

# Los Angeles Times

CALIFORNIA

## L.A. Fashion Institute students left in lurch after surprise proposed merger with Arizona State



Rebecca Feldman was just weeks away from finally pursuing, seriously, her fashion design dreams.

The aspiring clothing designer was wrapping up her undergraduate degree in elementary education at Arizona State University but was zeroed in on her plans to spend the next year at the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising in downtown Los Angeles, better known as FIDM.

Feldman, 22, had been accepted to FIDM's one-year professional designation program, which she was certain would be the perfect next step: providing fashion industry connections and know-how to boost her growing portfolio of self-taught sewing projects.

"I was on cloud nine when I got in," said Feldman, a Porter Ranch native. "I was like, all my dreams can actually come true."

But within a matter of weeks, those plans unraveled.



Not long after paying her deposit to FIDM, she heard on TikTok about changes coming to the fashion school, and soon after she received an email announcing the surprise merger of her current and future campuses, creating a new ASU FIDM, housed under ASU's design institute. Feldman wasn't sure how the change would affect her program, so she spoke with counselors from the schools.

"The guy from ASU basically told me the program that I applied and was admitted to no longer exists," Feldman said. "The rug was completely just pulled out from under me with no warning."

She said the counselor offered the option to pursue another bachelor's degree through the new ASU FIDM — but that wasn't what she was looking for.

Feldman sobbed in her car after that meeting, as her post-college plans had seemed to vanish in seconds.

"You would have thought when [FIDM leaders] negotiated whatever with ASU, they would have thought about their students — they didn't," said Dan Feldman, Rebecca Feldman's father. "It's really a shame that she's being treated this way. My heart goes out to her and the other students."

Several other current and former FIDM students who spoke with The Times say their education plans were derailed when FIDM's renowned fashion design program merged with ASU at the beginning of April — far too late for students to change direction that spring, much less make new arrangements for the summer or fall.





Feldman was supposed to start her one-year program in July. She's now spent the last few weeks trying to wiggle her way into other opportunities that can help her stay true to her passion.

"It's been a weird transition, trying to be determined to still be in fashion," she said. "I've just been making project after project, just working on my skill."

She got into a fashion course this summer at Orange Coast College and is on the waitlist for others this fall after missing the school's application and registration deadlines, but she worries the school doesn't have the same connections or name recognition that she was promised at FIDM.

Rachel Padilla, a spokesperson for FIDM, declined to respond to questions about Feldman's situation or other specific students, citing privacy concerns. She did not respond to questions about specific programs that were cut in the merger.

"We are doing everything we can to counsel students individually," Barbara Bundy, FIDM's vice president of education, said this spring in an interview with The Times. She declined to respond to questions about the extent of the discontinued programs or those expected to be cut when the partnership is fully implemented next spring, but said there's no "one size fits all" in this scenario.

Bundy emphasized that FIDM — which had been in financial distress so dire it faced losing accreditation — will continue operating independently through spring 2024, allowing many students to wrap up their current programs if they can complete the coursework before then. After that, all design-focused coursework will move under the new ASU FIDM, which is currently offering significantly fewer degree options than FIDM previously did, with promises to expand.

ASU FIDM officials, who plan to offer courses in both L.A. and Phoenix, said that they will ensure a "seamless" transfer process for FIDM students and that costs will not exceed what students paid at FIDM.

"We remain committed to helping every FIDM student find a pathway to complete a degree," said Katie Paquet, an ASU spokesperson. "We are actively meeting with students, listening to concerns and making adjustments as we progress."

Almost 450 students have enrolled in ASU FIDM as of this month, according to ASU spokesperson Jay Thorne, but it wasn't clear how many are current or former FIDM students. The university is working toward providing associate degree options and certificate programs — similar to FIDM's professional designation programs — but they are still undergoing review processes, Thorne said.

Padilla and Bundy did not respond to questions about how many students have dropped out of FIDM since the partnership was announced.



“Wherever a student has identified themselves as wanting to attend another institution, we are working with them to reach that goal,” Bundy said.

But that helping-hand transition was not the experience of former FIDM film student Evan Gervase.

Gervase, 21, was completing her first year at FIDM, working toward her bachelor’s degree in digital media and cinema, when the unexpected ASU partnership was announced.

Her advisor told her she could complete her associate degree over the next year from a still-independent FIDM, but that would require a full-time courseload for the next three quarters, Gervase said, including the summer — when she had planned, and needed, to work.

And perhaps more crucial to her, Gervase was seeking a bachelor’s degree, and not one from ASU, which she considered a party school.

“It’s just so cruel,” Gervase said, who is considering filing a lawsuit against FIDM for misleading her. “This is money I could have gone to another school. ... I’m now way behind on my graduation date because of FIDM.”

Gervase, who’s originally from Murrieta, dropped her FIDM classes soon after meeting with her counselor, worried the spring quarter would become more wasted time. She’d already transferred to FIDM from Fullerton

Community College, and many of her credits were not accepted by the fashion school.

“I feel like they just dug their hands into so many of the students’ pockets without no care in the world,” Gervase said.

Though FIDM refunded her spring classes, she’s stuck in her apartment lease that she’d picked for its location near her school, limiting where she can apply to new four-year universities.

“I feel like the entire weight of the world is on my shoulders because I feel so lost; I feel like I have no guidance anymore,” said Gervase, who is back taking community college classes while she tries to figure out what university might be her best fit. “It’s definitely taken a large toll on my mental health. ... I just want them to understand what they have done to their students.”

As anxious students grapple with the transition, FIDM leaders say even more changes are on the way. This likely merger would affect the other half of its student body: those pursuing the fashion school’s creative business majors, who weren’t involved in the ASU FIDM changes.

“We will move forward with all of our business programs in a partnership that will be announced very shortly,” Bundy said in May, calling it a deal with an “international business school.” Since then, she has not answered further questions about that change, including how it would affect current and prospective students.



Lexy Silverstein, a digital marketing student at FIDM, has heard inklings about this potential partnership and said she could be affected, depending when it is implemented.

“A lot is up in the air,” the 20-year-old said. “Everything has been a lack of communication.”

Silverstein has been trying to petition FIDM leaders to end a new scholarship program with Shein, an ultra-fast-fashion company that’s repeatedly come under scrutiny for working conditions and its environmental footprint. Though she supports scholarships for her classmates, she said Shein as a company contradicts what FIDM teaches about the future of fashion.

The new Shein partnership, announced soon after the ASU merger, has left many students confused about the future of their school, Silverstein said.

“It’s two hard blows to the chest, back-to-back,” she said. Her online petition asking the school to sever its ties with Shein has amassed more than 4,000 signatures — approaching double the number of current students at FIDM — but she said she hasn’t heard anything from school leaders.

Bundy declined to comment on student concerns about the scholarship program, saying the school doesn’t “get involved politically” and mentioning the school’s classes focused on sustainability.

“We can’t have a future of the fashion industry if we don’t have a planet,” said Silverstein, a Maryland native who moved cross-country for FIDM’s renowned programs that she used to rave about. Now, not so much.

“There’s not an ounce of school pride here,” she said.