



## Are Apparel Design and Merchandising Programs' Curriculum Building Students' Soft Skills? A Pilot Study Regarding the Presence of Communication and Leadership Skills

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### Background and Purpose

Employers are looking for soft skills intelligence among new hires, and some consider soft skills of more importance than technical skills and knowledge (Frazier & Cheek, 2016). Unfortunately, companies have seen a deficit in soft skills from recent graduates entering the workforce (Janusch, 2017). Janusch (2017) speculates that this deficit is because institutions of higher learning are traditionally focusing on knowledge building, not skill building, especially soft skills. Chamorro-Premuzic et al. (2010) noted that actual teaching of soft skills within most disciplines in higher education is weak.

Chida and Brown (2011) revealed that a high GPA does not equal a high proficiency in soft skills for students as new hires since, traditionally and for the most part, only technical skills objectives are taught and graded. Chamorro-Premuzic et al. (2010) also noted that actual teaching of soft skills within most disciplines in higher education is weak. It is important for apparel design and merchandising programs to stay relevant in producing students prepared for the industry with both technical skills and soft skills. It would be helpful to students if their education prepared them by aiding their development in soft skills to put them a step ahead of the competition when entering the workforce. Unfortunately, there is a lack of research of soft skills education within apparel design and merchandising programs.

Therefore, the purpose of this research is to explore what is being taught in higher education apparel design and merchandising curriculums in order to inspire new ideas for undergraduate higher education curriculum changes in regards to soft skills development. The guiding question for this study is: How are current apparel design and merchandising undergraduate programs educating and preparing students in soft skills such as leadership and communication?

### Methods

A detailed curriculum review was conducted from curriculum of four-year undergraduate apparel design and merchandising programs from three Southeastern Conference (SEC) Universities, one being a top apparel program in the United States (FS Staff, 2018). The targeted universities were Auburn University, the University of Alabama, and the University of Georgia.

Data in the form of student learning outcomes (SLOs) and/or course objectives from each syllabus of each course listed as a program specific requirement on the program curriculum sheets were collected, then analyzed and coded for leadership and/or communication skills. The

data was analyzed to reveal factors concerning teaching of soft skills within the programs. There was no formal syllabi review of University required core courses.

### Results

A total of 606 SLOs were collected from the syllabi of 74 program specific courses over the three universities. There was an average of 8 SLOs per course. A combined total of 44 courses had at least one SLO that encouraged the learning of leadership or communication or both. This leaves only 30 courses with no mention of soft skills. University of Alabama had the largest percentage of courses that included communication and leadership education within the SLOs to total courses with 69.6%. It was discovered that students' communication and leadership skills are mainly developed and matured over their Junior and Senior years. All students were required to take program core courses which make up 36% of all communication and leadership courses. Design students had more courses offering soft skills education than merchandising. Communication SLOs were comprised of written (18%), visual (4%), presentation (32%), discussion (25%), basic oral (12%), negotiation (5%), and interview skills (4%). Leadership skills were less prevalent within the SLOs and courses than communication skills. Leadership SLOs included opportunities to grow skills regarding problem solving, facilitation, networking, and relationship building within a team. Since there is such a low number of leadership SLOs and subsequent leadership courses, there is room for higher education courses to offer more opportunities for students to develop leadership skills.

### Conclusions and Implications

The apparel and retail industry is such an interactive field that requires the constant use of soft skills that most to all courses with in the apparel design and merchandising curriculum should have at least one SLO pertaining to soft skill development. With over 80% of SLOs and 40% of courses not including any type of soft skills training, this leaves a substantial amount of improvement left to be made within soft skills education in apparel programs. Professors should be intentionally including soft skills development SLOs to their syllabi and the related activities and assignments to actually to help students grow their soft skills set in order to set themselves apart and a step ahead of the competition when applying, interviewing, and attaining jobs in the apparel industry.

This study can help students understand the current soft skills that they will learn in apparel programs and the importance of the life-long soft skills, inspire educators to identify and fill the gaps regarding soft skills, and inform industry professionals including but not limited to recruiters, human resource professionals, managers, and executives on what soft skills recent graduates are bringing into the industry and what soft skills recent graduates do not possess that will need to be taught in training and continuing education initiatives.

This pilot adequately explored the proposed guiding question and in turn, was able to offer new insight on soft skills within higher education curriculum in order to better prepare students for industry training and development programs. Future studies could research different

soft skills, investigate current desires and expectations for recent graduates in terms of soft skills in the apparel industry, and create new ways to help students develop soft skills in the curriculum to prepare for the industry. Limitations for this study are a limited sample, simple analysis, limited soft skills and syllabus element selection, and limited generalizability.

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