

PURCHASING POWER

First Year Studies students explore who's behind the clothes they buy

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FYS students learned how garment workers in foreign factories, like this one, are treated.

The FYS Seminar offers a different way to help students realize how their actions have a larger impact. “They start considering what responsibility they have for others,” says Dr. Paul Lizotte.

Every year, Rivier’s freshmen participate in a first-year studies (FYS) program—a series of seminars in writing, reasoning, and religion encourage students to reflect on what it means to be an individual in today’s society and to consider their responsibility for others. This year’s fall FYS symposium focused on clothing production and fair labor practices.

Students researched where the clothes they buy are made and how the factory workers are treated. They checked the web to see whether companies like Nike, Gap, and Abercrombie practice socially responsible business. In groups, students discussed how they felt about their purchases based on how the clothes were made. They also role-played, examining different situations from the perspectives of factory workers, managers, shareholders, consumers, activists, and political leaders.

“The goal is to get students to talk in character, to realize there are multiple points of view,” says **Dr. Paul Lizotte**, Director of the FYS program. “There are all sorts of considerations—ultimately, we’re encouraging students to draw on the principles of Catholic social justice to think through the issue and guide their decisions.”

Alicia LaDouceur’10 found that her sweater from the Gap was made in the Ukraine where workers didn’t get paid for overtime. “The money they made wasn’t even enough to pay their bills,” she says. During the course of the semester, she learned that for many people in third-world countries, factory work is the only option. She said some articles state that workers don’t want people to stop buying the clothes they make. “They want people to speak up for them—people who have a voice,” she says.

At the symposium, students worked in groups to design t-shirts with messages about sweatshop labor and fair treatment for workers in developing countries. Designs will be transferred to T-shirts purchased from a sweatshop-free Nicaraguan women’s cooperative factory.

Students also created a petition encouraging the College to join the sweatshop-free movement, calling for greater scrutiny of the origin of goods on campus. Lizotte says the FYS seminar offers a different way to help students realize how their actions have a larger impact. “They start considering what responsibility they have for others,” he says. ■

* **JENNIFER LISKOW** works as a Public Relations and Web Writer in the Office of Marketing and Communications and teaches in Rivier’s Professional Communications program. Jenn earned her bachelor’s in English and communications from Notre Dame College in Manchester, N.H. in 1996. In 2002, she completed her master’s in writing and literature at Rivier. She began writing in junior high school; since then, she has had poems, short stories, features, and essays published. In her free time, Jenn enjoys practicing yoga, ten-pin bowling, and listening to live music with her husband, Tim.