It all started with a couple of short and simple questions: Who decides what we get and what we do not get? “I have always been a curvy girl,” says Keyaira Phillips. “So, before it was ‘in’ to be curvy, I had the hardest time finding in Waterloo/Cedar Falls areas a selection of clothes that were trendy and cute, and that fit.”

Of course, Phillips did not know then that “there were actual buyers and teams that pick out clothing assortments and that what was available varied per locations/regions.” However, she knew one thing for sure. “From drawing outfits when I was younger, to taking sewing classes in high school, I knew that I belonged in the fashion industry in some way, shape or form,” Phillips says. “Those questions and my early desire for style are what initially probed my interest in fashion, ultimately directing me to enroll and major in Textiles and Apparel at UNI.”

She loved the diversity in undergraduate coursework at UNI. “We were immersed in quality assurance classes which highlighted systematic process of determining whether products meet customers’ expectations and government regulations,” she recounts. “I took product development courses which taught us the technical side to our field (specification writing, creating and constructing patterns, sewing, etc.).”

“We also had CAD (computer-aided design) classes that taught us how to create and render designs on the computer,” she adds. “Lastly were the merchandising and design courses that focused on the business, buying, consumer behavior, and design sides of the fashion industry.”

“They set up the TAPP program this way because you get a holistic overview of career paths that you might want to take or have an interest in,” she says.

Phillips also found the projects to be fun and unique, eye-opening and interesting. “We had to make a garment out of unconventional materials (pop-cans, playing cards, etc.),” she recounts. “I made a formal wear top and skirt out of different condom wrappers. I know it was extreme but it conveyed the message about safe sex practices, a message that was plaguing college students on campus at the time. It was a huge hit.”

The undergraduate coursework was about diversity in more ways than one. “In most of my classes, we had to do tons of group work,” Phillips says. “Having been immersed in so many group projects in school allowed me to figure out ways to work well with others and how to communicate with them.”

The lessons in effectively communicating, negotiating and working with others have proved to be a treasure-trove for her. “When working at John Deere and Target, I had to work with people from all over the world and English wasn’t their first language,” she says. “It was a struggle at first… but having had courses where the themes were communicating effectively, speaking through common language (numbers) helped me build myself into an effective communicator.”

Diversity has marked Phillips’ career path, too. After graduating from UNI in 2006, she did an internship with Von Maur—the department store chain that sells primarily upscale brand-name apparel, accessories, cosmetics, gifts, jewelry and shoes—in its executive training program for buying and then went into store management.

In 2008, she started her corporate career at the Target headquarters in Minneapolis as a sourcing specialist. She worked with the company’s sourcing services, buying and merchandise planning teams, imports and customs, and Target India and overseas factories, to ensure the best product selection in its stores. In 2011, Phillips ventured into the world of agriculture, having landed a job at John Deere as a planner and buyer supporting its supply chain and management.
“Start early networking and job experience. Even if it’s a job shadow, volunteering and doing an internship, start as early as possible. The more experience you have, the more marketable you will be for that dream job.”

Keyaira Phillips

Finally, in 2014, she joined Alliant Energy. At Alliant, she coordinates and manages the purchase of materials, equipment and services to meet internal customer requirements, and is responsible for assuring the lowest total cost supply base and sourcing competitiveness through the procurement process. Simply put, she supervises and tracks everything that the company purchases—from desk chairs to computer equipment—and makes sure that the company gets the best price.

She also manages key contracts, materials, services and commodities, and assists with the development and implementation of strategic, operational, tactical sourcing and logistic planning activities.

Phillips says her leaps across industries have been rewarding. “I had no idea that I would go into agriculture or utilities but I am glad that I did,” says Phillips. “I will eventually get back into the retail industry but I am happy with the experience and skills I have gained so far.”

“Shocking as it may sound since fashion and retail are ever changing in terms of sourcing, merchandising, and product development, I was starting to become complacent at that time,” she recalls.

“I also wanted to diversify my portfolio in terms of carrying over the skills and foundations I had from fashion into other industries,” she adds. “Employees love the diversity within my career.”

She believes her education at UNI has helped her transition from one industry to another.

“There are many things that I can tie together between my studies in college and the work I have done previously and presently, one being the business component,” she says. “Regardless of the product I may source or buy, the basic business fundamentals hold true across the board.”

Diversity is also at the core of her advice for middle and high school students.

“Dream big and know that no job is too big for you,” Phillips says. “Tell people what your passions and dreams are because you never know what connections they might have to get you one step closer to your dream job.”

“Start early networking and job experience,” she adds. “Even if it’s a job shadow, volunteering and doing an internship, start as early as possible. The more experience you have, the more marketable you will be for that dream job.”