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Family & Consumer Sciences and Cooperative Extension in a Diverse World

Abstract

The role of Family & Consumer Sciences (FCS) as a program area in Extension dates back before the Smith Lever Act of 1914. As we celebrate 100 years, reaching a new set of audiences poses a challenge to Extension. These audiences include new Americans, new family structures, urban populations, new occupations, and virtual clients from around the world. This commentary examines the role that FCS will play in the next 100 years to face these challenges.



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A Rich History

Since 1914, with the passage of the Smith-Lever Act, the Cooperative Extension Service has worked toward solutions for social and economic problems for farm families. As we celebrate its 100-year existence, two important considerations warrant attention. First is a critical reflection regarding the impact of the Family & Consumer Sciences (FCS) program and a critical assessment of the changes that have occurred within the traditional nuclear family structure of mother, father, and children. The research literature reveals that within the past two decades common trends of the American family include dual-earner families, single-parent families, childless couples, and blended families (U.S. Census 2012). Extension has adapted to such changes, while its core focus has remained the same "to aid rural [urban] men, women, boys and girls in meeting the ever-changing problems of the

farm, the home and the community and in developing for themselves a more satisfying country life" (as quoted in *The Home Demonstration Agent*, AIB 38 – 1951, U. S. Department of Agriculture, page 1).

The Girl's Tomato Club was an educational demonstration project that required each girl to grow a 10th of an acre of tomatoes and to can them. The success of this project and other farm and home demonstration work allowed for building trust in new home practices that promoted convenient and efficient homemaking (Moore, 2003). As a way to work with adult farm women, the Home Demonstration Clubs were established, and members of these clubs gained social support as well as educational training on how to better their families' living conditions through home improvements and better ways of completing household tasks (Allen, Dunn, & Zaslow, 2011).

The proven success of Girl's Tomato Clubs and Home Demonstration Clubs supported the need to hire home demonstration Extension agents to coordinate the educational programs offered to farm women and girls. The Tomato Clubs, as well as the Corn Clubs for boys, were precursors to today's 4-H Clubs, and the Home Demonstration Clubs evolved to provide information and advice to farm women on vegetable gardening, canning, sewing, cooking, household management, family health, and other aspects of daily life (Moore, 2003).

Home demonstration agents in the South were segregated by race. African-American home demonstration agents were hired to work solely with African-Americans. This was the case with the first federally appointed black home demonstration agent in 1912, Ms. Annie Peters Hunter, of Boley, Oklahoma (Scholl & Finchum, 2012). While the same farm and home demonstrations were taught to African-Americans, the resources needed to fully carry out the demonstrations were limited. The black agents reported to white supervisors and worked within well-established community racial boundaries. Despite the constraints of racism, segregation, limited resources, and poverty, the black home demonstration agents developed and executed programs based on the needs of community (The Home Demonstration Agent, AIB 38 – 1951, U. S. Department of Agriculture). The hiring of agents to work only with African-Americans stopped with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. FCS has a rich history but still faces great demographic challenges in the populations it serves.

The Present Challenges

Diversity

The U.S. population is becoming more diverse, and its growing ethnic groups—the future clients of Extension—are mostly untouched by our programming. The FCS Extension workforce nationwide is very homogeneous in so many markers of diversity. Although at the state level there is a higher proportion of males in the ranks of state specialists, at the county or parish level FCS continues to be almost all women. How can Extension engage ethnic and diverse audiences successfully when our Extension workforce does not represent those groups? For years, Extension has been exploring ways to reach urban and ethnically diverse audiences (Schauber, 2001), and yet we still need to increase our reach to these and other audiences such as those with developmental disabilities.

This challenge is further complicated by the fact that FCS degree programs at four-year universities are not producing sufficient numbers (including males and minorities) to meet the growing demand

for graduates interested in pursuing a career as an FCS secondary teacher (Werhan, 2013) or in Extension. This could change, for example, if we attract and prepare second-generation immigrants to select FCS majors and later consider joining Extension.

Technology

100 years ago, FCS was included in the original Smith-Lever act to recognize that women were an essential part of the farm enterprise and needed to have access to educational resources to advance said enterprises and their families (Scholl, 2013a). Most families did not have access to electricity, running water, indoor plumbing, or telephones. However, they began to rely on FCS and Extension to learn how to adopt innovation and use it to enhance their quality of life.

Advances in science and technology have generated many great and not-so-great outcomes for society. For instance, we now know more about health, nutrition, and financial best practices and how to live a longer life. As a result, FCS developed programs to help people learn how to eat nutritiously and plan their finances to afford to live longer and enjoy new inventions such as cars, indoor plumbing, electricity, and other consumables such as computers, phones, televisions, dishwashers, among others. The negative effects of advances in technology include practices related to some of the same discoveries: fad diets, Internet bullying, consumer fraud, car fatalities, home fires, etc.

What challenged us 100 years ago continues to challenge us today. In broad terms, regardless of discoveries, FCS must face many issues, which remain critical today and will be present in the future. These issues include family economic stability and security; energy and the environment; diversity; consumer fraud and resource management; poor health and chronic diseases; family relations and parenting; and risky behaviors. Several of these issues are found in the archives of the National Extension Association of Family & Consumer Sciences (see <http://www.neafcs.org/naehe-narrative-histories>) and are shown in a review of graduate research productivity in FCS during the last century (Scholl, 2013b).

The prevalence of these issues is such that even if we can fully educate one generation, there will be another generation that will need Extension education and resources to best navigate life, society, technology, and the economy. The holistic and comprehensive way in which FCS approaches these issues will keep Extension educators occupied for another 100 years and beyond.

The Future Response to Challenges

Diversity Response

Let's turn our attention to three strategies for addressing the diversity challenge. First is to attract more ethnic minorities and males into FCS degree programs with the intention of recruiting them to Extension as future specialists and county educators. Second is to increase professional development for Extension personnel to help them develop cultural competencies (Ingram, 2013). Third, because many academic units of FCS around the nation have diversified their portfolio to include education, public health, and kinesiology, among others fields, Extension has an opportunity to diversify its

offerings in the counties and engage other populations who are attracted to these disciplines, as well.

Technology Response

We need to revisit our roots after 100 years and bring back the home demonstration agent concept in a new form and model. Technological advances have created opportunities for FCS to focus once again on a "home" demonstration model to further enhance experiential learning and produce the best life outcomes. Today, the "home" is not necessarily a shelter but rather the places (physical or virtual) where people live, learn, play, and work. Schuster (2013) notes such media-based Extension education could free up program time to focus on experiential learning. Moreover, the use of videos can be quite effective in education and does not demand high levels of technology to produce. The target audience for this "home" demonstration approach may be the baby boomers who are concerned about preserving the highest quality of life and have disposable time and interest in learning by doing. Another target audience includes new Americans starting a new life and adventure that requires the skills and knowledge to ensure success.

A challenge to consider when using technology is the need to increase contact hours in FCS programming to reach the behavioral, community, and economic outcomes we pursue. If people do not come to programs, we need to come to them in innovative ways. Much like FCS educators used trains, wagons, and cars to reach their audiences and conduct demonstrations, now the vehicle of choice may be smart phones and other technologies that use cyberspace. Extension has begun to face this technological challenge through efforts such as eXtension (www.extension.org). State-based operations still have a long way to go because they mostly rely on face-to-face interventions and inconsistent use of social media. Two strategies to deal with this may include the following. First, FCS academic programs must include curricula that educate students on how to use media in the context of their FCS disciplines in the workplace. Second, Extension must invest not only in eXtension but also in preparing the current workforce on how to use media and in the infrastructure that such media-based Extension education will require to be effective.

Conclusion

We need to draw from the rich history of FCS work in Extension and return to a model of "home" demonstration. This model will be possible through the use of cyberspace to recruit audiences, share basic knowledge, and then "demonstrate" how to adopt practices to improve the lives of individuals, families, and communities. In sum, we can take advantage of a technology that is accessible by many diverse individuals and that is becoming more accessible to all income levels. With technology on our side we can then concentrate on the face-to-face experiential education and interaction needed to reach the ultimate goals of FCS and Extension.

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