

FCS BRAND STORY

The Story of Family and Consumer Sciences

The story of family and consumer sciences begins with the story of Ellen Richards, one of the leading figures in the emergence of home economics as a profession. After growing up in modest circumstances in the small town of Dunstable, Massachusetts, Ellen defied the conventions of her times by leaving home to attend the newly founded Vassar College, from which she graduated in 1870. She then went on to be the first—and for many years the only—woman to earn a degree at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

Richards and her followers believed that the application of science to domestic issues could help save society from the social disintegration that was taking place at the turn of the century. Beginning in 1899, Ellen Richards helped organize a series of ten annual conferences that became known as the Lake Placid Conferences. At the first conference, participants agreed on the term *home economics* to define the broad range of disciplines and scientific studies being discussed. The die was cast and a movement took shape.

In 1909, Richards founded the American Home Economics Association (AHEA), which became the most influential professional association for home economists. Richards and AHEA believed that students who chose home economics as a field of study would not only be better prepared to manage their own homes, but would also be better prepared for careers focused on people and their environments. At the federal level, Congress enacted the Smith-Lever Act of 1914 to embed home economics into the U.S. Department of Agriculture Cooperative Extension and Land Grant University System. In 1963 the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Act was passed and has been consistently updated to support career and technical education. Students and teachers across the nation benefit from Perkins funding through FCS curriculum and participation in Family, Career and Community Leaders of America (FCCLA), the student organization for family and consumer sciences.

As times have changed and become more complex, so have the issues that impact our quality of life. Our workforce is more diverse than ever, the definition and makeup of today's families are more varied than previous generations, and our neighborhoods, communities, and cities are facing an increasingly complex set of challenges. Widespread concerns such as obesity, divorce, unemployment and underemployment, homelessness, and the credit crisis have affected nearly everyone.

While the Internet has made a massive amount of information available to us all, access to information alone does not provide the necessary tools and skills to become the critical thinkers and problem solvers that we must be for individuals and families to reach their fullest potential. Lasting solutions to today's complex issues require a comprehensive and integrated set of knowledge, skills, and experiences. Now more than ever, people are looking for tools and resources to help them make more informed decisions to enhance their overall health and well-being.

Home economics transformed the family by helping generations of people become more prepared to build better lives for themselves and their families. But as society continued to present more complex issues and the concept of family became more diversified, it was clear that people needed a more comprehensive array of skills to function successfully on personal, family, and professional levels.

In 1994, home economics-related organizations and programs decided to change the name of the home economics field to family and consumer sciences to more accurately reflect the complexity of the field. Evolving with the cultural norms, *home economics* was repositioned as *family and consumer sciences* to better serve the needs of individuals and families. Today, family and consumer sciences continues to evolve and provides an even broader foundation of essential research-based knowledge and skills to help today's generation of families be better prepared to live, work, and succeed in an increasingly complex and diverse society.

Through the generations, family and consumer sciences has moved beyond the technical homemaking skills taught in home economics toward a holistic focus on the knowledge and skills required to solve the interrelated challenges posed by personal, family, societal, and workplace issues. Today's family and consumer sciences represents the intersection at which content and context cross; the place where research and concepts gain deeper meaning through applied knowledge and skills.

The family and consumer sciences field draws from a broad range of disciplines to help achieve optimal and sustainable quality of life for individuals, families, and communities. This interdisciplinary approach is essential because the challenges of everyday life are not one dimensional. The ability to connect professionals across multiple practice settings and content areas to share knowledge, research, and experience is one of the strengths of the family and consumer sciences field, and helps create more integrated solutions to today's critical social and economic challenges. It truly is the perfect applied science for helping people engage and thrive in our complicated world.

Professionals in family and consumer sciences work to improve the quality and standards of individual and family life by providing educational content and programs, offering leadership opportunities, influencing public policy, and conducting research. They provide research-based knowledge and skills about the topics of everyday life, including human development, personal and family finance, housing and interior design, hospitality and tourism, food science, nutrition and wellness, textiles and apparel, and consumer issues. These same core skills and information provided by family and consumer sciences professionals also nourish professional development, acting as the catalyst that helps cultivate career and technical education (CTE). CTE lays the foundation for tomorrow's chefs, dietitians, designers, child care educators, and many more vital professions.

You will see family and consumer sciences professionals in all walks of life—they are early childhood, elementary, secondary, university/college, and Extension educators, administrators and managers, human service professionals, researchers, community volunteers, business people, and consultants who address the issues most important to our quality of life. The knowledge, research, and experience of these professionals help people create the best life for themselves, their families, and the communities in which they live.