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Traditional Fashion

Third-generation educator trains **next-generation leaders**

Elizabeth S. Marcuse

President, Laboratory Institute of Merchandising (LIM)
New York City

Elizabeth Marcuse has retail and education in her DNA.

Some 70 years ago her grandfather, education and fashion pioneer Maxwell F. Marcuse, was asked by leading retailers to create an institution for the business of fashion and merchandising. In 1939, the doors to a private, independent college — Laboratory Institute of Merchandising — opened on West 34th Street in Manhattan. Its mission: educate and train students with hands-on, practical work experience in the fashion industry.

Elizabeth's father, Adrian G. Marcuse, joined the college in 1962 and, as president, oversaw LIM's development from a one-year program to an accredited, four-year college, as well as its move to its current home on East 53rd Street.

Elizabeth joined LIM in June 2001 and was named president upon her father's retirement the following July. She brought 20 years of industry experience, ranging from being director of retail planning for Donna Karan International to buyer for Montgomery Ward, Lane Bryant and Macy's.

You're the third-generation in your family to lead LIM. You must have had retail in your blood.

Maybe it was in my blood, but it must have been in my milk bottle. I am the youngest of three sisters; my two older sisters both had successful careers in the industry. I certainly saw them excel and be rewarded in my formative years, and I did work a summer or two through high school at LIM, but in college I wanted to go into advertising.

But you ended up becoming a merchant. How did you merge your real-life experience with students and curriculum?

As an industry practitioner I offer perspective. We make sure courses are not so theoretical that when students

get out there they have no clue how to apply what they've learned. The foundation of LIM has been experiential learning from the day it was founded.

We require students to complete three internships before they graduate. In the process the students become so passionate about what they're learning; they realize how many avenues there are within the industry.

How are you "marketing" retail careers to students?

Undergraduate enrollment has quadrupled through a strategic long-range planning process — from approximately 340 students in the fall of 2001 to 1,120 this past fall. Fashion merchandising remains the No. 1 degree here, but our bachelor's degrees in visual merchandising, marketing and management have also grown. And reality TV shows highlighting what goes on behind the scenes within the fashion industry are helping students understand there are many avenues they can explore.

It's a unique student who is here. It's the student who, during the pre-admission interview, says, "I've known since the age of 10 this is what I want to study. I've been dressing my friends, I've been reading magazines."

What could retailers be doing to help attract new talent?

They need to do a better job marketing themselves. I don't think retailers have done a good enough job explaining what it is you can get if you're successful. If a kid is considering med school or law school, they know what's at the end of that rainbow. But if a college graduate goes into a training program of department store "X," what's at the end of that rainbow for them?

It would behoove retailers to come to the colleges and learn who's out there. At LIM, our sole focus is educating students on the business of fashion. There's a real reward at the end of the rainbow here. Our kids are placed into good jobs.

Little known fact you about you?

I've been known to try on clothing in stores without a fitting room.

If you weren't in this field, what other passion or interest might you have pursued?

I would have loved to own a baseball team.

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— Janet Groeber

