

## **A Textile and Furniture Industry Career Exploration Program**

**Ellen T. Miller**  
**Wilma S. Hammett**  
**Judieth E. Mock**  
**Ann Y. Frazier**

The United States textile complex, including fiber and apparel industries, annually generates \$50 billion of the Gross National Product. It employs 700,000 individuals in 4,787 U.S. textile companies and 6,412 textile plants. North Carolina ranks first in Gross State Product from textiles (\$6,186,000,000) and fourth in apparel (\$1,556,000,000). There are 1,200 textile plants each employing 100 people or more in North Carolina. The United States furniture industry contributes \$24 billion to the U.S. economy and employs 300,000 individuals. In North Carolina, manufacturing of residential furniture accounts for \$4 billion in the state's economy and employs 85,000 people.

Youth entering the workforce and their place in society must prepare themselves for a highly technical world. There are multiple educational and career opportunities in the textile, apparel, and furniture arenas. One role of formal and non-formal educators is to provide opportunities for higher level learning, and career exploration for youth.

The Southern Regional 4-H Textile and Furniture Fellows program is a successful model of industry, research, teaching and extension collaboration that provides a forum of "hands-on" career discovery and workplace preparedness in the textiles and furniture industries. The Fellows Program is anchored by a week-long symposium showcasing the diversity of the textile and furniture industries and the related career options to young people throughout the southern United States. It also prepares the participants to select high school curricula supportive of college entry into the fields of study.

The Textile and Furniture Fellows Program is open to any youth between the ages of 15 and 17 who is interested in pursuing a career in textiles, furniture, industrial management, or a related field. Applications are available from the County 4-H Agent or School Guidance Counselor.

Applications are screened by a committee composed of Extension professionals and industry leaders in the applicant's home state.

Designed as a two-year program, First-Year Fellows explore the various options in the industries while the Second-Year Fellows become involved in specific fields of study. First-Year Fellows have the option to extend their learning by conducting a project when they return home from the Symposium. They may choose to design, implement, and evaluate a project with the help of a mentor working in an area related to their topic. These projects are reviewed and eight to ten Fellows are invited to return to the Symposium a second year for an in-depth educational track. This track gives returnees an opportunity to focus on a specific career while spending one day shadowing and interacting with practicing professionals in an industry setting. In addition, Second-Year Fellows share their project through an oral presentation and exhibit.

### **Collaborative Effort**

The Fellows Program is the direct result of collaborative efforts among North Carolina Cooperative Extension 4-H and Family and Consumer Sciences; North Carolina State University: College of Textiles, College of Forest Resources, College of Engineering, and School of Design; University of North Carolina at Greensboro School of Human Environmental Sciences; High Point University: School of Business, Home Furnishings Marketing Program; and North Carolina textile and furniture industry professionals, companies, and trade associations.

The Fellows Program was initiated three years prior to the first Symposium. Collaboration built bridges of cooperation between education, industry and trade associations that resulted in both financial and program support for a seven-year period. The Fellows Program has drawn a diverse group of practitioners who collectively present a well-rounded picture of educational and career opportunities through seminars, tours, lab experiences, rap sessions, mentoring, and shadowing experiences. Students leave the Symposium more aware of college entry requirements and often the additional requirements of some science and technology curricula such as textile and furniture. Internal collaboration within the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service and with teaching and research colleagues in other colleges at North Carolina State University as well as other universities in the state has broadened the possibilities and the depth of experience that the Symposium can offer.

Some of the participating states have also collaborated with trade associations and specific industries to solicit support for their state delegates.

## Teaching Methods

The Fellows Program design recognizes and capitalizes on the strengths that set this program apart: Non-formal, nongraded, interest-based interactive education.

Upon completing the two-year program, participants will have practiced all of the steps in the experiential learning model: experience, share, process, generalize and apply. For example, Fellows work with professors in "hands on" laboratory experiences using state-of-the-art technology, visit industrial settings to observe the "real world" application of laboratory experiences, share information with other participants and with young professionals in informal rap sessions. They may choose to design and implement an individual long-term project under the guidance of a mentor, and present the results.

## Evaluation/Impacts

A total of 316 youth along with 82 adult mentors have participated in the Symposium as First-Year Fellows since 1989. Forty youth have conducted a research project under the guidance of a mentor and applied for the Second Year track. Of those, 27 selected by a review team of university faculty, have returned for more in-depth Symposium experiences. A longitudinal study of Fellows participating in the two tracks of textile and furniture indicates that a very high percentage of the participants are furthering their education at the college or university level. Also, the study reveals that 40 percent of the textile participants and 55 percent of the furniture participants are pursuing careers in the two industries after participating in the Fellows program.

Personal comments from Fellows responding to the longitudinal study attest to the influences of the Fellows Program experience. "I learned a lot about myself. I learned to be self-motivated and to follow a plan to reach a goal, a year long project." Another Fellow commented, "Because of the vast amount of knowledge I gained about the field of textiles, I decided to become a textile engineer. Some of the major factors that influenced me were the job opportunities available, the variety of jobs, the fact that many jobs are available in my home state, and the amount of scholarship money available."

A Fellow from Louisiana wrote, "The Southern Regional 4-H Textile and Furniture Fellows Program was one of the most enriching activities I participated in during my process of career planning. I was thoroughly intrigued by all of the latest advances in the textile industry that I was exposed to. For example, as a Second-Year Fellow, I visited CT2 (Textile Clothing Technology Corporation). There I was introduced to quick response manufacturing and the body scanning machine--a theory that my professors are just being introduced to two years later. I strongly believe that this program was very beneficial in helping me choose a career and prepare for college."

The experience is a successful model of academia, industry, and Extension working together preparing young people to make informed decisions about their future.

**Authors**

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