Samantha Fung is not the type of student who sits back and waits for things to happen. Whether it was getting an internship, participating in and winning a national competition, or lining up full-time employment before graduating, the May 2010 graduate turned everyday retail merchandising program opportunities into shining moments to build relationships and set herself up for a successful retail career.

It was in the Strategic Career Planning course that Fung first starting building relationships with her eventual internship employer, Buckle. The Buckle district manager volunteered in the class to help with mock interviews. Fung used the opportunity to make a good impression and then parlayed that into the perfect reintroduction at the campus career fair.

The internship opened her eyes. “A lot of people underestimate how much goes into managing a store,” she said. “It’s about building guest loyalty and how to work with people. It’s about staying one step ahead of what the customer wants.”

Fung got a second opportunity to make a winning impression on a major retailer by representing the University of Minnesota at the American Collegiate Retail Association’s (ACRA) Annual Charrette at the University of Arkansas. The fourth annual case competition challenged four teams of students from across the country to present a store layout and business plan for a store-within-a-store concept. The 20-minute presentations were judged by representatives from Walmart, P&G, and advertising agency Saatchi and Saatchi. Fung was on the winning team. “It was a lot of work, but it was one of my favorite experiences,” she said. “Walmart talked about implementing our ideas in their stores and that made it feel very real.”

While at the University, Fung also took advantage of the mentoring program offered by the College of Design. She credits the program with helping her build a relationship with an industry professional who helped connect her with her current employer, Made for Retail. Today, Fung is using all of her knowledge gained from classes such as Retail Buying and Product Development, her internship at Buckle and her ACRA Charrette experience to develop stationery products sold at Target Stores. [Unclear: is she currently working at Made for Retail or Target? ]

She credits the retail merchandising program with preparing her to work with people. “We worked in teams often and the Strategic Career Planning class and company tours taught us how to act professionally,” she said.

Fung has parlayed her ability to build relationships to accomplish her college and early career goals.
May 2010 retail merchandising graduates Kelsey Gallagher and Allison Anderson have already collected a lot of frequent flyer miles. These miles represent study abroad experiences that brought their classroom learning to life while opening up the vast world of retail.

In just four years at the University, Allison Anderson squeezed in four study abroad experiences. She has studied Renaissance art, architecture, and design in Italy and retail merchandising in New York, London, and Ecuador. In each of these experiences, Anderson says she learned aspects of herself and the retail industry that have guided her career choices. “When I first came to school,” she said, “I thought I wanted to be a buyer at a large company. Now I see that there are many other alternatives for me to explore. Study abroad allows you to complete your perspective.”

Anderson’s classmate and friend, Kelsey Gallagher, who also studied abroad in London and Ecuador, agrees. “I now realize how big the industry is and how many different roads you can take in your career. Would I want to start my own company? I have seen what it really takes. Would I want to design my own line? I now know what that takes.” Gallagher said both experiences were key to creating her broader perspective.

During spring semester 2009, Gallagher worked for a vertically integrated jewelry manufacturer and retailer in London to implement a new customer data management system. Anderson worked for a fashion and lifestyle public relations company, where she put to use skills gained in her marketing coursework. Both women felt the internships were a great way to learn about the retail industry from a global perspective and to better understand the British way of life.

The January 2010 trip to Ecuador gave Gallagher and Anderson a view of retailing in a developing country. The students lived in the home of a U.S. businesswoman who has her clothing line made in Ecuador. They went to knitting and textile factories where they were able to touch and feel clothing being made and even had the opportunity to design and produce their own apparel piece. The amount of manual labor was especially eye-opening for Gallagher who said, “I had never before looked at a pair of jeans and realized that so much of it was made by hand” after seeing workers hand sanding denim.

Experiencing a third world country also affected Anderson. “My travels gave me the desire to find a way to give back within the retail industry,” she said. “It opened my eyes to a part of the industry that I hadn’t thought about in the past.”

As recent graduates, both women feel that their study abroad experiences were catalysts to their budding careers. Anderson is currently interning for a Minneapolis-based trend company. Gallagher is working at JCPenney in Minneapolis for the summer and fall and in February will be heading to their Dallas headquarters for a career in the merchandising trainee program.
Valley turns visual merchandising internship into oversees internship and post-graduation employment

Nic Valley is a great example of making an internship much more than a temporary job—he turned his spring 2010 visual merchandising internship at the Mall of America Urban Outfitters into an summer internship in London, a part-time position through his senior year at school and a full-time job offer. He’s a learned a lot along the way: “[My internship with Urban Outfitters] made me feel like I was on the right track...before this experience, I wasn’t sure what to do with my combined interest in clothing and interior,” Valley said.

While working at the Mall of America Urban Outfitters, Valley started his experience by doing everything but visual merchandising. He checked in inventory and worked on the sales floor to better understand the way store operations worked and to get to know the consumer. He was then given more and more visual merchandising responsibilities in housewares. His position requires creativity and the ability to work with his hands; Valley regularly paints and builds displays with power tools.

Valley has proved himself to be a valuable employee to Urban Outfitters. He built strong relationships with management and, equally important, showed himself to be an excellent visual merchandiser. One of his clusters (shown here) was featured on the company website as “Best in Nation.” His hard work paid off with a part-time job offer at the Mall of America as a merchandising team lead through his last year of school. Upon graduation, Valley has also been offered a full time position as a merchandiser for Urban Outfitters, where he will get his own store.

This summer, Valley completed a second internship with Urban Outfitters in London while taking study abroad classes through the U. He experienced the European design aesthetic and the differences in European and American store operations. “In London, they have much cleaner lines, almost bare in comparison. Also the stores don’t carry nearly as much inventory, especially in housewares.”

Through hard work and strong creativity, Valley is able to go into his last year as a retail merchandising major at the University knowing he already has a full-time position lined up with a creative company that he loves. He’s especially looking forward to continue learning about the trade in his upcoming visual merchandising class offered in the retail merchandising program.
Whether you’re an entrepreneur, corporate retailer, store manager, or a retail merchandising student or alumnus, you will not want to miss the October 21, 2010, Retail Connect event.

The University of Minnesota retail merchandising program is proud to sponsor the inaugural event aimed at connecting area retail professionals with industry thought leaders, discussing emerging trends, and promote networking within the regional retail community.

“The Minneapolis/St. Paul metro area, and Midwest as a whole, is a hotbed for retailers across multiple sectors and scale,” said Professor Kim Johnson, retail merchandising program director. “With Retail Connect we want to bring the community and University together to enable continued growth and development in the retail industry.”

Attendees this year are sure to walk away inspired and invigorated. The lineup of speakers includes Roberta Bonoff, president and CEO of Creative Kidstuff and retail merchandising alumna; Michael Dervos, senior vice president/regional director of stores for Macy’s, and Vicky Abrahamson and Mary Meehan, cofounders and owners of Panoramix Global.

**RETAIL CONNECT**

Thursday, October 21, 2010
6:30 pm doors open, 7:00 pm presentation begins
$5, students. $20, professionals. Includes light refreshments
Advanced registration is required at z.umn.edu/retailconnect.

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