The Essence of Family & Consumer Sciences

State of the Profession at the Dawn of the 21st Century
Periodically, it is essential for an individual, organization, or profession to review and revitalize by reflecting on the past, celebrating the present, and looking forward to a vibrant future. The purpose of this white paper is to explore the essence of family and consumer sciences and to offer perspective on the state of our profession at the dawn of the 21st century.

The essence of family and consumer sciences can be summarized with three words—head, heart, and soul. The profession’s body of knowledge is the intellectual foundation or the head. The heart is the mission to improve quality of life, which reflects our passion, caring, and compassion as professionals. Soul puts us in touch with the “whys” of our being, that which inspires, motivates us, and gives meaning to our work.

**Historical Perspectives**

**Emerging Interdisciplinary Field**

From its very beginning, practitioners and friends of family and consumer sciences have debated what should comprise our body of knowledge. Early on, one overarching theme was the application of scientific principles to the management of the household. The two strongest advocates of this perspective were Ellen H. Richards and W.O. Atwater, both chemists who applied their science to everyday issues such as water quality, sanitation, and nutrition.

Other advocates, such as Isabel Bevier, insisted that substantial attention to arts and letters be included in the home economics curriculum. Benjamin Andrews and Marian Talbot wrote statements supporting social and philosophical perspectives including attention to public policy.

From these varied perspectives, home economics emerged as an interdisciplinary field with a focus on relationships and integration of knowledge gleaned from the physical sciences, social sciences, arts, and philosophy. The widely accepted definition of the field adopted at the 1902 Lake Placid conference states:

“...in its most comprehensive sense, [home economics] is the study of the laws, conditions, principles and ideas which are concerned on the one hand with man's immediate physical environment and on the other hand with his nature as a social being, and is the study specifically of the relations between those two factors.”

During the first half of the 20th century, attention focused on teaching, research, and public policy—so that families everywhere may achieve the highest quality of living and happiness in their homes and communities. By mid-century it was time to step back and examine where the profession had been and where it was going. Analysis, dialogue, and eventually partial agreement on the body of knowledge resulted from various meetings held between 1961 and 1993.

During the last decade of the 20th century, increased enrollment in specialized areas of family and consumer sciences influenced higher education programs resulting in more complex bodies of knowledge within each specialization.

**Head of the Profession**

**Evolving Body of Knowledge**

Today, the body of knowledge for family and consumer sciences reflects five fundamental principles and three key concepts, which are influenced by societal trends and articulated by the American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences (AAFCS).

**Five Fundamental Principles**

**Principle 1:** Family and consumer sciences is grounded in an integrative, synergistic, holistic focus, and driven by a deep and abiding commitment to individuals, families, and communities.

**Principle 2:** Our body of knowledge builds on historical strengths and competitive advantages while orienting to the future. We affirm and expand aspects proven effective and find new ways to articulate the common ground within a changing society.

**Principle 3:** We value a continuum of options for professional practice—from scholarly analysis, study, and research to application through diverse career
paths. Diversity of interests and perspectives are valued.

**Principle 4:** Both qualitative and quantitative investigation are valued, contributing to our ongoing examination of interactions among individuals, families, and communities, and the resulting impact on basic needs such as health and wellness, economic well-being, and quality of life.

**Principle 5:** In today’s environment, where complex challenges prevail, it is essential to integrate professional specializations around the issues and needs of individuals, families, and communities.

**Three Key Concepts**

The body of knowledge includes unique concepts that integrate the study of individual, family, and community systems throughout their life course 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 are the focus of our professional work.
- Encompassing the body of knowledge are systems theory and life course development.

**Key Concept 1: Basic Human Needs**

At the center of the body of knowledge is the concept of basic human needs. Abraham H. Maslow’s hierarchy provides a synthesis of basic human needs: physiological, safety, love and belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization.

While Maslow’s model appears as a linear trend toward needs fulfillment, J. Rowan (1999, *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 39(3): 125 – 133), suggests that deficiency and abundance may be present simultaneously. Rather than a hierarchy, where one level must be met before achieving the next, it is helpful to consider basic human needs as a set of Russian stacking dolls. Some needs may be met while others are still being sought.

**Key Concept 2: Individuals, Families, and Communities**

Meeting basic human needs is critical to achieve individual well-being. Physically and mentally healthy individuals are essential for sustaining humanity. Empowered individuals who are self-aware and motivated become partners with their social, cultural, technological, and natural environments. They enable others and make meaningful contributions via choices across the life span. Promotion of individual well-being is another central component of the family and consumer sciences body of knowledge.

Understanding families and nurturing this most fundamental social unit in all its diversity is basic to family and consumer sciences. Supporting strong and resilient families requires an understanding of complex relationships and human development across the life course. The body of knowledge is built on the definition of family put forth in 1975:

“… two or more persons who share resources, share responsibility for decisions, share values and goals, and have commitment to one another over time.”

It is the climate and network of sharing and commitment that most accurately describes the family unit, regardless of blood, legal ties, adoption, or marriage.

Healthy communities are essential for promoting individual and family well-being. Community is individuals and families having common interests and connections via ownership and/or participation in meeting basic human needs and caring for and about one another. Communities are usually structured so that actions contribute to the common good, and a shared moral culture is transmitted from generation to generation. Communities provide affective bonds that turn groups of people into social clusters resembling extended families.

**Key Concept 3: Systems Theory and Life Course Development**

The body of knowledge ties individuals, families, and communities together through the systems theoretical model. A system is comprised of a collection of interdependent yet independent parts working
Family ecosystems give family and consumer sciences its dynamic and integrative nature. In *Family Decision Making: An Ecosystems Approach* (1977, John Wiley & Sons, Inc.) B. Paolucci, O. A. Hall, and N. Axinn define family ecosystems as:

“Family members, their external environments as perceived by them, and web of human transactions carried out through the family organization constitute the basic elements of the family ecosystem. One fundamental characteristic of the family ecosystem is that it is made up of a collectivity of interdependent but independent parts working together to achieve a common purpose. Each element (organism and environment) is interrelated.”

Life course development refers to social norms for achievement, development, and productive behavior across the life span. The life course perspective, outlined by G.H. Elder, Jr. in *Handbook of Child Psychology* (1998, John Wiley & Sons, Inc.), centers around the assertions that:

- people develop biologically and socially across their lives, in ways that change their interactions with social institutions;
- social institutions, such as school and workplaces, create “transition points” for individuals as they develop;
- individual social development differs across historical times because of the way social institutions change. Collective human needs also create demands for social institutions to change across time.

Understanding individual, family and community needs, ecosystems, and life course development underpins the dynamic, holistic, and integrative nature of family and consumer sciences.

**Environmental Influences & Trends**

While history affects what we teach, investigate, and share through practice, the body of knowledge considers current external influences and trends that impact society. Key environmental trends facing the profession today include:

**Aging U.S. population:**
By 2030, more than half of all U.S. adults will be age 50 or older. At the same time, a baby boom is projected.

**Digital technology:**
The information revolution is transforming society and creating new careers, new industries, and new ways of working, living, and learning.

**Genetically modified products:**
Genome research, DNA knowledge, and genetically modified products will contribute to new alternatives for preventing and treating diseases. Nutritional enhanced fruits and vegetables have the potential to influence weight control and improve health practices.

**American families—an altered institution:**
At sometime in their lives the majority of families will raise children without the presence of both biological parents. Families are smaller. Marriage is less central. The proportion of single adults who never married rose from 15 percent in 1972 to 23 percent in 1998.

**Protecting the environment while accommodating growth:**
Healthy ecological neighborhoods depend upon sustainable practices. Energy use and consumption and access to clean water and air are on the global agenda.

**No majority ethnic group:**
By 2020, the U.S. will no longer have a majority ethnic or racial group and will be more diverse than ever before.

**Work life:**
More choices in work life circumstances are available. The number of women entrepreneurs continues to increase. A person may reside in one part of the country and be employed in another. Most
people plan to work or volunteer in some capacity following retirement.

**Dual economy:**
A high school diploma is essential to economic security, and education beyond high school is increasingly important. More than 50% of college students are enrolled in colleges offering two-year programs. The gap in income between the wealthy and the poor continues to widen.

**Globalization:**
The world is linked through migration and communications as well as travel technology. Decisions in foreign countries directly influence what occurs in others. When one country sneezes, several others catch a cold.

**Community focus:**
People rely on communities to foster a sense of belonging. Vital communities provide “high touch” environments that support well-being.

**Focus for the Future**
As family and consumer sciences unites towards creating a better future, the body of knowledge for the profession evolves. Themes for the immediate future identified by the AAFCS Body of Knowledge Task Force include:

- wellness
- global interdependence
- resource development and sustainability
- capacity building, and
- appropriate use of technology.

**Wellness:**
Wellness encompasses health and well-being, including nutrition; reducing the risk of chronic disease; learning behavior and development; health care availability, access, and costs; psychological health; and spirituality.

**Global Interdependence:**
This theme encompasses interdependence in global production and consumption; as well as tangible connections around the world through communications networks, learning, and culture.

**Resource Development and Sustainability:**
Resource development and sustainability involves protecting the environment, promoting, sustainable practices, creating public policy, and managing resources from generation to generation.

**Capacity Building:**
Capacity building means acquiring and using knowledge and skills, building on assets and strengths, respecting diversity, and responding effectively to change.

**Appropriate Use of Technology:**
Appropriate use of technology involves using technology to expand opportunities and solve problems. It must also consider the interaction of environmental factors such as diet, family and community with an individual’s genetic pool, and how to enhance human performance via ethical principles and awareness of social, economic, and other contextual implications.

**Heart of the Profession**

*Enhancing Quality of Life*
The practice of our profession is not only transmitting knowledge, but also fulfilling our mission to enhance quality of life for individuals, families, and communities.

In professional practice, we transmit acquired knowledge and express the “heart” or passion that energizes efforts. The heart of the profession is the mission. And improving quality of life has been central to family and consumer sciences from its beginning.

In the early 1900s, Ellen Richards spoke often about the importance of “right living.” She and colleagues envisioned improved living standards and sought to correct the injustices of society.

As M. Brown and B. Paolucci pointed out in 1979 (*Home Economics: A Definition, AHEA*), there is both an individual and a collective focus to the family and consumer sciences mission.

“The mission of home economics is to enable families (both as individual units and
generally as a social institution) to build and maintain systems of action which lead:

(1) to maturing in individual self-formation, and
(2) to enlightened, cooperative participation in the critique and formulation of social goals and means for accomplishing them.”

In 1982, V.B. Vincenti described family and consumer sciences not just as a mission-oriented field, but as a “reformist” field (Journal of Home Economics, 74(3), 20-25).

“We are not satisfied to have a body of knowledge for scholars to contemplate. We want action!”

Teaching and mentoring inherently reflects the “heart” of the profession as pursuit of our mission becomes the “wind beneath the wings” of our constituents, enabling them toward full self-realization, empowerment, and fulfillment of personal and group hopes and dreams.

Leading with Passion
The heart of family and consumer sciences is demonstrated by the passion with which an individual practices. The following five recognized leaders embody the heart of the family and consumer sciences profession.

Marilyn Swierk – Educator/Entrepreneur:
Swierk is the dynamo who led AAFCS’s work on the Early Childhood Initiative (ECI), a collaborative project to build public awareness of the importance of brain development in the first three years of life. She describes herself as “relentless about engaging, encouraging, enthusing and energizing people”. Swierk wants people to be hooked, empowering others through involvement and nurturing.

Tahira Hira – Researcher/Educator:
Hira, an international expert on financial counseling and bankruptcy, embodies our commitment to the practical application of family and consumer sciences. She inspires learners and policy makers to make a difference by helping families manage their financial resources more effectively.

Don Bower – Family Life Cooperative Extension Specialist:
Bower states, “I am not convinced that a commitment to improving the lives of others can be taught as well as it can be caught. Whether you see your commitment as a passion, a mission, or even a fever, it is contagious and we are carriers.” He collaborates with extension educators to enable individuals and families toward self-fulfillment and empowerment.

Becky Newell – AAFCS Teacher of the Year:
Creator of The Factory: Make Your Own Fortune curriculum, Newell teaches high school students workforce behavior and skills to thrive in a market economy. She believes the heart of family and consumer sciences is the commitment and dedication of our members, noting that professionals travel easily from research to practice, from the innovative to the traditional, from the exotic to the mundane.

Hazel Forsythe – Community Nutrition Educator/Department Head, University of Kentucky:
Forsythe facilitates the development of young professionals, engaging students in food preference research among children with disabilities and teaching students how to assess childhood development. Her expertise is shared through programs such as Head Start.

As family and consumer sciences professionals, expressing our heart through the pursuit of improving quality of life is vital.

Soul of the Profession:
Making a Difference
What is “soul” and how does it relate to the profession of Family and Consumer Sciences? According to Jay Alden Conger in Spirit at Work: Discovering the Spirituality in Leadership (1994, Jossey-Bass), soul includes feelings of being connected and making a meaningful contribution.

In Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World (1992, Berrett-Koehler), Margaret J. Wheatly describes soulful living as having a vision or sense of purpose, and then aligning actions to achieve goals and objectives.
Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal, authors of *Leading with Soul: An Uncommon Journey of Spirit* (2001, John Wiley & Sons) suggest that business has increasingly recognized the value of soul and its strong associations between empowerment, individual feelings of wholeness, and organizational prosperity.

We expand these ideas to include the profession, the institutions represented by family and consumer sciences professionals, and the community united by the American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences.

“The soul of the [family and consumer sciences] profession speaks of the identity of our being, of who we are,” according to S. Baugher, editor (1998-2001), *Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences*. “It is about the spirit of who we are as a collective and as individuals, creating a profession as well as a community.”

The soul of the profession has to do with our values. What motivates professionals to continue working in family and consumer sciences? A 2001 survey of AAFCS professionals who received the Association’s “Leaders” and “New Achievers” awards, revealed the core values at the soul of the profession. When asked, “What keeps your Betty Lamp burning?” respondents said:

- making a difference
- helping others
- experiencing personal fulfillment
- being a mentor and role model.

For most family and consumer sciences professionals, their career is more than a job—it is a calling, an attitude, a perspective, and sense of dedication that enhances the content and continuing evolution of the field.

To thrive in the future, it is critical that every professional continues to express the heart and soul of the profession, as well as researching and teaching the empirical knowledge of the discipline. Mentoring college students and young professionals is a key role for each member of the field.

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**Community of Professionals**

**Shared Education, Diverse Practice**

The essence of the profession depends on the head, heart, and soul of each person. We are a professional collective of reformers, scientists, inventors, teachers, and dreamers who share a common educational experience and practice in diverse ways within the public and private sectors. Regardless of how we practice, the body of knowledge connects us.

We experience community through professional organizations such as the American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences. In community, we renew and revitalize our individual and collective head, heart, and soul.

Recognizing that change is constant, continual revitalization helps us bring clear focus to the profession through dialogue, scholarly analysis, and application of professional practices that build meaning and express the philosophy of the profession. Together we empower each other to publicly communicate the value of the profession, and thereby enable all family and consumer science professionals to more effectively address systemic issues and create community vitality.

We ensure practice excellence through professional certification and accreditation, developing new knowledge and promoting current concepts. We affirm our commitment to educate those entering the field and thereby support the continued relevance of family and consumer sciences in addressing complex societal issues.

May each member of the profession leap into the future with head, heart, and soul fully engaged.

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