

Changing the Interface of Family and Consumer Sciences at Florida International University

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Abstract: The need to change the interface of the Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) Program at Florida International University (FIU) has evolved because of changes in our family structure, culture, resources, educational reform, new knowledge in basic disciplines and applied research.

Purpose

It is important for a program to connect periodically with the past, articulate the present, and create the future. The need for a conceptual framework in the FCS program at FIU has never been greater. Reasons for the need include the changing state of the workplace, our society, and the world, given the demands being placed on workers and citizens for technical and higher order thinking skills. Increasing complexity in all facets of work, family and community life, coupled with reoccurring calls for educational reform over the past few decades in Florida, present numerous challenges to professionals working in the family and consumer sciences field (Rojewski, 2002). Additionally, the need to revise or eliminate outdated curriculum and develop new programs to meet emerging work or family trends is an ongoing priority.

Rojewski (2002) suggests for a conceptual framework to be effective and useful, it must address the general purposes of family and consumer sciences, reflect the underlying beliefs and perspectives of its constituents, and shape the current infrastructure and educational activities and future direction of the program. A conceptual framework does not necessarily solve all problems or answer all questions present in a profession, but it should provide a schema for establishing critical issues and allowing for solutions--either conforming the problem to the framework or visa versa.

A framework should be fairly stable, have the capacity to change over time, and adapt to emerging issues, whether they be internal to the profession or external to society. The framework cannot be developed in a vacuum. There needs to be an on-going dialogue with educators and organizations to provide a comprehensive view of family and consumer sciences education and its applications in classrooms, boardrooms, living rooms, and universities. Therefore, this paper should be viewed as an initial point of discussion and debate, rather than as an arrival at the final conceptual framework for the program.

History

Family and Consumer Sciences, formerly known as Home Economics, began over one hundred years ago. Beginning in 1862, the Morrill Act established the nation's land-grant college system and provided educational pathways for individuals skilled in agriculture, mechanical trades and home economics. In 1914, a Congressional Commission on National Aid to Vocational Education was established. The findings of this commission resulted in the passage of the Smith-Hughes Act in 1917, the first federally enacted legislation to promote vocational education in public high schools in America. This act provided federal funds for vocational education at the secondary level in the areas of agriculture, trades, industry, and home economics.

In 1948, Katherine Alderman, an executive with the American Association of Home Economics, summarized the ways in which the Home Economics philosophy had been expressed. The philosophy included improvement in instruction, fostering international understanding, and the importance of on-going research at that time. A half century later, the name has changed but the philosophy has basically remained the same.

Recently, the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities (Anderson & Nickols, 2001) issued a call to institutions of higher education to join in their commitment to action by "addressing the academic and personal development of students in a holistic way" (p.15). The holistic, interdisciplinary perspective to FCS is the common thread that has been woven through all areas of specialization. It is this holistic perspective that has served as a ballast for the profession for almost a century.

A New Era with New Demands for the Profession

According to Anderson and Nickols (2001) in their Commemorative Lecture, the essence of family and consumer sciences can be summarized in three words: *head, heart, and soul*. The body of knowledge is the intellectual foundation of the field of family and consumer sciences. It can be described as the *head*. The *heart* is the mission, which reflects our passion, caring, and compassion. *Soul* is what inspires and motivates professionals and gives meaning to the field and work.

Today, the nature of this field has evolved today because of changes in the family, culture, resources, and new knowledge in the basic disciplines and applied research. Few areas of society have changed as much as the family has over the last generation. The structure of the family has been transformed from the stay-at-home mother, working father, and children to a more complex structure of children living in homes where both parents work outside the home. Many children today do not even live within a family with their biological parents. These changes have had an impact on the way that people view family life. Family and Consumer Sciences educators play an important role in family life instruction.

Dramatic changes in societal and workforce demographics present major challenges in language differences, cultural beliefs, and work attitudes that have a direct bearing on how Family and Consumer Sciences education is designed and delivered in public schools. Statistics from the United States Census Bureau has found that by the year 2020, this country will be without a majority ethnic or racial group. Therefore, we will be teaching a more diverse population of students than ever before.

The impact of technology on FCS education has not been limited to assessment. Technology has found its way into the instructional process as a teaching tool and as a learning process that facilitates a self-paced learning and tutorial assistance. Technological advances have not only changed the ways that society is living, but also the ways students learn. Technology has created new careers and new industries, and educators have greater opportunities and responsibilities to prepare students for future technological trends and issues. FCS professionals need on-going professional development to maintain a high level of competency in this area.

A severe shortage of teacher educators currently exists in many school districts of Florida. The American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences (AAFCS) indicated that by the year 2000 (Meszaros & Miller, 1996) the national demand for Family and Consumer Sciences educators could be expected to be approximately four times the supply of undergraduates preparing to enter the field. Those in leadership positions around the country indicated that it was imperative that an immediate and sustained action over the next decade was needed to

increase significantly the cadre of Family and Consumer Sciences educators prepared to teach in middle and secondary schools.

Currently in Florida, there are only two institutions that provide undergraduate and graduate education degrees in Family and Consumer Sciences: Florida International University in Miami and Florida State University in Tallahassee. The campuses are strategically located in the north and south portion of Florida, which helps to serve our state needs. Unfortunately, there are still a large number of potential students who do not have access to courses required for degrees or teacher certification in this field.

The Changing Knowledge Base

The intellectual foundation of the profession is a body of knowledge (see Figure 1), which is an evolutionary, ever-changing model that is reflective of societal changes (Anderson & Nickols, 2001). It is the integration of several different areas of expertise, including disease prevention, biotechnology research, and consumer product design, to work life benefits, ergonomics, and career planning, to parenting, personal finance, personal and home fashion to hospitality management.

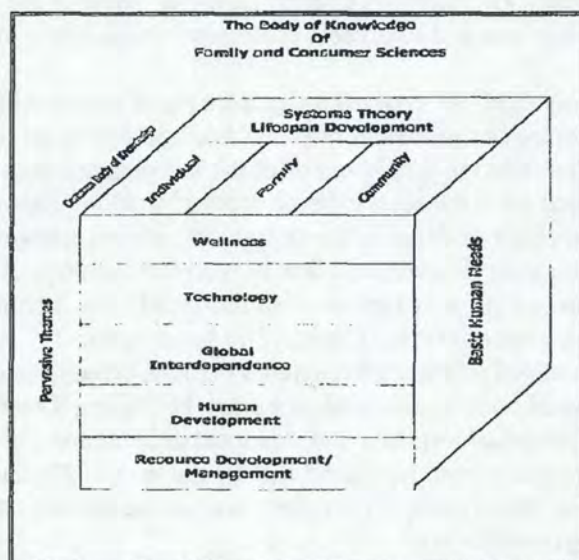


Figure 1. Body of Knowledge (Anderson & Nickols, 2001)

The body of knowledge includes unique concepts that integrate the study of the individual, family, and community systems throughout the life course and in the context of current concerns and trends. Basic human needs are central to the concepts in the family and consumer sciences body of knowledge. Individual well-being, strong and resilient families, and healthy communities focus the work of professionals. Maslow's hierarchy provides a synthesis of an individual's basic human needs: physiological, safety, love and belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization.

Empowered individuals meeting basic human needs are critical to individual well-being. Physically, emotionally, and mentally healthy individuals are essential for sustaining humanity. Empowered individuals who are self-aware and motivated become partners with the social, cultural, technological, and natural environments. The concepts and principals for promotion of

individual's well-being are central components of the family and consumer sciences body of knowledge.

Challenges currently exist for FCS educators to strengthen their integrative orientation to instruction, research, and service in responding to pressing needs of society. At Florida International University, the Family and Consumer Sciences Advisory Committee identified instruction, research and service components as the foundation for the new conceptual framework. This new focus paralleled many strategic efforts that were also occurring concurrently with the College of Education and the University.

A New Interface: Instruction

Changing the interface of the FCS at FIU requires making the scholarship of instruction a top priority. Prospective teachers will be provided with the best knowledge of the field, the latest theories of pedagogy, strong skills in technology, considerable classroom experience, and professional mentors.

An undeniable shift is taking place now from classroom teaching and learning to asynchronous Web-based and Web-supported learning environments. According to Sonwalkar (2001), the dissemination of educational content is surely moving from a teacher-to-student model to a technology-enabled interface. Simple interfaces, such as Internet browsers, are now providing the interface to connect students to teachers and to self-paced online courses.

According to the president of Pennsylvania State University, Graham B. Spainer, "The single greatest trend in higher education today is the move toward hybrid education" (as cited in Young, 2002). These convergences of online and resident instruction are being utilized by some of the oldest colleges in the United States. The FCS program has made hybrid instruction a priority and consequently developed a number of hybrid and virtual courses to broaden access to students in surrounding counties.

A New Interface: Research

Changing the interface of the FCS at FIU requires making research an integral part of the program. A priority of the FCS program is to educate and prepare students for many diverse challenges they will encounter when working in the classrooms. Engaging students in action research projects facilitates this goal. Both the undergraduate and graduate level programs incorporate action research into the curriculum. The outcome of this research empowers the students to help provide solutions to current problems affecting the profession and society.

Taking these concepts into consideration, a FCS seminar class at FIU put research into action by planning a pilot satellite video conference called "Making Dreams into Realities." Along with FIU, the conference was co-sponsored by Miami-Dade Public Schools and included the assistance of FIU's Satellite Technology Department and Instructional Development Center.

The satellite conference focused on the issue of the critical teacher shortage in South Florida. This pilot project specifically targeted middle and secondary students and their teachers. It created awareness of the possible careers available in FCS. The agenda included various topics: technology use, financial management, foods and nutrition, fashion design, childcare programs, research and resources. Pre- and post-evaluative instruments were created for data collection on-line.

The pre-conference activities included worksheets for teachers to utilize in their classrooms with students. The post-conference student activities included worksheets on specific careers and corresponding salaries.

The student researchers indicated a significant increase in action research techniques and distance learning strategies. Involvement in this research class afforded the students the ability to comprehend their role as FCS educators and to be more creative in reaching their students through technology.

A New Interface: Service

Changing the interface of the FCS at FIU requires making service an integral part of the conceptual framework. In the fall of 2001, the Family and Consumer Sciences Student Association was established. This student group through membership automatically links to the local, state and national professional associations. A group of graduate students assumed the leadership for the group.

Since its conception, the student organization has facilitated two service projects. In October 2001, a joint forum between two FCS associations was hosted at FIU. Collaborating with the local professional teacher's association, the student group invited local Housing and Urban Development experts to discuss the latest urban housing issues pertaining to Miami-Dade County. In December 2001, a workshop for caregivers was hosted in conjunction with the Urban League of Miami. Student association members taught grandparents raising grandchildren how to plan nutritious snacks for the holidays.

Examining the Future

The development of any conceptual framework is of little value if action does not result. Collectively, the FCS program must be willing to tackle tough questions and debate potentially contentious issues to maintain a clear and concise framework. Outcomes will affirm the program's commitment to provide appropriate instruction of persons entering the field. Such a framework can guide funding priorities, program development, classroom instruction, and relationships with external constituencies.

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