

Daily Union – Saturday, January 10, 2015  
Vol. 3 Issue 2: What is Family and Consumer Science?

As I continue to promote and expand the Family and Consumer Sciences Extension Program in Geary County, I often get asked “What is Family and Consumer Sciences?” Some may associate my professional title with Home Economics – which is, in a way, an accurate connection. However, it really is so much more than that single association.

To say that Family and Consumer Sciences is like Home Economics would be similar to comparing the corded cellular “bag phone” to a smart phone. Although the primary purpose of both phones is mobile communication, they look much different, the delivery system has changed, and the uses and applications of cell phones is vastly broader than it once was. Regardless of their differences, though, their function in our society is critical and they each have made a significant contribution to the human condition.

What later became known as Home Economics has its origins rooted in the work of Catherine Beecher (sister of Harriet Beecher Stowe) who promoted the need for domestic science programs as far back as the 1880s. They also believed in the importance of education for women.

The Morrill Act of 1862, also known as the Land Grant College Act, established colleges that provided educational coursework in the areas of agriculture and home economics and other practical professional areas of that time. Introduced by congressman Justin Smith Morrill of Vermont, the bill was signed by Abraham Lincoln on July 2, 1862. This provided the legislation that not only birthed home economics, but also the foundation to the national Cooperative Extension Service – now called K-State Research and Extension here in Kansas.

Land grant colleges from across the nation began to build programs around domestic science and agriculture. The states of Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, and Nebraska were the early leaders in providing higher education programs for women, specifically. While the agriculture programs were focusing on agriculture production methods and processes, the domestic science programs focused on the practical needs of the family and home.

It was during the first Lake Placid Conference in 1889 that the discipline known as Home Economics was defined by pioneers in the field. One of those, Ellen Swallow Richards, is considered by most in the profession to be the mother of Home Economics. She also carved her presence out in history as a chemist. As the first female student to be accepted to a scientific studies college (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), she completed her second bachelor's degree in three years at that institution.

She went on to become an instructor at MIT where her research focused on water quality. Her work also focused on the application of scientific principles to topics such as nutrition, pure foods, sanitation, physical fitness, and other domestic-related topics.

In 1914, the Smith-Lever Act passed and Agricultural Extension Services was born. This act created a partnership between land-grant universities and the federal government's US Department of Agriculture. The purpose of the legislation was to take the research and knowledge from the land grant institution and extend it to the public through non-formal, non-credit programs.

In addition to the resources being shared with the public regarding agriculture production, methodology, conservation, and safety, the Agricultural Extension Service provided resources for home and family. Research and knowledge about food safety, child development, food conservation, good nutrition, clothing production and care, home health care practices, and other domestic topics became the focus of the newly created Extension Home Economics.

From 1889 to 1993, Home Economics was the discipline name that identified the various areas of study related to family and home. Just as the corded bag phone of old had to change to meet the contemporary needs of our society, so too, did the field of Home Economics. Many colleges and universities across the nation had already changed their names to reflect the development of the profession and the diverse areas of content being studied. Names such as Human Sciences, Human Ecology, and Consumer and Family Sciences were adopted to reflect that the profession was no longer limited to what used to be domestic science.

In 1993, a group of contemporary home economists met in Scottsdale, Arizona and formally agreed on a discipline name change. The new name recommended by this group of professionals was "Family and Consumer Sciences" to embrace the many modern facets of the discipline.

According to the America Association of Family and Consumers Sciences (formerly the American Association of Home Economics) professionals in this field of study, "assist individuals, families, and communities in making informed decisions about their well being, relationships, and resources to achieve optimal quality of life. They provide research-based knowledge about the topics of everyday life, including human development, personal and family finance, housing and interior design, food science, nutrition and wellness, textiles and apparel, and consumer issues."

As a Family and Consumer Sciences Extension professional, I focus on providing programming for families and individuals across the lifespan. At the core of my job, I

extend the research and training from Kansas State University and other land grant universities across the U.S., to the public I work with. On any given day, I am fielding questions or providing programming on Medicare Supplement Insurance, safe food storage and preparation, budgeting for the family, resources for families, parenting and child development, preserving family heirlooms, and health and wellness practices, just to name a few.

Like our cell phones, the function of FCS in our society is critical and the profession has made a significant contribution to improving the human condition. What is Family and Consumer Sciences? The tagline for K-State Research and Extension says it all – “Knowledge for Life!”