Global Fashion Management (GFM), one of six programs within the Fashion Institute of Technology’s (FIT) School of Graduate Studies, is a five-year-old program dedicated to training professionals for executive positions within the apparel industry. Directly impacted and strongly influenced by globalization forces, competition in this industry has become increasingly complex in regard to managing the supply chain, promoting innovation in design and product development, and balancing priorities within an industry that thrives on both the creative and quantitative skills of its workforce. For these reasons, the need to find highly-qualified adjunct instructors has never been more critical.

As part of the State University of New York system, FIT’s budget is conservative; approximately 30 percent of the faculty serves in full time permanent positions. With the exception of the chair and one full time finance professor hired in a parallel graduate department who joined the staff in fall 2008, the entire GFM faculty consists of adjuncts. This reliance on adjuncts, which results in an ongoing search for teaching talent, is among the greatest challenges for a department chairperson.

The nature of the apparel industry is one in which extensive practical experience correlates highly with successful leadership. Historically, in fact, the industry has valued experience over academic training; this pattern has become less prevalent, however, as growing numbers of MBAs have joined apparel manufacturers and retailers over the past several years. But the presence of industry-trained, or clinical, faculty remains an essential objective in preparing students to excel. At the same time, theoretical training is imperative as higher levels of analytical expertise become essential in understanding the economic, political, and social complexities of the global landscape in which the business of the apparel industry takes place. But challenges in finding candidates who inhabit both worlds are considerable for the following reasons:

- Successful business people in this industry are seldom academically trained and are not familiar with the process of delivering lectures, conducting research, or offering theoretical explanations.
- The disparity between prospective adjuncts’ academic salaries and their professional salaries is so great that, when they come to teach, they are essentially being asked to volunteer.
- An adjunct’s demanding schedule makes it difficult—if not impossible—to join committees or become involved in the life of the department.
- The program curriculum demands knowledge and experience in international business. While most professionals in the industry travel worldwide, teaching at the graduate level requires that they have considerable expertise in economic, cultural, management, and marketing issues within several countries or regions (most importantly, Asia).
Despite these difficulties in recruiting teaching talent, it is impossible to overstate the advantage of being in a major metropolitan area—particularly New York, given its long association with the apparel industry. In a city with several highly rated universities, master’s and PhD candidates, as well as members of FIT’s full-time faculty, serve as lecturers and adjuncts in the Global Fashion Management program. FIT also benefits from the trend for professionals in their 50s and 60s, who are retiring from a corporate schedule or decreasing their working hours, to turn their attention to teaching. Here the acquisition of teaching skills is taken into account, as the prospective adjunct will lecture as a guest in several classes before taking on a semester-long course.

In sum, the educational advantages to students—represented by access to adjunct instructors with strong connections to the apparel industry—clearly outweigh the logistical disadvantages associated with ongoing recruitment. When the material presented is relevant, well organized, and current, the benefits of an industry practitioner may be the most effective way to bring the world to the classroom.

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