



Experiential Learning and Service Activities for University Students:  
Development of the Fashion Earth Project to Foster  
Leadership and Management Skills through Volunteerism

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## Introduction

With U.S. unemployment at 4.9%, it is back below 5% for the first time since the Great Recession of 2008 (U.S. Department of Labor, 2015). As a result, the U.S. job market has become increasingly more competitive, and retail industry firms interview many entry-level, college-educated candidates to choose for store and corporate-level management and merchandising training positions and consider a multitude of criteria when making hiring decisions. In today's competitive workplace, a majority of these recruiters consider prior retail work experience, leadership and volunteer efforts some of the most important qualification possessed by recent college graduates during the interview and hiring process because of the skills and knowledge gained through this directly relevant experience. According to the United States Department of Labor (2015), 62.6 million people engaged in 52 hours per year of volunteer activities last year. When recent graduates are interviewing for entry-level career positions at top companies, the majority are required to discuss, write about, or respond to imaginary scenarios that require the proper use of management or leadership skills for successful outcomes. As a result, as undergraduate merchandising and retailing programs strive to meet the needs of students and employers, university faculty must teach students practical and professional skills, not just through didactic learning situations, but also through experiential learning activities and opportunities.

## Project Design and Implementation

At the beginning of the semester, as a plan to support recycling and sustainability in the fashion industry, the instructor challenged university students enrolled in a career development course to develop a project to build awareness and promote recycling and conservation in the fashion industry through a campus-based project that would occur in April, around Earth Day. The teambuilding project was designed to also develop effective leadership and management skills of the students, while providing an exciting event that would showcase Earth Day and give university students the opportunity to participate and learn about the fashion business. Through

numerous submissions and planning meetings of the class, one multi-faceted project called, *Fashion Earth*, was selected that would be executed by the class members, in organized teams with specific tasks. In the *Fashion Earth* project, students utilized professional skills including clear organization, efficient time and project management, successful leadership, and overall teamwork to ensure that the project was managed and carried out effectively.

In the *Fashion Earth* project, teams were created to execute various activities that were essential to promote awareness and engage university students in the Earth Day activities. The groups included the Thrift Store Fashion Game team, the Recycled Fashion Art team, the Fashion Illustration Team, and the Fashion Informers team. In preparation for the event, students worked with their teams throughout the semester, while using key management skills to organize and coordinate activities. The instructor, monitored progress, but leadership skills were developed by allowing the students to have the opportunity to plan and execute the event with their peers. The activities all took place at the university union to allow for the most exposure, and the Thrift Store Fashion Game generated interest by offering an activity in which three contestants had three minutes to select clothing from a provided selection of thrift store clothing and then style a mannequin with their best outfits to win a prize. This activity also allowed students to partner with and promote a local thrift store while educating about the trend of recycling and upcycling garments. The next activity was designed by the Recycled Fashion Art team, and provided the resources and direction to create works of art with the use of recycled materials including magazines, newspapers and water bottles. The Fashion Illustration team utilized paints from prior semesters to allow self-expression by students through the creation of an Earth Day painting that was displayed in the student unions. Lastly, the Fashion Informers team created games such as fashion bingo and fashion Q & A along with a cupcake decorating station where students could decorate treats with global inspiration.

#### Effectiveness and Continuation of the Activity

The Fashion Earth project proved to be highly successful, and hopefully, through the continuation of a fluid and dynamic curriculum that includes effective teaching methods, group projects, problem solving, decision making, creating, evaluating, modeling, goal setting, self-assessments, and student-teacher conferences, students will continue to be occupied with their learning activities and more clearly begin to realize the level of personal engagement required for career success in the ever-changing, global fashion industry.

United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. *Volunteering in the United States, 2015*. Washington, D.C.