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Custom Collaborative is a New York City-based entrepreneurship and workforce development program that trains and supports women from low-income and immigrant communities to launch fashion careers and businesses.

By learning the standard techniques and ethical business practices of the fashion industry, our participants professionalize their sewing and design skills, overcome barriers to employment, and, ultimately, bring greater equity and inclusiveness to the fashion industry.

**Mission**

Our mission is to serve women from low-income and immigrant communities with training and ongoing supports that equip them to achieve viable livelihoods in the women’s fashion industry as designers, fashion entrepreneurs, patternmakers, and seamstresses who create and sell high-quality clothing and accessories.

**Vision**

Custom Collaborative envisions a environmentally sustainable apparel industry in which garment makers are fairly compensated for their labor and consumers have access to well-made, sustainably sourced clothes that fit and affirm all bodies.
Dear friends,

This new decade brings a lot of opportunity, made possible by so many important achievements over the past year. During 2019, Custom Collaborative gained three new members of our board of Directors and our Training Institute graduated three classes. Some staff transitioned to different roles, and we gained some new colleagues. We have partnered with players from across the fashion industry and joined the New York City Fashion Workforce Development Coalition as a founding member. And, at our new studio space in East Harlem, we celebrated the Grand Opening of our workers cooperative, Fashion That Works. Custom Collaborative is especially fortunate to enjoy a great corps of volunteers, partners, and donors, who collaborate with us to impact women’s economic lives. At Fashion That Works’ Grand Opening, supporters heard from Christina, a co-op leader, who talked about her journey through our Training Institute and into a new home.

One of the most important things I saw this year was sustainable fashion adjusting its lens to include labor and the impact that the industry has on its workers. We’ve been talking about this since we started--really, it’s Custom Collaborative’s reason for being--and I am so excited that others are embracing human rights. We are proud to have helped push this important issue to the fore.

Collaboratively yours,

Ngozi Okaro

Ngozi Okaro
Executive Director
Our Partners

NYC FAIR TRADE COALITION

wearable collections
Clothing & Shoes Reuse

UNITED STATES FEDERATION OF WORKER COOPERATIVES

WDI

hanky panky

Partner

MARA HOFFMAN

EILEEN FISHER

LAFAYETTE 148 NEW YORK

HOPE COMMUNITY INC

Democracy at Work Institute USFWC

FAB SCRAP

harlem needle arts
January

Custom Collaborative presents at Racial Justice Volunteer Fair and at Texworld

February

Graduation: Cohort 5

March

Annual International Women’s Day Crowdfunding Day raises over $5,000

Custom Collaborative presents at Fashion Institute of Technology on “What It Means to Be Sustainable”

April

Custom Collaborative presents at Harvard University’s Graduate School of Design

Ngozi Okaro receives New York Fair Trade Coalition’s “Changemaker” Award

May

Custom Collaborative joins the New York Fashion Workforce Development Coalition as a founding member

June

Graduation: Cohort 6
July

Custom Collaborative’s Maker Series features Miko Underwood

Fashion That Works founding members convene new worker-owned cooperative

August

Custom Collaborative’s Maker Series features Wilbur Pack, Jr.

September

Grand Opening of Custom Collaborative’s East Harlem studio space

Annual Fashion Week Crowdfunding raises over $10,000

Custom Collaborative’s Fashion Is Love documentary is selected for fashion film festivals in Los Angeles and Milan
October

- Custom Collaborative’s three year anniversary

November

- Ngozi Okaro receives “Spirit of Entrepreneurship” award from New York Women’s Foundation

- Fashion Institute of Technology’s “Sustainable Fashion” exhibit features work by two Custom Collaborative graduates

December

- Custom Collaborative launches partnership with Harlem Needle Arts

- Legendary designer Stephen Burrows joins Custom Collaborative as Senior Advisor

- Graduation: Cohort 7
In 2019, Custom Collaborative welcomed two new senior professionals to our team:

**Angelique Terrelonge**  
*Lead Instructor*

Angelique is a designer and fashion educator with over 30 years of industry experience. She is a graduate of Fashion Institute of Technology and owns her eponymous brand, Angelique Terrelonge. Before joining Custom Collaborative she taught fashion design at Broward Correctional Institution in Florida, instructing incarcerated women on fashion sketching, patternmaking, draping, and sewing. She brings her knowledge and craftsmanship to Custom Collaborative to help empower women through design.

**Margo Manbode**  
*Workforce Development Consultant*

Margo is a passionate advocate for individuals, families, and communities impacted by poverty. She is a recognized leader in the nonprofit sector holding senior leadership positions in education and workforce development. She has in-depth experience in strategic management. Margo is a proud graduate of the Milano School of International Affairs, Management, and Urban Policy at New School University, where she earned an MS in nonprofit management.
Custom Collaborative’s three-part business model builds on and integrates the strengths of each area of our work:

Training Institute

14-week class that runs 5 days a week, participants are paid a weekly stipend to attend and provided with a MetroCard. Students learn the basics of fashion design and garment construction and are coached in entrepreneurship, personal finance and business skills. All work in the classroom is done with upcycled materials. No previous design experience is required to apply.

Business Incubator

The incubator is open to both graduates of the Training Institute and the larger community. Here students can take classes and workshops in areas including advanced patternmaking and advanced construction techniques, as well as receive mentorship in their professional careers.

Fashion That Works (Worker Cooperative)

Custom Collaborative incubates Fashion That Works, a worker-owned cooperative founded by 7 graduates of the Training Institute. The cooperative will begin work as a contract manufacturer for the fashion industry this year.
Custom Collaborative's Training Institute features a comprehensive 14-week curriculum on the art, craft, and technique of fashion design. Our classes focus on teaching women with barriers to employment how to make made-to-measure clothing and personalized accessories for all body types. Our training includes instruction in fashion business basics, including marketing, sourcing, ethical/sustainable practices, and personal finance. Students graduate equipped with a toolkit to begin a career in fashion.

- Our participants come from over 20 countries, including the US.
- 96% live below the federal poverty level before beginning training.
- 82% of our participants are mothers / primary caregivers.
- 52% live in unstable housing when they enter the Training Institute.
Trainig Institute:  
*In Her Own Words*

Zipora D.

Zipora found out about Custom Collaborative at a public event at Fashion Institute of Technology. She wanted to learn to sew and make garments, but couldn’t afford to attend design school. She felt intimidated by the industry and didn’t have the connections or resources to pursue her dream.

She says:

“Custom Collaborative really boosted my confidence that this was possible for me. They gave me skills to push myself to be the fashion designer I always envisioned. They also provide support to keep going after graduating, which is so rare.”

Zipora is currently working for a fashion company in Brooklyn and continuing to pursue her design education.
The Training Institute

- Each 14-week class runs 5 days a week (9.30am-3.30pm).
- Each cohort accommodates 12 students.
- Students are provided a MetroCard and a weekly stipend.
- The program covers the basics of fashion design and garment construction, including illustration, flats, patternmaking, draping, cutting, and sewing.
- Students are coached in entrepreneurship, personal finance, and business skills.
- Field trips and guest speakers address such topics as fashion technology and sustainability.
- All work in the classroom is done with upcycled materials.
- No previous design experience is required.
For our Training Institute graduates and others in the fashion industry, Custom Collaborative’s Business Incubator offers management consulting, mentorship, technical assistance, advanced training, and access to professional equipment. Our goal is to maximize work opportunities and improve socioeconomic outcomes for all women.

• The majority of our Training Institute graduates continue to work with us through the Business Incubator to pursue advanced training and receive additional support.

• Business Incubator participants develop their skills by producing Custom Collaborative’s capsule collection and completing client work for local fashion brands.

• Additional support and mentorship is provided by Custom Collaborative’s Entrepreneurship Coach and through instructional partnerships with educational institutions and experts in the fashion industry.
Business Incubator:  
In Her Own Words

Nanya O.

Nanya had recently arrived from Nigeria when she heard about Custom Collaborative and decided to apply to the first cohort of the Training Institute. She was struggling to find her place and pursue her dream of being a fashion designer.

She says:

“When I learned I was pregnant with my first child, I thought I would have to kiss my dreams of a fashion career goodbye. Custom Collaborative built my confidence and helped me realize that I can do this.”

Nanya now has her own ready-to-wear line and also takes custom orders.
“Fashion That Works”

Custom Collaborative’s worker-owned sewn-goods cooperative, called Fashion That Works, is comprised of Custom Collaborative graduates and open to other qualified needle-trade artisans. Fashion That Works will accept sample and contract manufacturing orders of up to 200 pieces.

- Fashion That Works’ seven founding members are all graduates of Custom Collaborative’s Training Institute.

- Both Debevoise and Plimpton and The Legal Aid Society provide pro-bono legal counseling to structure Fashion That Works as an LLC.

- Democracy at Work Institute provides consulting on cooperative business operating agreement and membership model.

- Founding members joined Custom Collaborative staff in completing Participatory Management Training at Rutgers University.
Workers Cooperative: 
*In Her Own Words*

Christina I.

Christina was living in a shelter with her two daughters and dealing with depression after surviving domestic violence. Before she came to New York, she had a women's clothing store in Brazil, but felt she would never be able to work in fashion again. Christina decided to apply to the Training Institute, so that she could learn sewing and support her family.

She says:

“With my stipend from Custom Collaborative, I bought my first sewing machine and started to make bags while I was still living in the shelter. After graduation, I got out of the shelter and now I have my own place — and a home studio! I am so grateful!”

Christina is one of the founding members of Fashion That Works.
Where Funding Came From in 2019:

- Foundations: 37%
- Individual Donors: 22%
- Goods & Services: 18%
- Government Grants: 12%
- Corporate Giving: 11%

Total: $334,000

Where Funding Went in 2019:

- Training Institute: 40%
- Business Incubator: 20%
- Core: 24%
- Worker Cooperative: 16%
Acknowledgments

Thank you to:
• Board
• Advisors
• Volunteers & Interns
• Partners & Supporters
• Program participants!

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