

The McGrath Report: A Critique

WILLIAM S. GRIFFITH

The study report entitled The Changing Mission of Home Economics (The McGrath Report) represents a substantial investment—both in terms of financial resources and professional energies. With so carefully conceived an undertaking on the part of the profession and so adequately financed a project, it is reasonable to expect a report that reflects the quality and rigor of scholarly work. The author appraises the report on the basis of nine criteria, examining selected conclusions and recommendations in the light of these criteria. He concludes that the report is a disappointment.—The editor.

IN NOVEMBER, 1959, the members of the Division of Home Economics of the American Association of Land-Grant Colleges and State Universities decided that the scope, purpose, and future mission of home economics should be studied. They started seeking a way to implement that decision.¹ In November, 1964, the Carnegie Corporation agreed to provide \$200,000 to support such a study in response to a request from the Executive Committee of the Association.² Earl J. McGrath agreed to direct it. Copies of the study report were prepared for the Association in January, 1968, and the Institute of Higher Education at Columbia University has subsequently published it in paperback book form.

The purpose of this critique is to examine the study report entitled *The Changing Mission of Home Economics*³—the latest in a se-

¹ Helen G. Canoyer, "Report of the Origin and History of the National Study of Home Economics in Land-Grant Colleges and Universities Entitled, 'The Changing Mission of Home Economics,'" a paper presented at a meeting of the Home Economics Commission of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, Chicago, Illinois, May 2, 1968 (mimeographed), pp. 2-3.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

³ Earl J. McGrath and Jack T. Johnson, "The Changing Mission of Home Economics" (New York: Institute of Higher Education, Teachers College, Columbia University, January, 1968), mimeographed.

WILLIAM S. GRIFFITH is Associate Professor, Department of Education, The University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois.

ries of self-renewal efforts of the home economics profession. The examination will consist of three parts: (1) a presentation of nine criteria which may be useful in assessing the quality and the rigor of a scholarly report; (2) a brief discussion of each of six recommendations which appear to this writer to be representative of the scholarly quality of the report; and (3) a comparison of the report with a classic study of professional education in another field.

No effort will be made to judge the desirability of implementing any of the recommendations, either on the basis of evidence presented in the report or elsewhere. Accordingly, if it is found that a given recommendation is inadequately supported by the evidence presented in the report, that finding should not be misconstrued as implying the recommendation is undesirable. Rather, such a finding indicates that those who favor the implementation of the recommendations will have to seek data other than that provided in the report as grounds for supporting their conclusions. It is assumed that in building a case to support a desired change the proponents of the change will want to use grounds other than an appeal to authority.

Self Studies of Home Economics

Historically home economists have exhibited a tendency toward self-study. Through the Lake Placid conferences beginning in 1899 and the American Home Economics Association meetings, the leaders of the field have been willing to examine all aspects of their work.⁴ With the cooperation of the home economists in the Land-Grant Colleges, the Office of Education conducted a study which was published in 1930. A paragraph of that report is presented here because it could serve as a summary of the findings of the 1968 report:

The most obvious superficial situation revealed by a study of home economics courses and curricula is confusion of objectives, confusion of means adapted to the attainment of objectives, and confusion of lines of demarcation between subject matter fields. The impression is created that home economics is bewildered by the wealth of possibilities, by the necessity of selecting from the multitudinous materials available those best suited for its purposes, by the variety of demands and by the chasms of ignorance that must be bridged.⁵

In 1933 home economists considered the place of home econom-

⁴ Isabel Bevier, *Home Economics Education* (Chicago: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1924), p. 151.

⁵ Office of Education, United States Department of the Interior, *Survey of Land Grant Colleges and Universities: Home Economics*, Part XI, Volume I, No. 9 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1930), p. 988.

ics in a changing society and called for home economics to "broaden and deepen its own conception of its function."⁶ The search for new directions and the consideration of the breadth and depth of the field was continued by the Committee on Philosophy and Objectives of Home Economics of the American Home Economics Association. It issued a report in 1958 entitled a "Tentative Statement on the Philosophy and Objectives of Home Economics." Subsequently the Committee made a second report dealing with the same issues entitled "Home Economics—New Directions." A reexamination of the basic concepts of home economics was undertaken at the 1960 French Lick conference of home economists.

The majority of the self-initiated studies of the home economics field has been conducted on modest budgets. For this reason the initiation of an amply supported national study of the changing mission was greeted enthusiastically by those who had requested the study five years earlier.

Nine Criteria

By whatever form a study is conducted there are standards for assessing excellence. And since the study of the changing mission of home economics was amply funded, and conducted at the request of representatives of the programs to be investigated, it seems reasonable to assume that it should exemplify the highest standards for such a work.

A research report of the highest standard will exhibit all of the following nine elements:

1. A clear statement of purpose.
2. Operational definitions of the major terms used.
3. Specific questions or hypotheses which serve as a guide to the kinds of empirical data needed.
4. An explanation of the means used to assess the validity, reliability, and objectivity of the data collected.
5. Cross tabulations of the data on related variables to show the nature of the relationships.
6. Empirical data to support each conclusion.
7. An acknowledgement of the limitations of the research.
8. A listing of inferences which go beyond the modest conclusions directly related to the data.

⁶ Flora Rose, "The Place of Home Economics in a Changing Society," *Proceedings of the Forty-Seventh Annual Convention of the Association of Land-Grant Colleges and Universities, 1933* (Washington, D.C.: The Association, 1934), p. 108.

9. An exploration of alternative interpretations of the meaning of the data together with a statement indicating that the conclusions are probabilistic rather than final.

These criteria may serve as a useful framework in examining reports based on quantitative data. They were used in studying the home economics report and the questions in the following sections arose from such considerations.

The Report: Description and Examination

The authors state that "the dominant object of the report is to improve the practice of home economics and to expand its beneficial influence in American society;"⁷ that its aim is "to survey the needs of American society for persons who are trained in the areas of knowledge embraced by home economics and, on this basis, to recommend the future scope and arrangements of home economics programs of member institutions of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges."⁸

The Changing Mission of Home Economics is organized into three major sections: "ideas and pressures which have in part at least, shaped home economics as it exists today; . . . [a description of] home economics programs now in operation within the State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges; . . . [and an analysis of] trends in contemporary society with the purpose of determining the role which home economics can play in meeting the needs of the next generation."⁹

Nearly one hundred state university and Land-Grant Colleges were identified as the population for the investigation involving three aspects of home economics: resident teaching, research, and extension. Data from the American Home Economics Association, the United States Office of Education, and from two previous surveys conducted by personnel of the Institute of Higher Education at Columbia University were also used in the study.

In the following sections six of the recommendations are presented and discussed as a means of demonstrating the scholarly quality of the publication.

Generalist Versus Specialist Preparation

One of the persistently popular topics of conversation among

⁷ McGrath and Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. iv.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. iv-v.

home economics faculty members is specialization versus generalization in training. *The Changing Mission of Home Economics* treats this topic, but the meaning of the terms is ambiguous and the ways to implement the recommendation are obscure.

McGrath states that "home economics at the undergraduate level can best confirm its heritage and meet present challenges by retaining a strong generalist major, while expanding its interdisciplinary base in order to fully comprehend contemporary social problems and those of family life."¹⁰ The key phrase used here is "strong generalist major." The utility of the recommendation is dependent upon the clarity with which a "strong generalist major" is defined. McGrath says that the strong curriculum

must be a systematic and interdisciplinary major rather than a congeries of snippets of specialization. Its instructional core ought to be the analysis of family structure and functioning; its value orientation, that of assistance to families; and its goal, the creation and enhancement of viable family life. These integrating principles provide the unity of concepts, skills, and values distinctive and necessary to the core of home economics. Without them, the generalist majors will be mere technical preparation for specific jobs which are likely to be outdated in a few years.¹¹

In the report, however, no estimate is given of the number of institutions offering strong generalist majors and the number lacking integrating principles. The absence of an operational definition makes it possible for different observers to classify the same generalist majors as strong or weak subjectively.

Research

McGrath asserts that "home economics research must be expanded beyond its primary orientation to foods and nutrition and beyond its limited financial base in the agricultural experiment stations. And second, home economics teaching and research must be increasingly integrated on either an informal or a formal basis with related fields and the basic disciplines that underlie them."¹²

Under what organizational structure are home economists most successful in finding financial support for their research outside of the agricultural experiment stations? Is the size of the faculty, the areas of academic preparation of the faculty, the degree status of the faculty, the faculty-student ratio, or the salary scale related to the kinds of funding and with relationships between home econom-

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 84.

ics and related fields? Are faculty members who receive the largest amount of support from agricultural experiment stations more or less likely than their fellow faculty members to be successful in securing outside financial support for their research?

Why were the data on other relevant variables not cross tabulated to demonstrate the relationships existing between them and the financial base for home economics research? Does the formal integration of home economics teaching and research with the basic disciplines that underlie them result in an expansion of the research beyond foods and nutrition?

Extension Methods

The tendency of the federally funded programs established in the 1960's is to emphasize the desirability of a close personal relationship between the teacher and the taught, which is typical of home economics extension work. Despite this, McGrath believes that "with the expansion and improvement of local community colleges, branch campuses of state universities, adult education centers, and the mass media, the traditional methods of Cooperative Extension are becoming increasingly outdated."¹³

What evidence is there to support the assumption that newer mass methods are more effective in changing behavior than are older methods? Where are the data which demonstrate the relative effectiveness of different methods for different purposes? How great an increase in the size of the audience reached will be required to justify the probably decreased impact on the individual learner? How should the choice be made between exposing large numbers of people to information or working intensively with a smaller number? Is the use of mass media an effective way to facilitate learning with an urban audience?

How valid is the assumption that "traditional" extension methods should be equated with what is done exclusively by the traveling county agent?

Extension Coordination

One of the aspects of the home economics organization in the Land-Grant Colleges examined in the report was the national movement toward a merger of Cooperative and general extension. In this regard the report states that

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

efforts now underway to integrate Cooperative Extension and its agrarian tradition with general university extension deserves the support of home economists and all others interested in raising the technical competence and the general understanding of our people. The activities of Cooperative Extension and general extension should ultimately be combined into one structure, with home economics extension becoming an area of continuing education along with many other subject matter fields now being made accessible to an ever growing number of our citizens.¹⁴

The soundness of such a recommendation would be enhanced by the presentation of evidence that the home economics extension program has improved in those states in which a merger has occurred. On the basis of the data provided, the reader cannot determine if the merger itself is the controlling factor in improving home economics extension. Perhaps the attitude of home economists regarding interdepartmental cooperation is the key element.

If there are improved home economics extension programs in states where the merger has taken place, have these improvements resulted from the new organizational structure, from increases in the number of professional home economics personnel, or from increased budgets which provided additional resources?

Administrative Arrangements in Extension

Another aspect of the administrative arrangements for home economics extension discussed in the report is the relationship between agricultural extension and home economics extension:

The programs of home economics now under the jurisdiction of the schools of agriculture should be freed from this control. They should be given greater opportunity and encouragement to establish relationships with other disciplines in the liberal arts and in the professional and graduate schools. Only by loosening the administrative and structural ties to agriculture will home economics departments be able to reorient themselves away from their limited agrarian purposes toward the broader educational and social needs of a culture which continues to move swiftly away from the conditions of American life existing when home economics came into being.¹⁵

In the absence of correlational data or interview testimony substantiating the claim that the college of agriculture is exerting a restricting influence, the soundness of the recommendation cannot be assessed. Unless there is evidence that efforts of home economists to work with the professional and graduate schools are being ham-

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

pered or resisted by administrators in agricultural colleges, any assumption that a restricting influence is being exerted is poorly supported. The assertion that there is a restriction also presupposes that there is some initiative which is being resisted. No data are presented to support this assertion.

What evidence is there that the directors of Cooperative Extension and the deans of agriculture are opposed to cooperative interdepartmental relationships? What evidence was collected to establish that the home economics departments with the fewest administrative links to the college of agriculture are doing the best job in research, teaching, or extension? Are the 30 institutions which belong to the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges and which maintain a "separate and autonomous unit in home economics" engaging in interdisciplinary activities to a significantly greater extent than the member institutions lacking a "separate and autonomous unit"?

Budget Control

The table of organization of an institution may reflect a number of aspects of the formal organization but it cannot reveal the informal organization. Accordingly, if one naïvely assumes that all human relationships and power differentials within the institution are indicated by the organization chart, then one may be seriously misled concerning the actual pattern of influence. McGrath observed that

only a minority of the state leaders in home economics extension participate in the final determination of the budgets under which they operate. . . . It is clear that regardless of the eventual structure of extension or of modifications in its final support, the administrators of home economics must be given a more decisive note in budget preparation and hence in the allocation of funds.¹⁶

What is the extent of congruence between the formal authority structure and the informal authority structure in the budget process? Are there cases in which it is to the advantage of the home economists and their program to have a director of extension or a dean of agriculture serve as the defender of the home economics budget? What evidence was collected to determine the relationship between the state leader's or department head's official position and any performance variables or size of budget? Without such information any recommendation proposed must be based solely on conjecture.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 120.

A Classical Study of Professional Education

As a perspective for viewing *The Changing Mission of Home Economics* it may be useful to consider the nature of another study conducted 55 years earlier which has had a profound influence on professional education and practice in another field.

Abraham Flexner's study entitled *Medical Education in the United States and Canada*¹⁷ is regarded as the classic study in its field. His investigation covered a two-year period during which time he visited 150 medical schools to collect data. It is said that nearly half of the total number of medical schools in operation at the time he began his study closed before he could get around to visit them. When he began his study there was an oversupply of ill-trained physicians, many of whom were the graduates of medical schools operated as commercial enterprises.

Flexner's frankness in reporting his findings is refreshing for its clarity and brevity. No one could read Flexner's report and have any question about where he stood on his assessment of any of the schools he visited. He reported his facts, offered his evaluation, and gave whatever suggestions he felt were needed to upgrade a school—if he felt it was worth saving.

The following statements taken from his report are directly related to the data he presented. No one need question whether any relationships existed between his data and the conclusions he drew from them. He stated that

Reduction of our 155 medical schools to 31 would deprive of a medical school no section that is now capable of maintaining one. It would threaten no scarcity of physicians until the country's development actually required more than 3500 physicians annually, that is to say, for a generation or two at least.¹⁸

Also, "The foregoing account makes it clear that really satisfactory medical education is not now to be had in Alabama."¹⁹ "The City of Chicago is in respect to medical education the plague spot of the country. . . . With the indubitable connivance of the state board these [licensing] provisions are, and have long been flagrantly violated."²⁰ He further stated that "Wisconsin presents a simple problem: the two Milwaukee schools are without a redeeming feature."²¹

¹⁷ Abraham Flexner, *Medical Education in the United States and Canada*, a report to the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Bulletin No. 4 (New York: The Foundation, 1910).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 319.

Contrasting Approaches

Unlike the Flexner report which is aimed at bringing about change by influencing individual institutions, the report on home economics appears to be directed toward the institutions collectively. A part of the difference may arise from the ways in which data were collected. In the Flexner report all of the evidence was gathered by visits to each institution. In the home economics report, data were collected through mailed questionnaires and visits made by the investigators to 12 institutions considered to be representative of the population of home economics departments and schools in the Land-Grant Colleges and State Universities. Flexner presented his comparative data showing the facts for each institution. In the home economics study no qualitative judgments were made about individual institutions and the absence of data which might reveal institutional weaknesses avoids placing any pressure for reform on the poorer institutions. However, neither study is an example of a sophisticated analysis of data.

The importance of the Flexner study to the field of medicine was not the result of the brilliance of its research design or of the profoundness of the data analysis. Instead, it became known as a landmark study in the field of higher education because of its directness and simplicity and because the evidence presented formed an airtight case for each of the recommendations.

But to point out the Flexner report which had a quantitative base as an example of excellence is not to deny that other forms might be equally as good. A carefully written essay reviewing the development of home economics and identifying the advantages and disadvantages of different structural and procedural arrangements for research, teaching, and extension could be invaluable in aiding professionals to weigh alternative courses of action. Even an essay which poses no solutions but instead stimulates professionals to examine a number of issues they might otherwise overlook could be of significant value.

A Concluding Note

In studying *The Changing Mission of Home Economics* the author of this critique was puzzled by the weak or nonexistent links between the quantitative data and the conclusions and recommendations. Sophisticated researchers in the social sciences have largely abandoned attempting to explain complex behavior as the result of a single cause, yet this report uses only one-factor explanations.

Equally disturbing is the lack of any explanation of the procedures used to insure the validity, reliability, and objectivity of the data.

Home economists will agree with a number of the conclusions presented in the report, but the basis for the agreement is not likely to be a compelling argument based on the data presented. Rather, the agreement is likely to spring from certain pre-conceived notions and value positions which may or may not arise from an empirical data base. Accordingly, those who are in favor of some or all of the recommendations in the report may take comfort in the fact that they were made by an authority in the field of education. On the other hand, those who are seeking to justify the recommendations by the use of empirical data rather than by an appeal to authority would be well advised to seek support elsewhere.

The examination of the changing mission of home economics has not ended with publication of the McGrath Report. Eleven months after *The Changing Mission of Home Economics* was published, the Joint USDA/National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges Extension Study Committee issued its recommendations for the future.²² The fact that the Joint Committee did not cite the McGrath Report or refer to any of its findings may suggest that although the mission of home economics continues to change, *The Changing Mission of Home Economics* is unlikely to be a major factor in giving direction to the process.

²² *A People and a Spirit*, A Report of the Joint USDA/NASULGC Extension Study Committee (Fort Collins, Colorado: Printing and Publications Service, Colorado State University, November, 1968).