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Technology Making the Grade at Fashion Schools

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The next generation of apparel designers and merchandisers emerging from California's fashion colleges and trade schools should be more technically skilled than ever if recent investments in new technologies pay off, educators say.

Government leaders, educators and private enterprise have practically mandated increased investment in technology to compete in a global marketplace. That is especially evident in the local market as apparel and textile companies continue to shift production offshore, creating more demand for workers with expertise in the product development and technical side of the business.

To meet this demand, schools have been going well beyond basic clothing design, adding courses in computerized data management, business management and textile design. It's not just about designing clothes anymore, educators say.

"The reality is that we're more product-development driven now," said Barbara Bundy, director of education for the Fashion Institute of Design & Merchandising, which has campuses in Los Angeles, Orange County and San Francisco. "That's where it's happening in the industry, and that's where it's happening at FITD.

FITD recently added a course teaching Gerber Technology's WebPDM software application, which helps companies manage production data and steps, including sizing, costing and organizing specs across the board.

Bundy, a member of the Washington, D.C.-based American Apparel & Footwear Association, brought an AFA "Special to Market" conference to FITD last month.

The event featured technology leaders from Nike Inc., the Authentic Fitness Corp., the St. J. Jill Group Inc., and other companies. The college will host another major technology conference this fall.

At the Los Angeles-based California Design College, now under the Art Institute umbrella, educator Shideh Shirdel teaches students how to create virtual showrooms and retail stores through the 3D Visual Merchant program from Lectra. CDC students create a retail environment using 3-D technology and learn about planning sales floors and showrooms.

The students also use 3-D technology in PAD System Technologies new CAD (computer-aided design) products, which allow users to save time on alterations during the patternmaking process.

On the business side, the college teaches computer programs—like those from Santa Ana, Calif.-based AIMS—that process orders, integrate EDI (electronic data interchange) and track inventory.

"We try to keep the software current and teach a variety of applications," said Gwen Lewis, director of academic affairs.

Students at the Otis School of Fashion Design in Los Angeles are taking design to the next level by studying nanotechnology, the science of molecules and everything small. The project is being conducted in conjunction with the Otis student mentor program and UCLA Media Arts, headed by Victoria Vesna.

Under the guidance of designer Isabel Toledo, students incorporate the foundations of nanotechnology into clothing designs by using shapes found in nature, such as squares, rectangles and triangles. The finished products will be on display during the school's May 1 fashion show, which will not be an ordinary show, according to Rosemary Beaudry, chair of the fashion school at Otis.

Beaudry said the designs will feature reflecting images of molecules and atoms.

"We're at the point at which it's not a matter of how much technology or coming up with better technologies, but how to use it better," Beaudry said. "With this project, biochemists are sharing information with the fashion industry. There's a crossover in fields, and now even competitors are doing that for the benefit of everyone.

According to Beaudry, scientists think the fabric of the future will feature prints and images that actually move on garments as the body moves. Following the fashion show, the students' designs will be part of a nanotechnology exhibit at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Public schools and colleges have for the most part been able to keep up with the technology investments made by their private-school counterparts, despite a state budget crisis that has put pressure on some programs.

Los Angeles Trade-Technical College has cut some fashion programs, but the trade school has upgraded its technology thanks to federal grants and a long-term commitment to staying on the cutting edge of new technologies. "In fact, we're restructuring the program around technology," said Carol Anderson, chair of the fashion program.

The school added an Apple Macintosh lab in September and has an array of CAD and textile design classes featuring state-of-the-art textile design programs, such as Lectra's Ula and Gerber's Artworks.

Santa Monica College's program came very close to being eliminated last year because of budget restraints.

"We're in a mode of expansion," said department coordinator Ferenehah Mobabah.

"We're requesting more computers and technology. The college is recognizing that we're students are being absorbed into the industry fast. We're in an area where there's demand from the entertainment industry, as well.

California State Polytechnic University, Pomona has faced financial challenges, but the fashion program should be spared any major cuts, said Betty Tracy, chair of the fashion program. "I think it will help the university as a whole," she said.

Cal Poly Pomona has been aided by the private sector. Los Angeles-based American Apparel has allowed the school's production students to spend a semester producing their own clothing line, which they then sell at the student bookstore.

California State University, Los Angeles, has also benefited from outside assistance. CSULA will launch a textile production management certificate program for the 2001-02 school year.

"There's a need for continuing education for people already in the industry, too," said Carol Tukudait, an associate professor in CSULAs art department.

The California Fashion Association, which has promoted technology to educators through events such as last fall's Technology by Design conference at the Los Angeles International Textile Show, is promoting the program.

The new emphasis on technology in education is long overdue, said Tammy Clutkin, senior vice president of Santa Monica, Calif.-based 24 Seven Inc., an employment placement agency for the apparel industry.

Clutkin said only about half of the recruits she sees have the technical skills necessary for jobs in today's apparel industry. Knowing popular computer graphics programs such as Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator can help, she said, adding that the more recruits know the better.

"It's better if they're well-rounded and know how to construct a garment," she said.

"The problem is, in today's economy, a lot of companies want employees that can hit the ground running. They often don't have the time to train each person they hire."