

BUSINESS

URBN and Drexel take on fashion industry barriers by offering free tuition and paid work to some students

The fully-funded 2-year program aims to break down barriers of access in fashion



This area inside the URBN Center at Drexel provides a space for sewing. Students in a new partnership program between URBN and Drexel were shown around the facilities on July 31, 2023.

Ariana Perez-Castells / Ariana Perez-Castells

Donald Whorley had a full scholarship to study fashion at Kent State University in Ohio, when he decided to apply to a new program in Philadelphia. It was too hard to get to New York Fashion Week from where he was studying and found the opportunity to work at a brand he admired while completing coursework appealing.

The program seemed like a “a match made in heaven,” the 18-year-old from Washington, D.C., said.

This week, URBN, the Philadelphia-founded company behind Urban Outfitters, and Drexel University launched a new fashion program that aims to break down barriers of entry into the industry. The two-year apprenticeship offers students free courses at the university while gaining hands-on experience working part-time across URBN brands at the company’s headquarters in the Navy Yard. The program is envisioned as an alternative track into the fashion industry — one that doesn’t require a traditional four-year college degree.

Whorley is one of six students selected to participate in the program’s first cohort.

URBN and Drexel launch fashion apprenticeship and paid work program



Donald Whorley, one of the students that is part of the new URBN and Drexel fashion program at the Drexel University URBN Center.

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‘It’s about who you know’

Breaking into the fashion industry has its challenges.

Before young people even consider their plans after high school, there are hurdles that may keep some out of the fashion industry, said Rachel Ford, owner of Made Institute in Philadelphia, which offers courses in fashion. “A lot of kids, especially in Philly, don’t have art classes so they don’t have the ability to make a portfolio that would gain them entry into a four-year university,” she said.

Then there are family concerns and pressures about earning a living in the arts, she said.

About two years ago, URBN leadership started to think through how it could invite more talent into the industry.

“What we felt and what we continued to see and hear in the industry was that there was a lot of creativity being left on the table and being unrecognized,” said Matt Strode, chief people officer at URBN.

Whorley, who created an LLC for his fashion brand in eighth grade, said one of the hardest parts about breaking into the fashion industry is knowing how to build a network.

“It’s not about what you know, but it’s about who you know,” he said. “If you never got to the room to know anybody, it’s kind of hard to make your way.”

URBN began having internal conversations about an apprenticeship-style program in fall 2021 and approached Drexel in early 2022. They began to design the program last summer and opened applications in January of this year, with finalists selected in May.

By design, the goal for the program was “to reach out to communities of students who would not have otherwise considered college,” said Denise Marie Snow, program director of diversity programs and partnerships at Drexel’s Antoinette Westphal College of Media Arts and Design.

“It’s a game changer in terms of removing barriers to access,” she said.



The URBN Center at Drexel will host students in a new apprenticeship program that is the result of a collaboration between the fashion company and the school.

Ariana Perez-Castells / Ariana Perez-Castells

The program is fully funded through a grant from URBN that covers students’ tuition, room, and board. There is enough funding for two cohorts.

The inaugural class of students began orientation on Monday, with students from California, Maryland, New York, Washington D.C., and Pennsylvania.

When not taking classes in fashion design at Drexel, students will rotate through the design teams at Urban Outfitters, Free People, and Anthropologie. They’ll also interact with the production, sourcing, and buying teams to better understand the life cycle of a product from designer to buyer. Apprentices will be paid \$20 an hour for their work at URBN and will split their time equally between classes and work.

Apprentices who successfully complete the program will be able to stay on at URBN or continue working toward a degree at Drexel, setting them up on their career path in the industry.

“We would love to convert each and every one of them into full-time roles within the organization,” said Strode.

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