

IMPLICATIONS



Fashion Entrepreneurship: Implications for Workforce Development in Extension Family & Consumer Sciences

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Abstract

West Virginia University Extension partnered with the Department of Fashion, Dress, and Merchandising and Business College to develop a replicable program model called the Fashion Impact Challenge (FIC). The FIC engages rural underserved youth and college students in entrepreneurship education that builds knowledge, confidence, and interest in pursuing fashion entrepreneurship careers. Rising interest in sustainable fashion presents an opportunity for Extension to support the development of entrepreneurs seeking to make a positive impact through fashion. Student teams work to develop ideas that incorporate principles of entrepreneurship and consider the ethical and social context of fashion products, services, and businesses.

Fashion Entrepreneurship: Implications for Workforce Development in Extension Family & Consumer Sciences

Family and Consumer Science (FCS) educators have a long history of providing guidance to emerging adults in areas related to clothing, textiles, and sewing. The clothing and textile industry continues to hold significant value in modern society, with fashion accounting for 2% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as a 1.7 trillion-dollar industry (Fashion United, 2021). With the evolution of technology, the fashion industry continues to grow at expo-

ponential rates, increasing the affordability and rate of clothing purchase. Fast fashion, the mass production of inexpensive garments, is rising and has a significant impact on the planet (Smarch, 2022). The vast majority of “fast fashion” garments are discarded by consumers leading to overconsumption and pollution that has a significant impact on the environment. The fashion industry accounts for a significant percentage of global ocean microplastics, industrial waste water pollutants, and carbon pollution (Smarch, 2022).

An emerging trend in fashion is the shift in consumer preferences to sustainable products. In fact, younger generations are likely to prioritize ethical/social values when purchasing clothing and textiles. Ethics are increasingly influencing consumer purchases, including considerations like environmental impact, animal welfare, fair labor practice, community impact and others (Deloitte, 2019). This is reflected in the new adoption of ethical/social standards by major luxury brands (Deloitte, 2019).

This shift, combined with wide access to the market through technology, presents an opportunity for rural fashion entrepreneurs to develop sustainable products, services, and ventures that have a positive impact on their community and the world. Extension is uniquely positioned to harness its existing resources in family and consumer sciences and collaborate with on-campus partners to implement workforce development efforts in the area of fashion entrepreneurship that reach rural and underserved youth. Incorporating fashion entrepreneurship into workforce development efforts has the potential to increase the confidence and skillset of youth interested in the fashion field and demonstrate an option for a career path (primary or secondary) that can be pursued in a rural community setting.

Background

Rural communities struggle with a persistent challenge; the outmigration of talented young

adults. According to the United State Department of Agriculture (USDA), the population of rural communities in West Virginia declined by 130,562 between 1980 and 2018 (USDA Economic Research Service, 2020). Labor markets in traditional coal communities in Appalachia are depressed, with significant barriers to employment (Lego et al., 2021). West Virginia struggles with low workforce participation, with the rate decreasing during COVID-19 pandemic from 62.9% in 2018, to 53.1% in 2022 (US Census Bureau, 2023). An additional obstacle to employment in rural and distressed areas is a lack of local opportunities near home making traveling far distances to work necessary.

Empowering young adults to contribute to and invest in their communities through diverse career opportunities is the key to the long-term growth of rural economies that have experienced economic depression. In West Virginia, 98.8% of businesses are considered small, employing fewer than 500 employees (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2022). Experiential learning that combines entrepreneurship education and community engagement is a viable pathway to providing the next generation with the knowledge and skills they need to consider career paths, pursue their passion, and build their communities.

The Fashion Impact Challenge Program Model

West Virginia University (WVU) Extension in partnership with the WVU Department of Fashion, Dress, and Merchandising, the WVU John Chambers College of Business, and the Morris L. Hayhurst Launch Lab, created the Fashion Impact Challenge (FIC). The FIC is a replicable program model that integrates rural high school students with undergraduate college students enrolled in the WVU Fashion, Dress and Merchandising Program. Students

participate in an on-campus three-day, three-night program in which they work in teams to develop and pitch an innovative fashion or textile product or service that addresses an identified issue in their community. This program serves as a model to generate new interest in a traditional Extension field while creating innovative pathways to boost the economy in rural communities, possibly slowing the outmigration of young adults in rural communities. Fashion entrepreneurship education has the potential to build student knowledge, entrepreneurial skills, and interest in pursuing fashion entrepreneurship careers. The FIC model can serve as a tool for workforce development efforts in entrepreneurship that builds upon the traditional family and consumer sciences field of fashion, clothing, and textiles.

WVU hosted the Fashion Impact Challenge three times from 2020-2023 on campus as an in-person three-day, two-night program. The program is offered as a one credit hour course for college students from the Fashion, Dress, and Merchandising Program and an Extension sponsored educational camping opportunity for high school students. All participants who successfully complete the challenge are eligible to receive a micro credential in "Innovation and Entrepreneurship" from the WVU Morris. L Hayhurst Launch Lab. The course was developed by a cross-disciplinary team of faculty from the WVU Fashion Department, the WVU John Chambers College of Business, and WVU Extension. Extension contributed expertise in community engagement, youth development, and family and consumer sciences. The team included state specialists and county faculty who engaged rural youth and directly facilitated their participation. To reduce barriers to participation, high school students were provided transportation, housing, meals, credit fee waivers, and safe supervision without cost. Funding for the program is received from a variety of sources including grants, private donations, and contributions from the partnering college/program (i.e. Fashion, Dress, and Merchandising).

Participant teams work to identify a social, cultural, and/or environmental issue in their community,

and create an innovative apparel or textile product and/or service that addresses the problem. Throughout the course, students work in teams of four (with both high school and college students). Students work with faculty and economic development professional to move through a variety of educational exercise aimed at increasing their knowledge in fashion design, sustainable fashion, sewing, entrepreneurship, and community development. Teams practice iterative ideation by brainstorming ideas and receiving feedback in cycles from peers, faculty coaches, subject matter experts, and industry professionals. Each activity includes an opportunity for students to present their ideas to various sized groups. Repeated opportunities for pitching are included to reduce anxiety around public speaking, which has been reported during the program's associated student focus group discussions as a primary concern among youth and young adults participating in the challenge.

While on campus, high school students also explore campus by visiting the Fashion Lab, Applied Innovation Center, Engineering and Manufacturing Labs, dining areas, recreation areas, and bookstores. Time spent on campus with college students has implication for student recruitment and supports a sense of belonging for rural youth who may not have previously visited a university campus. Additionally, students participate in community visits with sustainable fashion businesses and meet with successful entrepreneurs. For example, students tour and speak with employees from the Goodwill distribution center to learn about the non-profit organizations role in reducing clothing/textile waste. They also visit businesses and individuals including those that design and sell clothing, resell clothing/textiles, and/or otherwise succeed in the sustainable fashion industry. For example, students have visited and spoken to young entrepreneurs who started a thriving vintage sneaker shop, and a designer utilizing sustainable design techniques for clothing. Table 1 includes a general overview of the daily in-person activities of the FIC. Each activity is designed to provide hands-on interactive opportunities for youth to develop entrepreneurial skills including confidence in public speaking, working with

a team, communication, and launching a business.

At the conclusion of the course, student teams present their idea for a fashion-related business, product, or service that would positively impact West Virginia during the final "pitch competition." Each team has five minutes to present to a panel of judges and peers. Team projects are evaluated by judges based on a standing rubric and winners are selected. The winning team(s) receive prizes and all teams are connected to WVU business development resources and secondary business and/or pitch competitions to move their ideas forward to additional opportunities for funding and/or technical assistance.

The Fashion Impact Challenge was evaluated using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Students completed a pre-survey, post-survey, and a reflection essay. After each FIC, researchers facilitated focus group discussions with students to better understand the impact of the program and gather feedback/ideas for subsequent challenges. Discussions were recorded, transcribed, de-identified and analyzed by a third party. Additionally, team members tracked the number of high school students who enrolled in the Fashion program at WVU and the progress of teams who continued to pursue their ideas through other avenues. The course evaluation methods were approved by the WVU Institutional Review Board as Flex/Non-Human Subject Research.

Results/Summary

According to students pre/post surveys, participants increased confidence in their ability to demonstrate entrepreneurial skills and pro-social behavior (as measured by changes in mean responses). Student surveys were anonymous, which required researchers to utilize aggregate means for comparison of pre/post surveys. The results of pre/post surveys for 2022 and 2023 were combined to provide a sample of 34 students total. An independent T-test was utilized to compare means. Results

demonstrated multiple factors with a statistically significant increase in mean (p -value < 0.05). These included increases in confidence sharing ideas with others ($p=0.003$), and navigating conflict ($p=0.027$). Additionally, elements of pro-social behavior demonstrate statistically significant increases in mean including student ability to chat with an unfamiliar person ($p=0.018$), and student ability to share a funny story with peers ($p=0.025$). These results are shared in Table 4 and 5.

An analysis of student reflection essays from the first challenge demonstrated three themes: (1) increased interest in working with teams, (2) increased confidence in public speaking, and (3) increased sense of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy and self-perception influence motivation and persistence in the face of barriers (Bandura, 1978). Awareness of challenges in their community, coupled with the belief in their abilities to affect change, may serve as a catalyst for action. Figure 2 provides example quotes from student reflection essays.

Student focus groups continue to serve as a valuable tool for better understanding the impact of the program. According to evaluators, key differences emerged among each target audience which are summarized in Table 3. The team also gathered valuable feedback and ideas on increasing the length of in-person programming and re-arranging program components to focus more heavily on pitch preparation earlier in the course that were applied to future iterations of the program.

Lastly, multiple high school students participating in the FIC have decided to pursue their college education through the Fashion, Dress, and Merchandising Program at West Virginia University. It is possible that participation in the FIC as a high school student influenced the student's or family's perception of the value of this program, inferring potential implications for recruitment. The original Impact Challenge model has expanded and continued to grow in its utilization to include other career development areas including fashion, agriculture, community health, and technology. The model may also

be delivered as a hybrid program combining virtual and on-campus activities or combining local (rural) and on-campus activities. The potential for student recruitment supports the program's current funding structure, with the majority of funding being contributed by the hosting college/department.

Program evaluation results show that the Fashion Impact Challenge can be a catalyst to spark youth and young adults' interest in fashion entrepreneurship careers and utilized as tool to increase confidence in entrepreneurial skills. The Fashion Impact Challenge is a model that can be replicated at any University with strong collaboration between Extension, fashion, and business faculty. Extension Service's unique positioning and relationships through 4-H and school-based programming create an opportunity to engage underserved rural youth and college students in education in fashion, entrepreneurship, and community development to bring family and consumer sciences education to a new generation and develop a workforce that will contribute to the significant and evolving global industry.

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Table 1

Summary of Daily Activities

Friday	Welcome and Introduction Team Building Customer Journey Mapping Presentation from Fashion Entrepreneurs Campus Tour Team Time (Ideation)
Saturday	Basic Sewing Exercises Creating a Lean Canvas Feedback Loop and Team Time Presentation Development Expert Speaker: WVU Librarian
Sunday	Pitch Practice Final Pitch/Presentation Feedback from Judges Student Focus Group Discussion (Reflection)

Table 2

Selected Quotes from Student Reflection Essays

Theme		
Public Speaking	“Public speaking has always been a fear of mine but... everything was okay.”(High school student)	“My favorite part of the challenge was overcoming my fear of public speech and seeing what I can accomplish.”(College student)
Teamwork	“From the moment we all got together to the very end we were a team. If we had a disagreement, we would easily work it out and find a solution.”(High school student)	“I loved it. My college mentor was amazing. She treated us like a friend and not just a student.”(High school student)
Self-Efficacy	The skills I gained from this is unreal. Starting off from the very beginning I learned my ideas matter.(College student)	I would like to start helping my community with projects with fashion.”(College student)

Table 3

Student Focus Groups: Evaluation of Central Themes by Audience

Theme	College Students	High School Students
	College Students	High School Students
Perceived Self-Efficacy	Focus on intellectual skill development, realization that fashion can be applied to entrepreneurship	Significantly shaped by hands-on learning experiences (i.e., sewing and presenting/pitching)
Vicarious Experiences	Identified program staff, presenters, judges as role models	Identified college students as primary role models and emphasized openness and leadership
Exposure	Focused on exposure to content including different aspects of fashion industry	Focused on social exposure to new people and places
Bonding	Expressed awareness of group dynamics and acknowledgement of friendships as key to team accomplishment	College students viewed as facilitators that ensured openness and supported positive group experiences. Value on social activities

Table 4

Student Reported Confidence in Entrepreneurial Skill Development.

Survey Question	Pre (Mean)	Post (Mean)	P value
Confidence in sharing ideas with others	3.42	4.26	.003
Confidence navigating conflict	3.09	3.68	.027

Note. Responses based on 5-point Likert scale as follows: Not at all confident (1), A little confident (2), Somewhat confident (3), Very Confident (4), Extremely confident (5)

Table 5

Student Reported Social Interaction Skills

Survey Question	Pre (Mean)	Post (Mean)	P value
How well can you have a chat with an unfamiliar person?			
	3.44	4.00	.018
How well can you share a funny story with others?			
	3.44	4.00	.025

Note. Students were asked to respond on a scale of 1-5 with “Not very well” being (1) and “Very well” being (5)