

PARSONS FASHION DESIGN STUDENTS RESHIFT FOCUS AS COVID-19 UPENDS EDUCATION

FINDING INSPIRATION IN SELF-ISOLATION

by Shakira Weir

As the school semester comes to an end, fashion design students at Parsons School of Design grapple with an uncertain future. With Parsons located in New York City — the city most severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic — online education and social distancing procedures may stay in effect for the fall semester.

Parsons will have to contend with a possible drop in enrollment, as some matriculated students consider alternative plans for the fall semester. “I’ve already made the decision that if they do have another semester online, I’m going to take a gap semester,” said Kristine Michelle Ang, a second-year fashion design student from Queens, NY.

According to a national survey of college students conducted by the higher education marketing and research firm SimpsonScarborough in April, 26% of students were unlikely to return to their current college or university in the fall—a 12% increase in four weeks. Outgoing President David Van Zandt acknowledged the toll a drop in international student retention would have on university expenses. “Even a 5% decline in international students next year would be a multi, multi million dollar hit to the budget,” President Zandt told The New School Free Press.

For some undergraduate fashion students, it is difficult to justify the more than \$50,000 annual tuition rate for a learning experience that does not include equitable access to quality fabrics, sewing machines, mannequins, and other studio equipment essential to sewing finished garments. Third-year [continued on page 6]



FRANCIS COONEY

“Everything I want to do has been pushed back, but I guess it has given me more room to really think about how I want to execute things and put things together visually which I kind of like. So I’m not really on a crunch time or on a set time that I need to do something, which is kind



Frances Cooney [above]. Pair of pants presented for final project [below].

On the awkwardness of presenting

“It’s been really difficult sometimes to present. I made a pair of pants and to present them was the weirdest thing ever because I had to lift my computer, my laptop, just to show my class on the floor cause I didn’t have a mannequin.”

KATHERINE SAJE

On wearing a mask before it was accepted

As an international student from Hong Kong, Katherine has been staying in New York during quarantine. Her family in Hong Kong remains concerned, particularly about discrimination and harassment. “At the beginning, when it (COVID-19) first started in Asian countries, I would wear masks, and then people would look at me but didn’t say anything,” said Katherine. “I said to my friend, they’re looking at us right now, but wait until this explodes in America, everyone’s going to wear masks. And it happened and now I don’t feel weird to wear a mask.”

Jacket and pants for final project [above and left]



fashion design student Marie Mannix felt a better option would have been to put the semester on hold: “I think it could have made a lot of sense to end the semester and then extend the school year next academic year.” Unlike liberal arts classes, which can more easily be taught online, Mannix noted the intermediate skills developed sophomore year in fashion design are crucial to “create your own looks and design your own collection” in junior year.

Fashion students from small towns who relocated to New York City to immerse themselves in the fashion scene may find it difficult to make connections and get the exposure needed to get their work noticed. “A lot of times there are kids who are here in NY and they are from these small towns and being here, your art gets noticed more, people are more attracted to that, but if you’re going back, you’re not gonna have that same thing,” said Frances Cooney, a first-year fashion student from Brooklyn.

The stakes are even higher for international students like sophomore Katherine Saje. “My goal is probably different from American students because I need a reason to stay here [United States],” said Saje, who recognizes her desire to finish her education and start a career in the U.S. limits her tendency to complain.

In March, when Mannix learned on-campus classes were cancelled for the rest of the semester, she had just landed back in New York. Within four hours, she packed her bags and was headed back home to Chicago, Illinois for the rest of the academic year. “I was so panicked from rushing that I got back to Illinois and crashed,” said Mannix who found it challenging to adjust to working from home. “It was taking me double the time to complete tasks and homework as usual. Being in a home environment, it’s hard to get work done fast.”

Other students have thrived in a remote learning environment. “Honestly, I love it. I can just wake up and go to class. I don’t need to get ready,” said

Saje. But the workload of fashion design students can be even more difficult to manage at home. Keeping track of homework, assignments, and class schedules present a challenge when disconnected from the support system and infrastructure that on-campus instruction provides.

Staying motivated has also been a challenge for some students. Garment projects follow a process that include inspiration, sketches, and eventually the final product. “I can’t even get myself to go on Pinterest and look at inspiration because I’m not feeling inspired at the current moment,” said Ang.

Beyond difficulties accessing materials and equipment, fashion students faced other unique issues presenting work, printing patterns, understanding instructions, and receiving feedback remotely. It is challenging to comprehend the intricate steps involved in sewing and construction without seeing an instructor demonstrate a technique in person or provide feedback in real time. Details about how a pair of pants work or how a certain fabric functions get missed.

Joya Ma, a sophomore at Parsons suggests a more visual approach, “I think they should provide video instructions of the specific steps of sewing instead of just words on a manual.”

Professor Rachel Lifter, who works with senior students on their portfolios and two-dimensional work, such as videos and photoshoots, understands the importance of ingenuity and resolve in the competitive and unpredictable world of fashion design: ”I’ve been so impressed with how the students built impromptu sets in their homes, asked family members and friends to serve as photographers, and used digital tools to come up with some exceptionally exciting ways of representing clothes.”

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KRISTINA MICHELL ANG

Kristina is grateful for the support of her family. "I'm grateful to be sitting in my home with two sewing machines, not one. I'm super lucky that I am home...but I'm still struggling with it, so can you imagine talking to someone who is not that lucky?"





On focusing on personal goals

"The biggest thing for me this quarantine has been focusing on myself... I have had time to sit down. I do journaling now. I read now. All these things that have been helping me surprisingly, that I didn't get to do while I was in school. I'm reading personal growth books and I didn't get the time to do that when I was in school."

**Studio final
pants and jacket
[above and
left]**



For some students, being quarantined has shifted their priorities. "The biggest thing for me during this quarantine has been focusing on myself. I'm doing a lot of work now because I want to do it. I have had time to sit down," said Ang. Perhaps it's all about perspective; the ability to improvise and be flexible can expand your creativity and refine your design. "Even in the best of times, how we engage in independent research and design is shaped by what we have access to," added Professor Lifter. "We get what we get and we make something with it. And then we take that work in new directions when we have access to other materials and resources."

Even as new cases of coronavirus continue to decrease, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo prepares for a second wave in the fall. Regardless of this semester's test of individual strength and resolve, one thing many students agree on is the need for tuition adjustment for a modified semester. Although The New School, which houses Parsons School of Design, has taken measures to reduce financial burden through an enhanced student emergency fund and refunds of meal plans and housing costs, students have little justification to pay full tuition for an online education.

Students from all over the world attend Parsons for the chance to learn from leading experts, collaborate with talented students, and break into a competitive industry—a goal that when finally realized, is priceless.

MARIE CHOI MANNIX

For Marie, even a one hour time difference can disrupt her schedule, but the most frustrating aspects of remote instruction is communication and presenting. “For fashion design it became harder to communicate with my design and specialized studio professors. I think presenting online is frustrating, or more so I find it more challenging,” said Mannix. “My Parsons professors have really prepared me to have confidence to prepare a presentation in person but online is new and less exciting; it’s more challenging to display everything online.”

Working in a new environment meant creating new routines and setting new habits. Getting consistent sleep and exercise while staying on track with school work has been a challenge for Marie. “I have a habit of working out every day when I am here. I tried getting to sleep early, getting up early to workout, and then being proficient in my school work. That didn’t work. Everything was taking too long,” said Marie, who has found it helpful to reach out to friends who face similar struggles. “Although I am with my family, I have been FaceTiming my friends when I feel alone since not many people understand the workload of fashion design students. Mostly everyone I talked to was also struggling, some more than others, with doing work and being in a new environment.”

Third-year fashion design. Minor in creative entrepreneurship.





Custom designs made by
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