

# What are career closets? More colleges help cash-strapped students with job-ready clothes

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When Renee Perez has any extra money, she sets it aside for her five children. For the 38-year-old business information technology major at

Texas Christian University, anything that isn't essential, like professional clothing, is a difficult purchase to justify.

She's noticed others in the Fort Worth business school's orbit don't seem to have the same concerns. At networking events, Perez sees professionals dressed in well-fitting, and expensive-looking, clothing. In her worn-out shoes and lacking a blazer, Perez said she feels it's better to blend into the crowd rather than approach people without the same polished look.

"I feel if you're dressed 'a little less than,' you might feel that they won't take you as seriously," Perez said. "That's just something society has put on us. And I just feel that with a nice pair of clothes, you have a different kind of confidence."

Attending college already means a mountain of unexpected expenses. There's the cost of books, lab fees and parking permits. But low-income students also may be blindsided by the cost of fitting into the workplace. It's the experience of a large group of students: About a third of college undergraduates in the 2020-21 academic year received a Pell Grant, a financial award geared toward [low-income students](#).

Professional clothing is one of those expenses, and even figuring out where to begin outfitting themselves beyond the relative safety of a university can be a challenge. Other costs related to personal appearance, such as haircuts, transportation and dry cleaning can quickly strain students' already-limited budgets.

A growing number of colleges, including TCU, are addressing those concerns by providing professional clothing to their students. Some rely on donations from a local community or alums, but TCU provides custom-tailored clothing for its students. The college's program, called Suit Up, is limited to students with financial need, and those who

participate in the initiative also take professional development classes.

Ann Tasby, an accounting instructor and director of the business school's Office of Inclusive Excellence, oversees Suit Up. Tasby said it was created in spring 2021, after a focus group with diverse students to understand their perceptions of the business school. They found many avoided it because they didn't have the right clothes.

"That was quite daunting and horrifying," Tasby said. "You don't really think about business attire until you don't have it."

Tasby took some of these students to the business school's board of advisers, which includes executives from national and global companies, to explain the challenge. That was enough to get the program funded, though like any college program, Tasby said it needs money to keep going. The program serves about 40 students per academic year, and it cost about \$20,000 to get started.

Students for generations have relied on secondhand clothes from thrift stores or family. These outfits, however, seldom fit well, with the wearer left anxious about whether a prospective employer would notice bagginess, tightness or an out-of-date style. Wealthier students are more likely to arrive on campus with clothing that fits well, and tailored garments are another indicator of the class divide colleges are intended to help narrow.

For the uninitiated, it can be overwhelming to figure out where to buy or how much to spend on professional clothing. A new suit from Men's Warehouse might run about \$200 before tailoring, but students might not be familiar with the fitting system. Is a 15-inch or 16-inch collar closer to a traditional medium? There are plenty of other unknowns: Are skirts OK? Are stockings required? Brown belt or black?

## **Students say colleges should help with professional clothing if it's required for classes**

For some students, not having the right clothes translates into anxiety—on top of typical college worries. Alijah Wood, 21, arrived at TCU from Michigan without professional clothing. He said it wasn't something he grew up with, and buying a suit seemed like a headache to be avoided, especially when he could spend his money on a nice shirt or pair of street shoes instead.

That meant borrowing friends' clothing when a presentation or event called for formal attire. Wood, who is majoring in entrepreneurship and innovation, appreciated the help but felt like a burden.

And the shoes were always too big.

Through the Suit Up program, he owns a tailored suit, a shirt with his initials on the collar and shoes that fit properly. Wood said the new suit provides him with a "sense of security" when attending formal or business events.

"They should do it," he said. "If you require professional dress, or certain things people don't have, you should provide a medium for them to get it."

Another upside of fitted clothing: building students' confidence. After receiving his suit, Wood posted a picture of himself wearing it on his Instagram while promoting a throat spray he developed to help calm the vocal chords for public speaking events.

Having the right clothes may feel especially urgent for students of color in predominantly white spaces. And appropriate attire can help them

embrace parts of their identity considered out of the norm for a professional environment. Perez, for example, said she is a fan of hoop earrings and winged eyeliner, though her sister cautioned her against that style because she was in business school.

"I was like, no, no, I am going to look good in my clothes and I am going to feel comfortable wearing my winged eyeliner," Perez said.

The clothes demonstrated that the university was thinking about her needs, Perez said. It was already intimidating for her to start school at 35, but support from the university, she said, made it possible for her to thrive.

## **Do the right clothes really matter to employers?**

Christine Cruzvergara, the chief academic officer at Handshake, a job recruiting site focused on college students, once worked for university career advising departments.

She said she is glad to see colleges offer professional clothing services, though employers aren't looking to dock students for wearing outfits that are too loose or out-of-style. Hiring managers want to know students can present themselves in professional settings.

Perhaps more important: They want to see a sense of confidence from their applicants. Professional networking or trying to land a job is already a "nerve-wracking experience," Cruzvergara said.

"If you're wearing shoes or clothes that are not yours and don't fit—it's uncomfortable," Cruzvergara said. "And when you feel uncomfortable, it is hard for you to be at your best."

She noted that employer expectations will vary by industry and region.

Those working in finance probably still must wear professional attire daily.

But many rules about workplace attire have loosened because of the pandemic. Expectations about in-office interactions or internal video calls may be relaxed, she said, compared with when employees engage with clients or others outside the company.

## **How far should colleges go to make sure low-income students they lure succeed?**

Over the past decade, more universities have created what some are calling "career closets," though the offerings differ from school to school, according to Cruzvergara. Northwestern's Cat Closet offers up to three individual items or one suit per [academic year](#). At the University of Michigan, staff help students find professional attire in a "safe, clean and private space."

The University of Washington has offered a similar program since 2019, said Briana Randall, director of the university's career services program. The program was born from a desire to make sure the university met the distinct needs of low-income, first-generation or other nontraditional students.

"Colleges have been more attentive to making sure their admissions numbers are very diverse," Randall said. "I am not always sure that universities have put as much emphasis on supporting diverse students all the way through the educational process to the career outcome."

Almost uniformly, students have responded positively to the University of Washington's program. The center queries students on their experiences with the program, and they report decreased anxiety and



more self-confidence when wearing professional clothing.

The biggest challenge, Randall said, is keeping the closet stocked.

Randall fills the Husky Career Closet with donations from alumni and faculty. The items, despite the best intentions, tend not to fit college students.

Her department recently applied for and received a \$3,000 grant for the program, but it ran into the same problem students face: Professional clothes are expensive. Buying professional shoes for just \$35 a pair adds up quickly.

That mirrors Cruzvergara's experiences when she worked at colleges in the District of Columbia metro area, including Georgetown, George Washington and George Mason universities. Career centers often have just a fraction of the budget and human resources of other departments—such as enrollment or admissions.

The disconnect speaks to a longstanding tension between universities and their students. Academics will say the goal of a [college](#) education shouldn't be wholly career-focused. Students, who are investing years and building up potentially life-altering debt, often disagree: They want to know that their time and money will serve them later in life.

"It's a shame that we spend so much money trying to bring [students](#) in," Cruzvergara said, "but we do not spend the same amount of money to ensure their success leaving."

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