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Employer and Training Needs: Report 2 Apparels Arts

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Report Number Two

APPAREL ARTS

EMPLOYER AND TRAINING NEEDS

PREPARED FOR METROPOLITAN TECHNICAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE



Center for Applied Urban Research

university of
nebraska 
at omaha 

APPAREL ARTS

by

Joan V. Holley

THE APPAREL ARTS

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this portion of the study is to determine the employment and training needs in metropolitan Omaha in an occupational area designated as the apparel arts.

Two-Year Associate Degree

Program

The 1977-79 catalog of the Metropolitan Technical Community College described the program as:

Designed to develop the knowledge and skills of management/marketing of textiles, this program also focuses on the skills of clothing construction. Upon completion of the program, employment opportunities exist in management and/or sales in fabric stores and yard good departments of retail stores.

Data Source and Methodology

To determine the target population to be interviewed, CAUR contacted all of the fabric stores and department stores listed in the telephone book for metropolitan Omaha. Two survey instruments were then constructed to gather data about the employment and training needs of these stores or departments. One of these two instruments was administered to the managers of all of the fabric stores and the yard good departments of retail stores in the area. Thus, the entire population was used and sampling was not done. The longer and more detailed of the two questionnaires was used when the researchers perceived that the data obtained would contribute to the purpose of the study. Both personal and telephone interviews were conducted. The findings of this study are summarized here, with conclusions about the employer and training needs related to the two-year associate degree.

Findings

The Fabric Business

From the initial contact with the fabric and department stores, the researchers determined that 15 fabric stores were in business in Omaha plus 13 retail stores that sell yard goods.

Fabric Stores. During the survey, five of the 15 fabric stores were found to be small, locally-owned establishments. The other 10 stores specializing in fabrics belonged to three national fabric store chains: Minnesota Fabrics, Northwest Fabrics, and So-Fro. The smaller stores stocked primarily designer fabrics, imported fabrics, or knits, while the chain stores carried a wide variety of fabrics with a wide range of prices.

The managers of the chain stores all stated that the fabric business is changing, with a more fashion-conscious home sewer demanding better fabrics and needing more information about patterns and materials.

The managers also indicated that the fabric customer is becoming more interested in sewing with better fabrics for the home. The area manager of Minnesota Fabrics stated that his company now is considering hiring an interior designer in each of the cities where their stores are located. The manager of Northwest Fabrics told about a recently created section with a separate manager in one of the Omaha stores. Established on an experimental basis, this "Lifestyles" department offers unique and more expensive fabrics for the buyer with exceptional sewing skills who wants to construct clothing or decorate the home.

The managers of the chain stores were optimistic about the fabric business and the future need for employees. So-Fro has four stores in Omaha, 560 stores throughout the country, and has been adding about 20-25 per year. The Northwest Fabric chain has 76 stores in 15 states, with two openings here within a month. Minnesota Fabrics has 96 stores, two in Omaha, and is planning new stores for Lincoln and Omaha. The manager of Minnesota Fabrics stated that the volume of business has been increasing 15 percent each year with the need for employees increasing 10 percent each year.

Yard Goods Departments of Retail Stores. Thirteen of the approximately 29 department stores in Omaha now sell fabrics. The research revealed that Brandeis, Montgomery Ward, Richman Gordman, and Sears have discontinued fabrics. Most of the stores that sell fabrics have combined this department with another. The four K-Mart stores and the two Woolco stores have domestic departments, which feature fabrics, draperies, curtains, linens, and bedding. At the Woolco stores the macrame and craft supplies also are included in this section. The two Phillips department stores similarly have combined fabrics with linens, bedding, curtains, and draperies. The managers of these sections reported that the stores have experienced a decline in the sale of fabrics, which they attributed

to the wide variety of fabrics now available at the large fabric specialty stores.

The Singer Sewing Machine Company, which has carried a wide variety of fabrics in the Omaha stores, is going to discontinue the fabric departments. The manager of the Westroads store also reported a recent decrease in the number of sewing machines sold in this area.

Employment and Training Needs

Four different categories of jobs related to management or sales in the fabric business were identified by the managers of fabric stores or departments.

Fabric Buyer. One of the area managers for a fabric chain store described the fabric buyer position as being the most glamorous and desirable of all the jobs in the business. He stated that the buyers usually were selected from the most outstanding and experienced area managers. Having been a store manager in a different community, this area manager came to Omaha at the time of his promotion. He stated that he hoped to become a buyer within a year.

Fabric is purchased for the Omaha stores of fabric chains by buyers who are located in other areas of the country. For instance, Minnesota Fabrics has four head buyers, six assistant buyers, and six other buyer staff members who work out of the main office in Charlotte, North Carolina. This company prefers to have the buyers all located near the fabric mills in North Carolina and Tennessee. The head buyers receive salaries of approximately \$30,000 per year, with the assistants paid about \$20,000 annually. The staff members receive between \$10,000 and \$15,000 per year.

The buyers of the fabrics sold in the national chain department stores also are located in other cities. For instance, the fabric buyers for the Woolco department stores are located in New York, and the buyers of yard goods for Younker-Kilpatrick's works out of the Des Moines headquarters.

The fabric buyer for the locally-owned Phillips department stores handles the purchasing of the other items included in that section, such as linens, bedding, curtains, and draperies. Mangelsen's, also locally-owned, has a manager/buyer in the fabric department of the store. This manager/buyer was a sales clerk in the fabric department.

The five fabric stores in Omaha not belonging to a chain are all owner/manager enterprises. These owner/managers all perform the buying function for their own fabric stores.

The managers interviewed emphasized that a buyer needs to be knowledgeable about fashion trends, and, importantly, needs to be able to discern how these trends apply to home sewing. One manager related how a buyer for his company ordered 750,000 yards of velour fabric for the stores in the Omaha area before the fall season opened, anticipating a demand for this type of fabric. In reviewing the Metro Tech two-year apparel arts program, one interviewee suggested that a course was needed in fashion trend awareness. Also, advanced marketing and accounting courses were suggested to prepare for a career in fabric buying.

However, all the managers emphasized the importance of many years of experience in the fabric business to performing in the buyer role. One stated, "It takes a lot of know-how to handle great quantities of fabric."

No one knew of any Metro Tech graduates employed as fabric buyers in this area or in the regional or national offices of the fabric specialty corporations.

Home Economists. The national fabric chain stores all employ home economists to work with the fabric stores in each city. Minnesota Fabrics now is considering hiring an assistant home economist for each of the cities where stores are located. At present, Northwest Fabrics does not have a home economist in Omaha since the home economist recently was promoted to the manager position in one of the Omaha stores. Thus, while the job of home economist is considered a staff, rather than a line position, the home economist is eligible for promotion to a managerial position. The home economist usually is paid about \$10,000 and up.

All the managers indicated that the number of trained people greatly exceeds the number of positions available. One of the fabric store chains does not advertise for an opening for a home economist in a large city such as Chicago, because of the overwhelming number of possible applicants. In Omaha, a fabric chain store manager received 15 applications from four-year home economics graduates in the first day of an ad for a home economist. Most of these applicants were graduates of the University of Nebraska at Omaha, the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, or the University of Iowa. At present, four degreed home economists are employed as sales clerks in the Omaha stores of one fabric chain.

The home economist position requires that the individual have a knowledge of fabrics and sewing techniques as well as the ability to work with people and give presentations. This preparation could be gained from a four-year

degree program at a college or university or from a two-year program at a technical community college. One manager stated that the Metro Tech two-year program had an advantage over the four-year background because of the business and management courses included in the course of study. He stated that the four-year university-educated home economists are usually well-prepared for the home economist position, but they are not prepared for managerial positions. He regretted that home economists did not have business education, as they could make effective managers.

Managerial Positions. In the Omaha area, four categories of managerial positions were found in fabric stores or fabric departments of retail stores: the area manager, the store manager, the assistant store manager, and the fabric department manager.

The fabric chain store area manager position was described as requiring exceptional personal attributes plus many years of experience. The area manager of the Northwest Fabric stores was a store manager for 16 years before being promoted to manager of the Omaha area. With fabric store corporations planning to open stores in cities that presently do not have company stores, an increasing need for area managers will be felt. The fabric store chains appear to have a policy of "promoting from within." For instance, the Omaha area manager for Minnesota Fabrics was transferred here from a different city where he was a store manager for many years.

Ten fabric stores are now in business in Omaha, with two new ones to open in April, 1980. Each of these stores has a store manager and some have assistant managers. In fabric chain stores, managers' salaries range from \$10,000 to \$20,000, and the assistant managers receive between \$8,000 and \$15,000.

The chain store managers listed some of the requirements for the positions: a knowledge of textiles and sewing, merchandising, business management and accounting, the ability to work with people, and experience in the fabric business. The managers stated that a two-year program at a technical community college would be adequate educational preparation for the manager positions. The present Metro Tech two-year associate degree program was given a good rating by all of the managers. All of the managers stated that a manager does not need the number of sewing classes required in the course of study. However, they also all stated that a fabric store manager needs more accounting and bookkeeping courses than are being offered as support courses. One also suggested an economics elective.

None of those interviewed knew of any Metropolitan Technical Community College graduates working in management positions in fabric chain stores in Omaha. However, one manager stated that his company does have two-year technical community college graduates working as assistant managers in other areas of the country. Another stated that managers and assistant managers often begin as sales clerks in the company. These individuals are distinguished by their personality and maturity with the promotion depending mainly on personal attributes.

As stated, five locally-owned fabric stores have owner/manager organizational structures. Those department stores that have domestics departments or have combined yard goods with a variety of other items do not demand that the department manager have a special education in apparel arts. One manager stated that several of the clerks should have sewing skills instead. The manager of the Penney's department that includes fabrics stated that prospective managers at Penney's all attend a management training school and are then placed in different departments by the company officials. He did not have a background in the fabric business.

Fabric Sales Clerks. Northwest Fabrics now employs about 85 sales clerks, and this number will increase when the two new stores open in the Omaha area. So-Fro employs over 40 sales clerks in their Omaha stores, and Minnesota Fabrics presently has 14 employees in sales. The locally-owned fabric stores employ between two and six persons each. These small shops almost all use permanent part-time clerks. The yard good departments of retail stores employ from two to six persons each to sell fabrics. Almost all of fabric sales clerks in the city are started at the minimum wage. The Minnesota wage scale for sales clerks is from five cents above minimum to \$3.80.

The representative of Northwest Fabrics estimated that about 60 of the 85 sales clerks have been hired in the past two years. While many persons apply for sales clerk jobs with Northwest many do not have the combination of math, sewing, communication, and merchandising skills required to sell fabrics. Northwest Fabrics presently has a sales clerk with a two-year degree from Metro Tech. The manager stated that this woman is one of their best clerks and was very well prepared for the job.

The fabric chain stores do not require any previous training or education for the job, as long as the applicant has the necessary qualifications. The managers all indicated that the Metro Tech two-year program would be excellent

preparation and suggested no changes.

Conclusions

The Metropolitan Technical Community College catalog stated, "Upon completion of the program, employment opportunities exist in management and/or sales in fabric stores and yard good departments of retail stores." The findings of this study indicated that the need for employees with special training in the apparel arts is decreasing in local department stores. Most of these retail stores are eliminating their yard goods departments or are combining yard goods with a variety of other merchandise. However, the fabric store chains are continuing to expand nationally and are adding three more stores this year to the 10 now operating in the Omaha area.

The sales clerks jobs usually begin around the minimum wage of \$3.10 an hour. The managers of the local chain department stores interviewed all stated that the Metro Tech Two-Year Associate Degree program was a good or excellent preparation for the sales clerk job in a fabric store.

The managers also indicated that this program would be a good educational background for the position of assistant manager or manager of a fabric store. Two suggested additional accounting courses. However, they said that experience in the store probably would be required in addition to the apparel arts training. The salary range of these positions is from \$10,000 to \$20,000. The Metro Tech graduate is competing for these managerial positions with outstanding clerks who have skills in math, sewing, and human relations; four-year degreed home economists; and assistant managers or managers that the chain store officials could promote from a smaller store or community in another state.

TWELVE-MONTH CERTIFICATE

Program

The 1977-79 catalog of the Metropolitan Technical Community College gives this description of the Twelve-Month Certificate program:

The program is designed to develop knowledge and skills in the area of textiles and clothing construction. Upon completion of the program, employment opportunities exist in alteration shops of retail establishments, apprentice tailors/esses, seamstresses/ers, patternmakers and self-employed dressmakers.

Data Source and Methodology

To determine the target population from which to gather data, the CAUR researcher identified all the headings in the telephone book related to the program: Clothing-Mens, Clothing-Wholesale and Mfrs., Department Stores, Dressmakers, Sewing Contractors, Tailors, Western Apparel, and Womens Apparel. The two survey instruments constructed for the research related to the Two-Year Associate Degree were used. A sampling was done of the alteration departments of both the men's and women's clothing stores, the western apparel stores, and the department stores. A sampling also was done of the tailors listed in the telephone book. All the dressmakers, the clothing manufacturer, and the one sewing contractor were interviewed. Both personal and telephone interviews were conducted. A summary of the findings is presented here, with conclusions about the employer and training needs related to the Twelve-Month Certificate in the apparel arts.

Findings

Factory Work. Eight firms are listed under the heading, "Wholesale & Mfrs.-Clothing," in the telephone book. However, Pendleton Mills is the only clothing manufacturing company, with the other firms all being wholesale clothing outlets.

The personnel manager of Pendleton named the different jobs in garment production: plant manager, production manager, engineers, sewing room and cutting room supervisors, inspectors, hand and machine pressers, fabric spreaders, cutters and pinners, interfacing sewers, and the production seamstresses. She stated that approximately 200 seamstresses are working at Pendleton.

Seamstresses begin at the minimum wage of \$3.10 an hour. With the piecework rates, the seamstresses could earn up to \$10.00 an hour. The plant manager said that \$4.69 is the average hourly rate.

The plant manager called the seamstress area the "House of Nations," indicating that many employees from other countries were working at the Pendleton factory. He stated that many of these seamstresses were wives of Offutt Air Force Base servicemen. The personnel manager said that a high turnover of employees in the seamstress area occurred. She said that sewing knowledge was not mandatory but it helped. The main requirement was manual dexterity to work at a rapid rate. The personnel manager also stated that when job openings occurred there were too many qualified applicants.

Both the personnel manager and the factory manager stated that Pendleton has a policy of promoting from within, rather than advertising for the supervisory positions. This policy is based on the necessity of having a knowledge of the factory system to perform in the supervisory positions.

The engineer, plant manager, and production manager positions all require a knowledge of sewing, business, math, and psychology. The personnel manager stated that too few applicants meet all of these requirements. They perceived that an apprenticeship program in the company after a one- or two-year program at a technical community college would be a good preparation for these positions. Neither the personnel manager nor the plant manager knew of any Metro Tech graduates working at the Pendleton factory at the present time, although they did have Metro graduates working when the factory was located in downtown Omaha.

Other Factories in the Area. An interview was held with the owner/manager of the B B & G Sewing Company, which was the only listing under Sewing Contractors in the telephone book. This company often employs three to eight seamstresses, with five seamstresses now working for B B & G. Minimum wage is paid to these employees.

The owner/manager stated that an educational experience would not be the best preparation for a job in his company. A job in this small factory requires that an individual be willing to sew on a large commercial machine all day, working on only one portion of a garment without ever seeing the finished product. The owner/manager perceived that this type of job required special personal attributes. He stated that he had heard of one high school in Nebraska that had had a contract for piecework production with a clothing factory. He

said that this actual piecework experience would be of more benefit than sewing classes.

The Tip Top division of Faberge also employed people on a piecework basis. Six employees sew on two different items produced by Tip Top. These jobs required the employee to be able to sew but did not require advanced sewing skills.

Alteration Departments of Retail Stores. A sampling was done of the men's and women's clothing stores and department stores. Hovland-Swanson employed seven alteration persons. The Avenue had five, Goldstein-Chapman's and Zoob's each had three persons in alterations, and the Carriage Shop had one. The number of alteration persons employed in women's clothing shops was related to the size of the store and the clothing sold in the store. While Foreman & Clark employed seven alteration persons, many men's clothing stores send the garments to local tailors to be altered. Brandeis had 29 persons in alterations, 19 altering women's clothing and 10 working with men's clothing.

The manager of the Brandeis alteration department listed the nine categories of jobs in alterations: two corporate heads (\$5.50-\$7.00 an hour), master finisher/master tailors (\$4.75-\$7.00), men's finisher #3 (\$3.25-\$4.25), women's finishers--1, 2, and 3, and women's fitters--1, 2, and 3. The women's jobs began at minimum wage and went to about \$4.25.

The manager is one of the two corporate heads in alterations. In reviewing the programs in apparel arts at Metro Tech, he perceived that the Two-Year Associate Degree program would be a good preparation for his position. The manager stated that he had worked as a child with his mother who was a seamstress, took a three-year tailoring program at Boys Town High School, and then worked in Brandeis in alterations for several years before becoming a corporate head in the department.

The master finisher/tailors at Brandeis have had many years of experience, with one having worked as a tailor for 30 years. None had been hired in the past few years by Brandeis. Most of the alteration personnel at Brandeis were working at general alterations, which included hemming, shortening and lengthening of sleeves, tucking in the sides of garments, and collar alterations. The manager stated, "We have the United Nations at Brandeis," with most of the alteration people being taught their skills and receiving extensive experience in other countries. Some of the countries represented were Italy, Iran, Korea, Japan, Russia, Germany, Greece, and Mexico. With some of the employees

lacking proficiency in English, communication is sometimes a problem in the alteration department.

The manager said that working in the alteration department required experience in sewing. Many of the best people in this department had many years of experience in garment factories in other countries. The need is for production, and it takes some time for seamstresses to develop a degree of proficiency. No Metro Tech graduates were working in alterations at Brandeis. He stated that a need always exists for qualified applicants, and alteration departments of stores often hire skilled people away from each other.

Dressmakers and Tailors. All the dressmakers listed in the telephone book were contacted and were found to be one-or-two-person businesses. A sampling was done of the tailors in this area. The majority of the tailors listed also were small operations, often involving relatives. One of the larger tailoring establishments employed about eight persons. However, the owner/manager stated that tailoring is a lost art in America, with his best people coming from Germany and Italy.

Conclusion

In the Omaha area employment opportunities exist in factory garment production at Pendleton Mills and in alteration work in retail stores. A limited need was found for qualified applicants in tailoring and dressmaking. However, in job openings involving sewing skills, foreign-trained and experienced seamstresses offer real competition to local persons.

A few management positions in sewing are available in this area, such as at Pendleton Mills and at Brandeis. The employers stated that the Twelve-Month Certificate or the Two-Year Associate Degree would be good preparation for these positions. However, the employers also indicated that experience in their businesses probably would be a prerequisite.