would have benefitted from a practice run, in which they actually set up the pop-up store in a space of similar dimensions ahead of time, to rectify issues related to placement of furniture, fixtures, and the arrangement of merchandise. Despite these challenges, the faculty felt the experience was an excellent way of applying students' previous knowledge in a new experience. The pop-up store required that students utilize their marketing and merchandising skills in partnership with an already established local apparel retailer, providing a true to life experience, which is, ultimately, the goal of a capstone experience.

Durel, R.J. (1993). The capstone course: A rite of passage. *Teaching Sociology*, 21(3), 223-225.

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