

ARE WE TEACHING TO THE PAST OR THE PRESENT?

Most people have a small corner somewhere in which an item made by hand lights up the heart, especially so for clothing, our most intimate environment. It speaks so strongly and silently about who we are. For many the thrill becomes a passion and a fashion student is born; they go on to be clothing and textile professionals who want to make a beautiful piece *and* make a living at it.

If you are currently a fashion student (or a parent of) or, more importantly, if you are a teacher, consider the US dilemma: The garment industry has long since moved off-shore and yet there is little support in the US for small garment manufacturing, the kind that can and should grow bigger. Developing countries are now doing a better job of this. We are the most technological country on earth, living in a computer dominated business era -- these factors, combined with the innovative visions of the millennials (they now out-number the boomers) form a powerful new foundation for small, local, green garment businesses.

But there are two issues: the lack of access to the best technology that is scaled to students' best and most likely options and, secondly, many schools' position that becoming a Fashion Designer means that he or she will be paid only to design, not to create or market. This has now become a false hope since the number of interns working for free is legend. For the price that young people pay for tuition, it should reflect their realities, which are: at least half of every class wants to establish their own fashion business (read small); there are few jobs in the remaining large fashion corporations; it isn't possible to design without the technical expertise required to construct and market and, finally, good business skills are essential to success in the fashion industry -- being a good designer, even a genius, barely solves the career problem.

To change this situation, we must address the issue of scale; for instance, students learn to design patterns on large CAD systems. Then, they graduate and cannot afford such a system in their small business, so they wind up making everything by hand and, therefore, cannot be competitive -- a classic Catch 22. Another example is the lack of knowledge about shipping which is inherent in every online business; the Internet drives small garment businesses. Compounding the problem is the lack of the basic business skills and the professional small scale production experience to operate successfully and so, regardless of design talent and promise, success dims considerably. Maybe they will find a partner with capital or maybe they will find a position with a large company but neither are likely for most -- and those student loans must be paid off.

Fashion schools must embrace a new approach to curriculum design, a blueprint for growth that is commercially realistic. Stop following the the hierarchal model that makes a celebrity of every designer, or the post-war (WWII, that is) model in which the US led the world in ready-to-wear. The truth is, now students must grow their own business, be tech geniuses, wear every hat, work within a status-flat team and shift strategy overnight; plus, customers now rule. I ask every administrator to take a hard look at their program, their local business affiliations and the scale and skills their program assumes for their students. We know they love it but Is it working for them in the long term? Is it working for this country?