

# Understanding the Fashion Design Student's Transitional Experience from Foundation Year to Program Major

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## Abstract

This qualitative study examines both the cognitive and emotional development of undergraduates as they transition from freshman-year "foundation" design programs into sophomore-year fashion design "major" programs. The study investigates this through the lenses of multiple constituents, including design school undergraduates, alumni, educators, directors, scholars, and current program structures. Using the theoretical framework of William Perry's Scheme of Epistemological Growth this research study seeks to understand the undergraduates' transitional experience. This study also considers the future of fashion design education and what kind of experience might best prepare students for their transition into the major. This study aims to provide undergraduate design programs, educators, and directors with information for how they can improve their students' transition into fashion design programs.

## Background and Rationale

### A Disconnect Between Foundation Year and Design Major

- Undergraduate design students often feel a disconnection between their foundation year and second year of design school. Foundation curriculum emphasizes general art/design principles while second-year fashion design programs require markedly different skillsets.
- This disconnect prevents a smooth, fluid transition into the program major thus affecting students' cognitive and emotional development.

### A Dearth of Research Literature

- Research literature in young adult development is scant unlike that in child and adolescent development. In fact, the first conference to examine this group was in 2003. This study is critical to advance design education and student development.
- 'Generation Z' (ages 25 and younger) are experiencing unprecedented rises in mental health issues. For example, among "Gen Z" there has been stark changes (2009-2018) in those reporting anxiety (up 112%), depression (up 70%), and panic attacks (up 116%) (American College Health Association, 2019).
- Obtaining research about 'Gen Z' is critical if they are to develop in an optimal manner, both cognitively and emotionally (Arnett, 2004).

### Strengthened College Student Development

- Understanding students' transition into program majors will allow us to create meaningful developmental experiences so that they may form a healthy identity and robust academic experiences throughout college. These will prepare our graduates for their entrance into adulthood and the professional world.
- "Optimal development in youth enables individuals to lead a healthy, satisfying, and productive life, as youth and later as adults, because they gain the competence to earn a living, to engage in civic activities, to nurture others, and to participate in social relations and cultural activities." (Hamilton, Hamilton & Pittman, 2004, p.3)
- Support systems are particularly needed for first- and second-year art and design students. Freshmen under-engage with their advisors; about 1 in 3 had less than 2 meetings with advisors during the year (23% had one, and 9% had none) (National Survey of Student Engagement).
- Drop-out rates for first-year art/design students is high: 25%.
- In fact, a little less than half (48%) of those enrolled in a B.F.A. program will graduate within six years. That puts art schools more in line with completion rates at community colleges than at most four-year colleges and universities" (Grant, 2004, n.p.).
- In the setting of higher education, a healthier transition can lead to payoffs for the institution in terms of student retention, involvement, and alumni support.

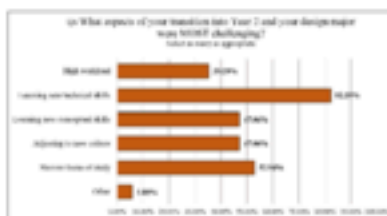
## Research Questions

### Primary Research Questions

- What challenges do fashion design undergraduates experience during their second year of college?
- Based on this, how can design schools better prepare undergraduates for the transitional experience from "Foundation Year" into fashion design programs?

## Methods

Online Survey	~200-250 undergraduates and graduates (n=84)
Focus Groups	5-7 undergraduates, to elicit dominant discourse
Case Studies	"Portraits" of 2 graduates, members of the Focus Group
Interviews	Professionals, Educators, Administrators, Alumni Offices
Literature Review	Multiple disciplines and sources including design education, developmental psychology, design theory, and higher education. Data collected in areas of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Secondary- and Tertiary-level art/design programs</li> <li>Design higher education practices</li> <li>Developmental attributes of young adults</li> <li>Mentorship and support, informal and formal</li> <li>The college experience</li> </ul>



## Summary and Recommendations

### Years 1

- Design Career Panels.** Professionals present their student-to-practitioner stories to demystify career options, counter stereotypes, and alleviate anxieties around fashion design studies.
- Build Technical Acumen.** Increase projects with discipline-specific technical acumen and short, immersive workshops to introduce students to the major and professional practices prior to entering the major.
- Increase Engagement of Foundation & Program Major Faculty.** Faculty participate in panels, critiques, office hours, and mentorship for freshmen.
- Choice of Two Pathways (Second Term).** Foundation Programs offer students a choice of two tracks in the second term. One offers a more traditional "foundation" curriculum and the other is disciplinary-focused

### Years 1 and 2

- Cognitive/Emotional Development Workshops.** Sessions for teachers about young adult development provide an understanding of students' cognitive and emotional development to strengthen teaching and learning.

### Year 2

- Information Sessions Redefine College "Success"** Address feelings of imposter syndrome and the challenging transition into the program major.
- Rethink traditional studio critiques.** Reduce students' competition and anxieties by increasing teachers' 1-on-1 relationships with students through individualized sessions, rather than the common, lengthy group critiques.
- Peer-to-Peer Mentorship.** Partner upper classmen with a foundation year students so they can meet regularly, share their experiences during the transition, receive advice, gain support, and more.

## Results

### Advisors and Career Support

An abundance of participants felt their academic advisors offered little to no support. These feelings stemmed from several causes including the fact that the majority of advisors were not from the design disciplines and were thus unable to offer meaningful support—in both academic and professional contexts. These, in addition to the general lack of career guidance, often left students to "fend for themselves" through self-initiated research and trial-and-error.

### Personal Growth

For most respondents, the transition, although challenging, was a period of significant emotional development. Findings align with developmental theory (Perry, Kegan, and Magolda) that describes the student becoming more self-directed. At the same time, it was a period of increased "imposter syndrome" for them; students were now surrounded by peers all pursuing the same/similar goals. This increased doubt about their abilities, career choice, futures, and more.

### Disconnected Technical Acumen

The majority of participants experienced a tremendous learning curve during the transition—particularly in the areas of 3D prototyping such as patternmaking and sewing.

### Necessary Foundational Knowledge

Despite the Foundation Programs' low levels of technical skill building that related to the fashion design major (e.g. sewing) most students acknowledged the benefits of the first-year curriculum that developed fundamental design skills. Additionally, participants noted these skills ultimately strengthened their experiences in the major.

### The Narrow Focus of Major Studies

Participants experienced a pronounced shift when they moved from the broader first-year curriculum into the narrow sophomore year coursework that taught one area of design. Some students wished their sophomore year curriculum had been less narrow by incorporating more diverse elements related to fashion such as different approaches to 3D prototyping and visual communication. Others expressed foundation programs should allow students to elect a major-specific curriculum in the second semester to better prepare students.

### Disconnection in Teaching & Critiques

The transitional experience was undermined by pedagogical styles that were noted by students to be incongruous. Students felt unsure about new expectations, manners in which design principles were taught, and the general critique cultures that were misaligned between levels.

### The Importance of the Faculty-to-Student Relationship

Teachers (81%), as opposed to Academic Advisors (15%), were "most helpful" for students during their transition. Most students praised teachers who went beyond imparting course content knowledge and formed supportive and nurturing relationships with their students. These relationships promoted trust, community, and general emotional support—all of which were critical for a fluid transition.

