

# From classroom to design room: the transitional experience of the fashion design graduate

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**Summary:** This study examines the transitional experience of fashion design graduates as they move from academia into professional practice through the lenses of recent graduates, established professionals, educators, academics, and undergraduate program structures. This study also considers the future of fashion design education and what kind of undergraduate experience might best prepare graduates to transition into the industry. The literature review examines design in society, fashion design education, developmental attributes of young adults, mentorship, and undergraduates' preparation for the professional world. Through focus groups with professional designers and educators, professional conferences, an online survey of recent graduates, the graduates' experience is contextualized. This study aims to provide fashion design educators and program directors with awareness for how they can improve their students' preparation for entry into professional practice.

**Keywords:** Design - Education - Fashion - learning - student.

[Summaries in spanish and portuguese at page 152]

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## Introduction

As an Assistant Professor of Fashion Design at Parsons The New School for Design (formerly Director, 2007-2011), I have taught hundreds of fashion design students. These graduates have had a wide range of experiences during their early professional years. For some, the transition into the industry was fluid, while for others it was filled with many unexpected surprises. The purpose of their education was to provide a solid foundation and fluid transition into professional practice; unfortunately, however, not all graduates made the shift easily.

The graduates' transition is further affected by rapidly changing practices in design education. The majority of American fashion design education programs are reexamining their current practices in order to respond to several circumstances. These include an

industry that is changing at an unprecedented rate, an evolving student generation, and a new set of skills and abilities demanded by the profession. Fashion design education is attempting to address these challenges by placing greater emphasis on “design thinking” and conceptual processes in order to produce designers who understand broader contexts, create innovative new products, and rethink business systems. How will these new emphases affect the graduates’ entrance into the field? Will the new approach to education improve their transitional experience, or will additional support structures be needed? How do internships contribute to the professional preparation? How can educators consider the roles internships play within this new academic framework?

It is incumbent upon educators to prepare students with the knowledge and skills they need to enter the field successfully. The importance of examining the quality of preparation becomes particularly meaningful when that landscape is rapidly evolving and its future directions remains uncertain. Research into graduates’ pre-college, undergraduate, and early professional experiences must be conducted if future fashion design students are to be well educated and prepared for a successful entry into the industry. By raising awareness in these areas, program directors and educators will be better informed about how to advance fashion design education and thus prepare graduates for a rapidly evolving practice.

## **I. Literature review**

The young adults’ transition from academia into the fashion design practice can be better understood by examining key areas that surround and impact undergraduate fashion design studies and the graduates’ first three-years working in the industry. They include the impact of design in contemporary society, fashion design education and speculations for future evolution, the developmental attributes of young adults, the importance of mentorship, and the young adults’ professional preparation. Collectively, these areas inform, prepare, and affect the fashion design students’ transition from the classroom to the design room.

### **Design and the cultural context**

We are increasingly engaged in making our world special through design (Postrel, 2003, p. 7); fashion design has even entered the museum environment with one notable example being the retrospective of Giorgio Armani’s work shown at The Guggenheim Museum in New York City. Around the world, increasing numbers of urban centers are hosting fashion weeks that are state sponsored “and therefore represent the commercial and cultural interests of the respective country” (Loschek, 2008). The prevalence of design is underscored by such mass-market retailers as H&M and Target hosting top designers such as Karl Lagerfeld, Vera Wang, and Comme des Garçons who offer “guest star” collections with enormous success.

Society’s ever-increasing demand for “designed” objects has led to unprecedented rates of production and consumption; the retailer Zara develops approximately 40,000 styles

each year, of which 12,000 are produced (Seigel, 2011). Similarly, the production cycle for retailer H&M, design-to-retail, is just 3 weeks and involves a highly choreographed network of chain management around the world (Seigel, 2011). This surge in production has direct relation to consumption; consumers now demand roughly four times the number of garments that we did in 1980, and the same quantity that we buy will be discarded each year (Siegel, 2011).

These excessive levels of production, consumption, and disposal have shaped consumers' psychology and relation to design. Due to abundance, design is no longer driven by need and designers realize that the only way to differentiate their products in today's overstocked marketplace is to make their offerings aesthetically appealing and emotionally compelling (Pink, 2005). In order to create products that resonate emotionally with their audience, designers must become empathizers, pattern recognizers, and meaning-makers (Pink, 2005). To support this new approach to design, design industries must evolve from a "product-centered practice" to a "knowledge-based economy." Yet this future has migrated manufacturing from domestic centers, such as New York's Garment Center, to overseas locations. For example, the percentage of American clothing made in the USA has declined from 95% in 1965 to 5% in 2009 (Pinkerson & Levin, 2009). When manufacturing is no longer part of the Garment Center and just design remains, the designer's role evolves in a larger global context. When evolving into this role, fashion designers emphasize the critical need for creativity and innovation in order to inspire consumers who are *inundated* with commercial offerings and desire emotionally satisfying and meaningful products.

## Fashion Design education in The United States

The Bauhaus strongly influenced the primary structure for American art and design education (Marshall, 2009). The school's mission was to produce artists and designers ...” who could contribute to the greater good of Germany (Wax, 2010, p. 23). As duplicated by many of America's leading fashion design programs, Bauhaus students were encouraged to learn design principles “by doing and making,” and studied art and design fundamentals before progressing to a chosen design specialization (Marshall, 2009). Faculty were active, practicing artists and designers who imparted their expertise by placing emphasis on how things were made in the contemporary practice.

Today, fashion design program structures vary; students either enter a 4 year fashion design program directly or first complete a “Foundation Year,” where they learn the fundamental skills and principles of general art and design before entering three years of fashion design studies. Curriculum is typically framed by the studio courses of fashion design and garment construction that are taught throughout the levels; these are supported by required liberal studies and discipline-related subjects such as digital design, textiles, drawing, business, and others that support students' learning. The capstone experience is the development of a portfolio and thesis collection that showcases the student's abilities and launches them into the industry as Assistant Designers. For some, graduate studies in business, fashion history, and fashion design allow them to advance professionally or to enter an area of greater interest.

As the world demands better solutions for concerns such as environmental sustainability, educators are providing opportunities for students to become future “agents of change” by creating curricula that interface with social and civic organizations. Some claim the design school’s mission is “...to foster a new generation of designer-citizens: productive, engaged, inventive businesspeople, policy makers, and community activists, many of whom also make beautiful and useful things” (Wolff & Rhee, 2011, p. 12). Academia has begun to question how it can prepare students. What new skill sets will be needed for the shifting professional landscape? How can our programs and graduates prepare for a future that is so highly unpredictable?

This unpredictable future is largely due to how globalized the fashion industry has become. Fashion designers must become increasingly educated in the nuances of the expanding global markets, sub-cultures, available resources, and technologies. As a result, curricula are becoming increasingly influenced by ethical issues, philosophy, innovative technology, and environmental issues (Marshall, 2009). By infusing curricula with these areas, programs prepare designers who can succeed in the evolving global industry while having an ability to synthesize their fashion practice with other disciplines in order to innovate products; one examples includes Nike’s LZR Racer bodysuit that was created through advanced computer software.

Many design schools are offering or considering multi- and inter-disciplinary studies where the process of research and development engages analytical thinking as the primary learning objective (Palomo-Lovinski & Faerm, 2009). Parsons The New School for Design offers the graduate program Transdisciplinary Design in which students of diverse backgrounds work as design teams in specialized areas of Urban, Sustainability, The Social, and Systems. According to Laetitia Wolff and Jen Rhee:

Design is no longer just a vocational, trade-oriented activity driven by industry, as described in Parsons’ founding mission, but rather a methodology with potential application to almost any kind of problem –the focus has shifted from object to process or system. (Wolff & Rhee, 2009, p. 10)

In order to nurture this type of creative development, education must enable design’s cross-fertilization with areas such as science, education, or business, in order to innovate products for our society (Palomo-Lovinski & Faerm, 2009). This pedagogical approach was raised at FIT’s conference Moving Forward: Fashion Design Today held in November of 2011; participants felt a broader approach will provide greater flexibility to graduates in today’s competitive job market. Flexibility will be an asset since future designers will be expected to cross boundaries into unfamiliar practices while being able to “identify [new] opportunities and make connections between them” (Pink, 2005, p. 135). To provide graduates with these abilities, we must prioritize academic research.

Determining the ideal balance of conceptual learning with practical application seems to be a prioritized discussion in fashion education. Some educators think “intellectual, analytical, and conceptual considerations through research and experimentation must be foremost within a college design curriculum, yet should be grounded in ideas of practical

application” (Palomo-Lovinski & Faerm, 2009). As fashion design education evolves and students’ attempts at originality are nurtured, curricula must effectively balance artistry (vision, research and design), craft (technical skills), with business acumen (professional practice and placement) (Palomo-Lovinski & Faerm, 2009). Cameron Tonkinwise, former Chair of Design Thinking at Parsons stated:

We are educating designers who can actually begin to be social entrepreneurs and not just the providers of a product for somebody else to commercialize. With business acumen and design thinking skills, they are strategic in that they don’t just come up with the theme; they come up with the system that is going to sustain and proliferate the theme and actually have an impact on the world. (Wolff & Rhee, 2009, p. 13)

At the 2012 Fashion Education Summit hosted by The Council of Fashion Designers of America, there was consensus amongst attendees that a craft-based education should not be neglected, nor should it be replaced by academics that do not provide the specific needs of fashion design education. The de-emphasis of such knowledge as garment construction and overemphasis on social sciences could potentially create a “fragmented education in which students would neither learn to work as designers nor do research...” (Skjold, 2008, p. 11). However, attendees agreed the key challenge for students lies in being able to acquire essential skills, interdisciplinary experiences, and conceptual development successfully within the relatively short time period of undergraduate studies. Many American design schools are responding to the need for designers to have advanced knowledge by offering graduate studies while others are considering the development of doctoral degrees.

## Developmental attributes of young adults

There has been little research performed on the development of the 19-29 year old when the transition into adulthood is commonly marked (Arnett, 2003). In lieu of scholarship, media has focused on this age group through fiction and journalistic accounts; these have often portrayed the subject in a negative and pessimistic light (Arnett, 2000). Researchers raise the issue that such portrayals can be damaging when viewed by young adults since, when young adults begin to form part of their self-identities, they may initially base these identities on stereotypes (Erikson, 1968). While stereotypes may be initially adopted for self-identity, one of the primary focuses for young adults is to gain an understanding of how they fit within the larger community (Yates & Youniss, 1996). This is a salient point given the *increasing* diversity of cultures, religions, and ethnicities young adults experience in their local communities.

In the earlier stages of identity formation, the individual seeks release from the parents, becomes self-reliant, and sets aside childhood fantasies by adopting a lifestyle (and perhaps a career choice) that is more realistic (Marcia, 1980). This can be especially challenging for those entering such highly competitive professions as fashion design where, due to extreme competition, entry into the field may be available to only a very few who are at

the top of their class (Arnett, 2004). The young graduate may be forced to settle for an alternate, less desirable career path.

In order to form an identity, engagement in various life offerings takes place so that the young adult may make more enduring decisions. J. J. Arnett claims this process occurs mainly in young adulthood. He states:

Emerging adulthood is a time of life when many different directions remain possible, when little about the future has been decided for certain, when the scope of independent exploration of life's possibilities is greater for most people than it will be at any other period of the life course. (Arnett, 2000, p. 469).

For many young adults, a plan or route has been created for travelling from adolescence to adulthood. However, the plan is almost always subject to change through changes in academic pathways, situations that may affect their studies, the need for additional coursework or degrees, and personal circumstances (Arnett, 2004). This evolving pathway grants most young adults a wider scope of possibilities than in other age ranges because they are exploring options.

Despite these commonly experienced challenges, most young adults view the exploration exhilarating rather than onerous (Arnett, 2010). Studies have shown that well-being, self-esteem, and life satisfaction all rise steadily during young adulthood for most people (Galambos, Barker, & Krahn, 2006). Despite their frequent depiction of feeling daunted by low economic prospects, student loans, and by the soaring national debt, many in their 20's. feel ambitious and eager to pursue their financial, occupational, and personal goals (Hornblower, 1997).

## **Mentorship and the college experience**

The period between the ages of 19 and 29 can be one of great instability (Arnett, 2004). To support their development, young adults rely on peers, parents, and other adults for mentorship (Karcher, et al., 2011). Mentorship is valuable because it develops competence and character through teaching, advising, and the demonstration of model behavior (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2004) thus contributing to a healthy and productive life. To achieve maximum benefits during the transition into adulthood, young adults must engage with diverse activities and develop supportive relationships that provide mentorship. Mentorship is what is most beneficial to their development and often results in their academic and professional success (Hamilton, et al., 2011).

Due to today's youth struggling to discover their personal and professional pathways and thus taking longer periods of time to explore and experiment, the college student demographic has altered. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, nearly *half* of all undergraduate students were more than twenty five years old; just 56% of college students complete their four-year degree within six years (Van Zandt, 2011).

There are several reasons why students prolong their college years, and while these include wishing to improve one's income, the need to obtain degrees that carry a higher status, and the simple joy of learning (Arnett, 2004), college in the United States is commonly seen as the time when one finds out what one wants to do (Arnett, 2004). A prolonged college experience that involves broader and deeper professional exploration may prove highly beneficial since it is during this time that many young people acquire the education and training that will provide them with the foundation for their personal and professional achievements in the decades ahead.

Some scholars express concerns that the American higher education system does not provide graduates with a fluid transition into the workplace because there is a lack of proper guidance systems for students. Similarly, many educators assert that today's entering college freshmen are underprepared for college, thus prompting high dropout rates.

### **Preparation for the professional world**

The majority of American high school students are employed part-time and are engaged in service jobs; they view these jobs not as direct preparation for career goals, but rather as a means to make income for their active leisure life (Arnett, 2000). Despite viewing these jobs as casual activities, adolescents can gain significant long-term benefits through these jobs such as independence and confidence in handling responsibilities. Employment also develops a team playing attitude and awareness for how the world operates.

Unlike in adolescence, emerging adults consider how employment opportunities will contribute to their future career goals (Arnett, 2000). For fashion design undergraduates who intern, the workplace is commonly used to learn what they are most skilled at, for which area of the practice they are best suited, and what type of work they will find satisfying in the long term. They learn what they are good at in addition to what they are weak in, a realization that frequently leads to failure or disappointment (Arnett, 2004).

Choosing one's particular career path has deeper meaning for today's student who have "grown up in an era of great affluence and abundance, and this has made them pursue careers that are more than just paychecks, but something enjoyable and personally gratifying" (Arnett, 2010). Today's student perceives work as something that allows for self-development and self-expression (Arnett, 2004). Unlike their parents' generation, the young adult today has been exposed to a hyper-globalized professional landscape loaded with career possibilities. As a result of this ongoing search for the career that best suits their evolving identities, many experience a "quarter-life crisis" as they leap from job to job without a clear plan. This is partly an identity crisis because one cannot accurately choose a career path unless one knows oneself well enough to choose a career that one may enter more deeply (Arnett, 2004).

While such data speak broadly, the young adult who enters fashion design often has a different experience. Fashion design students often state they knew from an early age what type of career they intended to pursue. As a result, they explored the discipline through pre-college coursework and on their own time and entered college somewhat established

on their career path. For these students, the period of post-college career exploration is narrower; the goal during college for these students “is to obtain skills and the credentials that will enable them to do the work they know they are cut out to do” (Arnett, 2004, p.130).

Although fashion design students differ in this respect, these young adults exhibit common characteristics of exploration in other developmental areas. It is common for most fashion design students, when engaging in various internship opportunities, to explore diverse types of professional environments. These allow the young adult to obtain a broader overview of experiences before committing to “longer, more enduring, and limited adult responsibilities” (Arnett, 2000, p. 474).

## II. Methodologies

To research the transitional experience, several qualitative and quantitative research methods were employed. They were:

- An internet survey was sent to over 200 Parsons 2008 and 2009 alumni.
- Two focus groups were held. The New York City group contained 5 professional designers who graduated from Parsons in 2006 and 2007; the San Francisco group contained 5 adjunct California College of the Arts (CCA) faculty members who are active in the fashion industry.
- Interviews were conducted with faculty and students at Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles and Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) in Providence, Rhode Island.
- The first annual Fashion Education Summit launched by The Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA) brought together leading industry professionals and educators from fifteen American design schools to discuss fashion design education.
- The annual Arts of Fashion Symposium’s Fashion.edu Lecture Series presented information on international fashion design programs, pedagogy, and the transitional experience.

## III. Findings

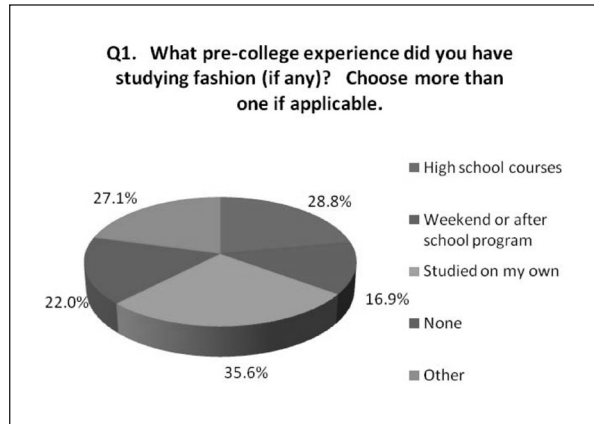
Following the data collection, findings were synthesized and categorized into key areas that collectively frame the graduates’ transition. These areas are: Pre-College Experiences, The College Experience and Graduate Attributes, Internships, Support Systems for the Transition Experience, Unexpected Challenges, and Evolving Professional Goals.

### Pre-College Experiences

Data about the pre-college experience figured prominently in the survey responses. Graduates were asked what type(s) of pre-college fashion design experience they had. The choices were high school courses, weekend or after school programs, study through one’s



own engagement, no experience, and an area to list “Other” means of experience (Figure 1). A high percentage of respondents (73%) had pre-college fashion design studies in a formal classroom setting; only 22% had none. Most who selected “Other” listed participation in pre-college programs offered by such schools as Parsons, RISD, and Pratt Institute. This data suggests a generation that is preparing very early for the college experience fashion career.



**Figure 1.** Graph displaying participants’ pre-college experience. **Source.** Author’s

During the focus group at CCA, faculty described students who are entering college with less developed design skills due to decreasing art course offered in secondary schools, thus forcing students to acquire basic skills through external programs. One survey respondent wrote:

Some of the courses expected the student to already know certain basics... (which I did not know) so I struggled heavily to make it through. My teachers would seem annoyed with me because I didn’t arrive with these skills to begin with. Most of the kids picked up lessons faster because they had done them before on their own prior to arriving at [school], where I needed more guidance.

As a result of the reduction in art curricula, a de-emphasis on “making things,” and schools emphasizing standardized tests and rote memorization, faculty felt first year college students have a reduced level of creativity. The participants expressed great concern over this reduction since the industry is demanding higher forms of innovation in both design and industry systems.

## The college experience and graduate attributes

Survey results show graduates felt their college courses were beneficial (62.7%) and provided good preparation through skills learned (59.3%). The courses' high workload, assignments with tight parameters, and learning from faculty's professional experiences provided foresight into industry expectations and career options. Projects that employed team dynamics were described as being beneficial because they prepared students for how design rooms truly operate. Field trips to design rooms, cutting houses, production centers, and other related sites were cited as being educational because they exposed students to actual industry practices. Surveyed participants asked for curricula to incorporate these activities for future students.

Ideas for improving program structures were explored during the Fashion Education Summit. Attendees described a need for fashion design education to move away from isolated course subjects to integrated skill building by allowing projects to move across courses in order to synthesize learning and skills. Other attendees felt students need to be more flexible and adaptable for a successful entry into the professional world; in order to strengthen this skill, "learning how to learn" is an area that educators must emphasize in curricula. Summit attendees emphasized this by stating students must remain constantly aware of emerging industry practices through an academic experience that encompasses both classroom and external educational opportunities.

College developed graduates in other ways, such as the ability to time manage, articulate ideas, and handle a high workload. These skills helped increase the students' work ethic and discipline and provided a more fluid transition into the competitive, demanding, highly accelerated fashion industry. As a result of the increasing speed and uncertainty in the profession, many agreed there will be new graduate attributes required by the industry. These will include:

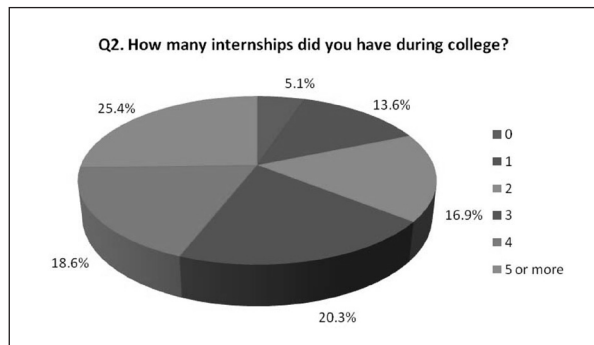
- Flexibility and an ability to "wear many hats";
- Versatility in design and professional environment;
- Heightened critical and intuitive skills;
- Expertise in collaboration and team work;
- High interpersonal skills;
- Ability to contextualize design within larger global systems.

As many expressed, the professional environment expects designers to be highly observant and resourceful in order to predict and overcome potential hurdles within the design room. Possessing talent is simply not enough for tomorrow's professional fashion designer.

## Internships

For college students in urban settings such as New York City, internships provide an additional source of learning, professional engagement, and opportunities to explore career options. Students typically find internships through their own initiatives, faculty recommendations, or their school's career placement offices, and usually work one day per week during the academic year and full time during summer recesses. The learning opportunities and tasks given to the intern vary greatly and often depend upon the company's size and structure, the students' skills, and area of design focus.

Almost all of the graduates surveyed (95%) had internships during college and virtually all of these related directly to fashion design (Figure 2). Although the quantity of internships varied, a significant portion of these respondents (25.4%) had five or more internships during college. All of the professional designers participating in the New York focus group *also* had three or more internships during college which exposed them to different markets, responsibilities, and company scales, thus informing their professional goals.



**Figure 2.** Graph displaying the participants' number of internships held during college. **Source.** Author's.

Graduates cited internships as *the* most helpful experience for their transition experience into industry. Out of seven possible choices (Figure 3), over 71% of those surveyed listed internships as *the* most helpful for their transition into industry. Most other areas ranked far below these results. Internships were valuable due to several reasons, including the information and skills acquired (“Good learning experience beyond classes at Parsons”), the broader engagement in the Garment Center that could be applied to their studies, understanding how to work for another designer, and general exposure to the professional environment. Participants describe the internship experiences as “insightful and personal”, beneficial for developing realistic professional expectations, and beneficial for learning how to network. The few who had negative experiences and felt internships were least helpful for their transition (12.5%) stated they were given menial tasks that did not offer much education or responsibility. As one stated:

One of them was terrible. I was basically the coffee girl and ran errands. [The internship] did not teach me anything about fashion. The others were much better. I basically did the work of an assistant designer. This showed me the type of work I would start to do at my first job. It also prepared me for the hours most fashion jobs required.

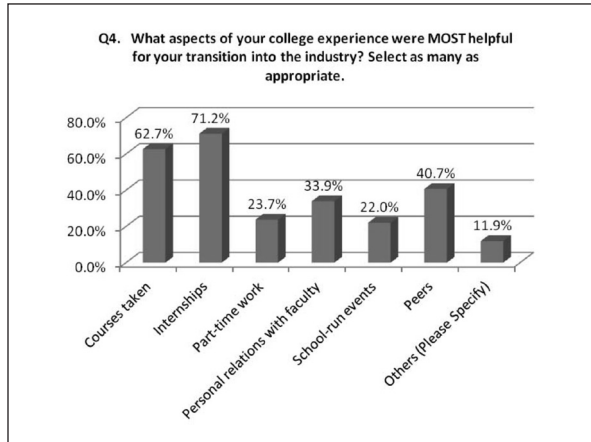


Figure 3. Graph displaying areas that were most helpful for the transition into the industry. Source. Author's.

Areas that provided direct engagement with the design practice, namely coursework and internships, were found *most* helpful by graduates for their transition into the industry. Respondents were detailed in describing the usefulness of internships due to the knowledge gained and the opportunity to network; one wrote "...the only way to get a job was through internship connections." Students view internships as "real world" experience that can be synthesized with academic coursework. One graduate expressed that school is able "to teach [aspects about] the industry in theory, but nothing compares to what you learn when you are actually in it," while another stated internships provide exposure to the "realities" of producing garments. Their experience with internships led some respondents to feel the area needing the most improvement is the connection between the education received and how the "real world" operates; some felt courses did not utilize The New York Garment Center for educational activities such as field trips and project critiques from professional designers.

Most survey respondents had a wide range of internship experiences as students and these increased their understanding of the industry and their professional goals. Diverse professional environments, responsibilities, and markets were often experienced by the same respondent. One graduate chose internships in different markets in order to "...get

an idea of where I fit. These experiences exposed me to the demands, expectations, and the reality of the industry...”

The students’ responsibilities during internships varied and included patternmaking, designing, sewing, sketching, performing inspiration research, digital work, and providing general administrative support. While many of these skills were taught in the students’ design programs, the professional environment allowed interns to improve these skills while observing the broader context of fashion design and how design teams operate.

Internships deepen the students’ education and professional development through the supervisors’ mentorship. As one designer stated “[My boss] really nurtured me [and] took me in. Her openness was helpful and I learned from that how to treat others.” As a result of their positive mentorship received during college, many professionals understood the necessary benefits of their experience. This has led them to be active mentors for their current interns.

### **Support systems for the transition experience**

What types of mentorship and institutional support structures exist for young adults? The support needed by students was underscored by one professional who claimed “students do not know themselves as well as we did years ago.” Others agreed that educators must help design students discover the many other types of careers in the fashion industry due to the field’s competitive nature that is compounded by the high graduate population.

The greater diversity of students and the awareness that students must become more fully aware of career options has led some faculty to feel their role has increasingly become that of “mentor.” This role has impacted the transition experience significantly: 34% of recent graduates surveyed found their relationship with faculty was the most helpful for a fluid transition experience. One graduate stated: “Talking to my teachers and getting advice on how to achieve what I wanted to achieve was the most important and most helpful aspect [of school].”

In order to best prepare students for entry into the field, academic institutions employ various methods. Career Services Offices typically support students across *all* majors through annual job fairs, resume workshops, internship and job boards for students and alumni, and general career advising. The online survey showed the Office played a role in approximately half of the respondents’ transition experiences. Many stated their first jobs were found through the Office’s events, an online database, and appointments with the staff. Beneficial activities included assistance with finding employment, resume workshops, and securing internships. However, some students wanted more opportunities to learn these skills. One wrote:

[The] whole process of job hunting, interviewing, and finding the resources for job listing[s] were something I wasn’t prepared for. These things weren’t really touched upon at schools I went in with very little to no idea/preparation on how to navigate in the job market.

In the CCA focus group, participants cited their Placement Office as an essential component in graduates' transition experience. The faculty described their office as highly engaged with the alumni; graduates are sent new job postings and are frequently supported by the office's outreach that offers mentorship during all stages of professional development. However, survey results showed 24 out of 46 respondents felt their college's Career Services Office to be of little or no help and they relied on their own perseverance when seeking employment. Graduates wished they had received better training in interviewing skills, resume preparation, and networking methods.

Many institutions hold social "mixers" that provide alumni with networking opportunities and professional support. To reach a broader community, some institutions produce publications for alumni so they remain updated on events and feel connected to their school community. In light of the economic crisis, Parsons offers a monthly alumni job search support group, and panel discussions and workshops on freelancing, which also serve as networking opportunities.

However, despite most schools offering these services, some described their colleges as "expecting them to sink or swim upon graduation, door closed, while they focused on the next batch." According to a recent survey conducted by Parsons The New School for Design, 57% of alumni cited the need for networking opportunities with industry professionals and school alumni as the most pressing concern for professional development (Parsons The New School for Design, 2011).

## Unexpected challenges

One of the key surprises for emerging graduates was how the industry operates, despite having internships throughout college. These ranged from understanding the designers' role within a larger corporate system, the corporate calendar, and how to work with overseas factories. For some graduates, the surprise was too great and they left the profession altogether. When asked to describe their own transition, one faculty member claimed it was "brutally painful" because school provided a "fantasy world" that did not reflect actual industry operations. Another designer felt "it was 'mind blowing' to learn how the industry really operates." More in-depth knowledge and training in entrepreneurship/business skills were cited for the past two years as the top two suggestions for Parsons to better prepare graduates (Parsons, 2011).

Another challenge pertained to the industry's accelerated rate of change. One focus group participant asserted "the industry doesn't know what it's doing anymore," exemplified in its shift from delivering four collections per season to possibly eighteen. The accelerated volume decreases the designers' ability to analyze and improve both products and systems behind the products' creation. Participants expressed feeling the industry focuses on quantity over quality and does not allow time for improvement or innovation in design. Participants articulated that they had received an education that emphasized conceptual

development and design process. This experience led many to feel they entered the industry with different job expectations. One stated:

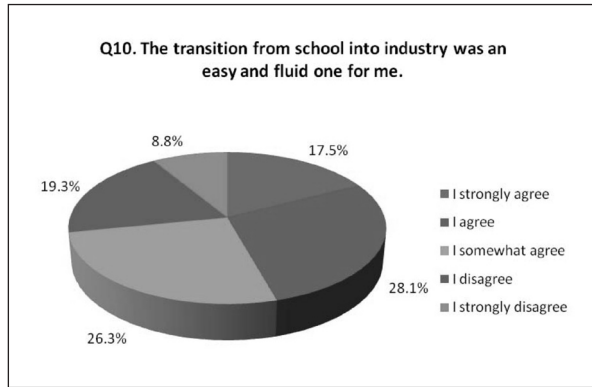
Academia is so different from the industry and no one explains to you the difference. You are under the impression that all of your talents will be utilized in the real world but they are disregarded, and that was a shocker. That should've been something we knew.

Research suggests graduates were surprised by the lack of creativity offered in the profession due to the high emphasis on technical responsibilities such as performing garment “specing,” and developing “tech packs” for manufacturing. To mitigate this, some expressed the need for education to incorporate industry practices into curricula. As one participant expressed the American industry is “void of [creativity]” and “it was a jolt” entering an industry that often looks to European runway shows for ideas. Another stated: “I was surprised by how many companies work from other company’s work and from Style.com to copy. The majority of companies steal from Paris, Milan, et cetera.” The lack of designing caused frustration and led some to feel that in order to experience design as a creative practice, they must operate their own companies rather than working for a brand that is largely driven by commercial success. One respondent reassessed her initial expectations and wrote:

[School] was very focused on the concept and philosophy behind fashion, which is great but I felt very limited with available jobs as I was trained for ‘higher-end designer customers’. What I realized outside [of school] was that [the] majority of [the] fashion industry has less of that and my fellow graduates [and I had] a hard time adjusting to that. Most of us settled for places that we [didn’t] believe in but [worked there] to get benefits and pay the bills.

Similarly, several respondents felt challenged when asked to design for a different aesthetic because they were accustomed to designing for themselves and their own aesthetic with few limitations during their education.

Despite these challenges, the professionals agreed that students must be taught to maximize their creativity that is *supported* by skill building in order to discover who they are as designers. This belief that design education should prioritize creativity and conceptual thinking led many designers to engage their interns in technical work to balance their conceptually focused schoolwork. This balanced approach to curricula development that was widely supported by all attending The Fashion Education Summit. While these challenges remain salient, almost half of those surveyed (44%) felt the transition from school to industry was easy and fluid, and just over one-quarter (28%) felt it was a challenge (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** Graph displaying participants' feelings towards their fluid transition into industry. **Source.** Author's.

### Evolving professional goals

With so many challenges faced by graduates, did participants' professional goals evolve during their transition? While many expressed their goals have *not* shifted and their deeper immersion into the field has strengthened these goals, others described slight adjustments, while still others left the profession altogether.

One common change pertains to company demographics. For some, college years were spent preparing for a large corporate brand. However, once employed by these brands, respondents cited the lack of creativity, long hours, insufficient salaries, low personal gratification, and contrarian design aesthetic as the impetus for changing their goals and opening their own, smaller labels. Some who were surprised by the lack of employment opportunities in the challenging economy created their own brand. One stated: "I always thought I would work for a company for many years. After a year of still looking for a job and interning, I decided to start my own line. Best decision I have ever made."

In contrast, some valued large established corporations for their financial and personal benefits. One stated:

I used to want to work at a small company where I knew all the ins and outs, and then eventually start my own small company. Now I will only work at large companies that can afford to pay me properly for the work I do...[and] offer a possibility to move up in the company.

The demanding profession and grueling hours ranked high in altering professional goals. One stated:



When graduating, you have this idea of your dream and how it will play out but as you get older your responsibilities and life choices start to change. Therefore your dream of designing changes and the reality of how much work is involved for one [person] begin to be not as enjoyable as it was during college and the first year of starting your career.

Although some graduates felt startled by the industry's lack of creativity, other graduates embraced the challenge and evolved their professional goals. Several graduates expressed that their new goal is to reach a wide audience who will "actually wear the clothes and utilize them in real life" rather than creating conceptual runway garments.

#### IV. Data interpretations

Throughout the research process, the graduates' transition experience was contextualized largely through an increasingly demanding and uncertain industry. The unprecedented acceleration of today's industry is resulting in an inability to reflect adequately and identify future needs and goals; the industry does not know how to innovate and improve due to the market's ceaseless demand for high quantities of product for consumption. There are increasing pressures placed on fashion designers due to the overwhelming numbers of graduates competing for jobs, the volatile economy, an overly saturated market where products must appear unique, and the evolution of the designer's role that will require significantly more skills. Literature and conferences demonstrated the need for future designers to identify social patterns, synthesize information from previously disconnected systems in order to innovate practice and products, and create a *highly* original and sustainable vision that can stand out in the global marketplace.

The designer's role is also being re-contextualized as a result of production facilities being removed from traditional design centers (e.g. New York City), while China and Brazil have established their own fashion weeks and local schools that educate students with great success. Much of the literature reviewed speculates these countries will marginalize the American fashion industry and design education. This confirms findings from focus groups and conferences that show American design schools will evolve the older mode of design education centered on *making* into one that prioritizes thinking, thus building a new knowledge-based economy. This will require a reexamination of curricula to create a new academic environment.

Survey data showed there is a significant quantity of students enrolling in pre-college fashion design studies; this preparation in skill will allow American design schools to develop a more theory-centered design education. If pre-college fashion design experience is rising, colleges' evolution to a more theory-centered design education will be critical since, due to the speed of our world today and the industry's volatility, designers will need to research more deeply in order to back up their work. Thus, students need to learn not only skills, but highly sophisticated forms of research and data collection methods to

inform their design proposals. Virtually all participants advocated for higher education to improve students' creative, critical, and analytical skills since the industry demands graduates who possess stronger creativity and innovative approaches to both fashion design and business models.

For students not adequately prepared by pre-college studies, American institutions may develop a common European system. Prior to entry into undergraduate fashion studies that prioritizes conceptual thinking, students complete a "foundation year" that emphasizes basic skills. This structure can serve those students who do not possess sufficient skills, often due to reduced arts education in the American secondary schools. Students already possessing the foundational skills needed for the undergraduate program would not be required to enter this "foundational" year. An optional five-year undergraduate program model was advocated by many educators and students in this study.

During the transition period, the study showed fashion graduates demonstrated common characteristics associated with most other college graduates; these included the need for professional and emotional support in the form of mentorship, attempts to discover the preferred professional area by frequent shifts in employment, and evolving values. Surveyed participants demonstrated a high motivation for professional success and demand for personal fulfillment from their work. As confirmed through literature, mentorship is also invaluable during this time of increasing uncertainty due to its ability to provide multiple perspectives and the voice of experience to inexperienced young adults.

The most significant challenge experienced by survey respondents during their transition period was an understanding of how the industry operates and the job itself. This finding was also stated in conferences and focus groups. Data shows the transition would have been easier if students had acquired more practical knowledge of how the industry works. Although internships were beneficial and gave exposure to profession, most interned one day per week; these short time spans did not provide a genuine industry experience. To increase their students' preparation, some colleges offer credit for full-time internships, while others allow students to alternate traditional semesters of academic study with professional work. Thus, students obtain firsthand learning, combine theoretical with practical knowledge, and formulate realistic expectations for future careers.

While diverse internships allowed students to consider where to focus professionally, a longer and more immersive internship experience must be undertaken to comprehend how the industry and entry level position truly operate. Similarly, a required "suite" of internships in such areas as design, business, and garment production will expose students to broader systems and career possibilities. This will promote the desired graduate attributes of versatility, flexibility, confidence, ability to make connections, self-awareness and a deeper understanding of industry operations and job expectations.

As this study shows, internships play an enormous role in the education and transition of the young adult. Therefore it will be critical for programs to have increased oversight of these internships to ensure they are educational. Educators must also create opportunities for using the industry (e.g. New York's Garment Center) and other relevant areas outside of the academic setting for educational opportunities. When developed alongside such support systems as Career Services and Student Advising, the generation that is expanding

in diversity and professional goals will be better supported. Academic programs that work collaboratively with the industry will allow each student to match his or her goals, thus contributing to better preparation and a more fluid transition.

## **V. Recommendations**

As fashion design education evolves and the industry experiences great uncertainty due to the economic climate and role the future designer will play, educators must remain aware of the challenges graduates experience during their transition period from college into the profession. In order for academia to strengthen their graduates' entrance into the industry, the following recommendations have been developed.

### **Internships**

A support system is needed for developing productive internships, and for ongoing monitoring of students' experiences in them. By overseeing students' internships, programs will ensure internships are highly educational experiences, and thus grant college credits in this "external classroom." There is need for credit-bearing full-time internships that provide students with an immersive experience in order to gain realistic expectations for industry operations and actual job responsibilities.

The data also showed graduates were not fully aware of the career possibilities within the fashion industry. A required "suite" of internships in areas of design, production, and business will allow students to connect systems, discover the professional areas they wish to pursue, and receive a more holistic understanding of the industry. Students will benefit by making professional connections for mentorship and future employment, applying their learned skills and theories acquired in the actual practice, and gaining familiarity with the professional environments.

### **Program Design**

Programs must offer a balanced education between design theory and industry "real world" operations so that students are intellectually challenged and able to obtain a fuller understanding and preparation for their future careers. This balance will require students to engage with professional designers throughout their studies in order to provide a greater awareness of industry expectations. These professionals may serve as visiting critics, participate in lectures and roundtable discussions, or other formats in order to contextualize the students' education. Such opportunities will be particularly beneficial if schools have limited access to urban fashion districts.

Suggested program models are:

- A) In **Model A**, a first year “foundation year” that addresses general art and design concepts is offered to students who have not received adequate college preparation and/or passed a portfolio review. However, students passing the portfolio assessment may enter the four year fashion design program directly.
- B) In **Model B**, students fulfill four years of coursework. A fifth year of full-time professional work is taken between the second and third years of study and delivers college credits. This “external year” allows students to fully engage in actual industry practices, gain professional connections for mentorship and future employment, and form genuine expectations for the practice.
- C) In **Model C**, a final “transition year” provides a more supported and fluid entry into the profession. Following the completion of four years of study, students enter a fifth year that combines academic coursework and credit-bearing professional experience. Similar to “B,” students form genuine expectations for the career by engaging in actual industry operations, make professional connections for mentorship and future employment, and experience a more fluid entrance into the profession.

<b>Model A</b>	<b>Model B</b>	<b>Model C</b>
Year 1: "Foundation Year"	Year 1	Year 1
Year 2	Year 2	Year 2
Year 3	Year 3: Industry	Year 3
Year 4	Year 4	Year 4
Year 5	Year 5	Year 5: 1/2 School, 1/2 Industry

Figure 5. Program Models Source. Author's.

## Support systems

Increasing opportunities for students to learn how to interview, resource job postings, network, and navigate professional environments will address many of the challenges students experience when transitioning from college to career. Career Services Offices must engage *far* more with students, faculty, and alumni to learn how the administrators can best support the student community, and ultimately provide a better transition for graduates. Engaging industry professionals on a frequent basis to acquire *specific* data about recent graduate hires will offer additional data and thus inform future initiatives.

## Lingering questions

### Pre-college and college experiences

To understand how to evolve design curricula –thereby improving the transition into practice– research into students’ pre-college experiences must be collected. What prior courses relevant to fashion design have students taken? What applicable skills do they already possess? Are these skills sufficient enough to allow programs to evolve curricula into advanced theoretical discourse and cross-disciplinary engagement in order to produce the newly desired graduate attributes? What is the future of art education in secondary education? How has the student generation evolved and how will this impact future pedagogy?

### The designer’s identity

This study shows the most significant challenges were the lack of understanding of industry operations and entry level positions. How and from where do students form their ideas for what being a fashion designer entails? How can college programs educate student successfully for entering the volatile and highly accelerated future fashion design industry?

### Program models

Advanced research into five-year design education models is needed. How could this model benefit students who do not have adequate pre-college art and design studies? How can design schools adopt this structure to better educate and prepare undergraduates? In what ways will this model improve the transition period? Have the graduates from five year programs experienced an easier transition into practice than those from four year programs? Undergraduate programs must also offer more personalized fashion design education through “tracks” and elective courses in which students “design” their own academic experience. This need for personalized programming is increasing due to the diversity of students’ pre-college experiences, and their unique needs and goals. Personalized “tracks” will ensure all students are academically challenged, are able to pursue unique personal and professional goals, and receive the types of mentorship needed.

Due to the ever-increasing knowledge graduates must possess, research into the role of graduate studies in fashion design must be performed. What are the benefits of graduate studies? How could graduate programs further improve the graduates’ transition into the industry? How can graduate-level coursework address the growing areas of interdisciplinary collaboration?

## Support systems

Although most institutions provide support systems such as Career Services and alumni events, many participants felt these services were inadequate. How can these structures be improved? What additional support systems are needed? Broader research into the types of institutional support systems will be needed to understand which are most beneficial for the students' mentorship and their transitional experiences.

The benefits of mentorship were praised by many in this study. Further research into diverse mentorship programs, the benefits and values expressed by their participants, and data collection from those who received mentoring before and during the transition are needed to more fully understand this type of support. How are alumni engaged? How could they offer more meaningful mentorship for students?

By contextualizing the transition experience, students and emerging professionals will be better prepared and supported. This will produce a more successful student and alumni body who are increasingly engaged and committed to the profession due to their fluid and positive transition from the academic environment into the fashion design profession. Awareness for the critical role the transition experience plays must always remain connected to an academic institution's philosophy, program design, and curricula.

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**Resumen:** El presente estudio examina la experiencia transicional de los graduados en diseño de indumentaria en su pasaje de la universidad a la vida profesional a través de la mirada de recientes graduados, profesionales, educadores, académicos y estudiantes. Asimismo, el estudio toma en consideración el futuro de la enseñanza del diseño de indumentaria y qué tipo de experiencias prepararían mejor a los estudiantes para su ingreso al mercado. La bibliografía consultada profundiza en diferentes temáticas, como el diseño en la sociedad, la enseñanza del diseño de indumentaria, las características del desarrollo de los jóvenes adultos, tutorías, y preparación de los estudiantes para el mundo profesional. La experiencia de los graduados se contextualiza a través de *focus-groups* con diseñadores profesionales y educadores, entrevistas con profesionales y una encuesta online a recientes graduados. Este estudio intenta brindar a los profesores de diseño de indumentaria y a los directores de carrera un panorama actualizado sobre cómo mejorar la preparación de los estudiantes de diseño de indumentaria para su ingreso a la práctica profesional.

**Palabras clave:** aprendizaje - diseño - enseñanza - estudiante - moda.

**Resumo:** O presente estudo examina a experiência transicional dos graduados em design de indumentária em sua passagem da universidade à vida profissional através da mirada de recentes graduados, profissionais, educadores, acadêmicos e estudantes. Além, o estudo considera o futuro do ensino do design de indumentária e quais experiências preparariam melhor aos estudantes para seu ingresso ao mercado. A bibliografia consultada aprofunda em diversas temáticas, como o design na sociedade, o ensino do design de indumentária, as características do desenvolvimento dos jovens adultos, tutorias e preparação dos estudantes para o mundo profissional. A experiência dos graduados se contextualiza através de focus groups com designers profissionais e educadores, entrevistas com profissionais e uma pesquisa online a recentes graduados. Este estudo procura brindar aos professores de design de indumentária e aos diretores de carreira um panorama atualizado sobre como melhorar a preparação dos estudantes de design de indumentária para seu ingresso à prática profissional.

**Palavras chave:** aprendizagem - design - ensino - estudante - moda.

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