Within the last decade, many schools and departments of home economics have changed their name to "human ecology," whereas others have become "family and consumer sciences," and still others have remained unchanged. "Human ecology" has tended to be used more in higher education, and "family and consumer sciences," in secondary schools and professional organizations. The name changes are one manifestation of extensive soul searching within home economics, beginning in the late 1970s. At that time, Marjorie Brown and others proposed a reorientation of the curriculum from the traditional emphasis on technical and vocational skills of homemaking toward a critical sciences approach in order to help students learn to think, reflect, and take action through the study of perennial, practical family problems. Forces driving the changes in name and focus include the following: (1) changes in women's roles and family structures; (2) poor image and low priority accorded to home and family in society generally and consequently to the home economics field; (3) desire to increase the field's standing in academia and to recruit and retain students with a more relevant curriculum; (4) the influence of feminist thought, with its emphasis on valuing the family sphere as much as the public sphere; and (5) the trend toward integrated curricula and holistic, connected forms of knowledge. The restructuring in home economic reflects the overall restructuring taking place in many educational institutions. The field of study still retains its focus on the work of the family, however. (Contains an annotated list of 16 references and 3 resource organizations.)

(KC)
Home Economics by Any Other Name
Trends and Issues Alerts

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Home Economics by Any Other Name

Within the last decade, many schools and departments of home economics have changed their name to "human ecology," others have turned to "family and consumer sciences," and still others have remained unchanged. This Alert looks at the impetus behind this trend and some of the issues involved in the re-focusing of home economics curricula.

The word ecology derives from the Greek ἐκολογία (ekologia) -- household, and "human ecology" was considered as a name for the field at the formative Lake Placid Conferences (1898-1908) (Brown 1993). Human ecology has tended to be adopted more in higher education, family and consumer sciences in secondary schools and the major professional associations. In fact, Bailey et al. (1993) define human ecology as an interdisciplinary higher education program concerned with family well-being, human development, human environments, and their interrelationships. The mission of family and consumer sciences (FCS) education is defined by the FCS Division of the American Vocational Association as preparing students for family life, work life, and careers in FCS. "Our unique focus is on families, work, and their interrelationships" (Redick 1995, p. 133).

The name changes are one manifestation of extensive soul searching within home economics, beginning as early as the late 1970s when Marjorie Brown and others proposed a reorientation of the curriculum from the traditional emphasis on technical/vocational skills of homemaking (cooking, sewing, etc.) toward a critical sciences approach: "helping students learn to think, reflect, and take action through the study of perennial, practical family problems" (ibid., p. 134). Home economics (by any name) is thus aligned with the emphasis on critical thinking curriculum in other curricular areas; it is seen as a program to prepare all students for work and family life (Thomas and Smith 1994). Forces driving the changes in name and focus include the following: (1) changes in women's roles and family structures; (2) poor image and low priority accorded to home and family in society generally and consequently to the home economics field; (3) desire to increase the field's standing in the academy and to recruit and retain students with a more relevant curriculum; (4) the influence of feminist thought, which emphasizes that the "Hestian" (private/family/houshold) sphere and its ways of knowing should be valued as the "Hermean" (public) sphere (McGregor 1994); and (5) the trend toward integrated curricula and holistic, connected forms of knowledge.

Brown (1993) asserts that for home economics to adopt "human ecology" as a name for the profession and its subject matter is both presumptuous and illogical and is sometimes motivated only by a concern for image-building" (p. 411). Although the name confusion and struggles over curriculum and professional identity may give the impression of a field in crisis, what is happening in home economics reflects the overall restructuring taking place in many educational institutions. Thompson (1995) suggests that recent pressures on home economics stem from "structural problems in society as a whole" — such as the multiple social problems affecting families — and not from intrinsic defects in the field" (p. 53). Redick (1995) concludes that the name changes are not the essence of what has happened in the field over the past decade, but "one very visible outcome of the substantive changes that have taken place in what was once known almost universally as home economics. One thing, however, has not changed: this field of study still retains its focus on the work of the family" (p. 148).

Print Resources


Suggests what human ecology programs must do in order to survive the restructuring of higher education institutions and to further the mission of the field.


This critical analysis of the history of the profession and its philosophical bases examines home economics as a practical field, professional community, interdisciplinary field, and as human ecology.


Analyzes reasons for the name changes in home economics and their effect on the perception of the field from within and without.

Dykman, A. "Out of the Frying Pan . . . and into the 90s." *Vocational Education Journal* 68, no. 3 (March 1993): 24-27, 45. (EJ 458 702)

The "new" home economics focuses on combating sex stereotypes, developing living skills such as balancing work and family, integrating academic and vocational skills, encouraging male enrollment, and helping students deal with serious social problems.


Reports on the American Home Economics Association's 1993 survey of higher education home economics units, documenting changes in names, enrollment trends, and responses to institutional restructuring.
Recent role changes, especially those of women, necessitate a restructuring of home economics. Retaining its family focus, it should emphasize the roles of all family members, quality of life, and the social relevance of family issues and family life education.

Home economics has been ignored in recent educational reform efforts, although its curriculum fulfills many frequently mentioned reform objectives: critical thinking, understanding of human experience, preparation for work, communication skills, active participation, contextuality, and moral reasoning.

The Hestian (private/household/family) sphere lacks power and is not valued. The field of home economics should strive to influence policy and assert the value of Hestian skills and caring and connection.

Interviews with 10 family and consumer science teachers revealed that curriculum change was an experience of discontinuous ways of knowing. In practice, teachers often based content on a technical view of home economics and reported change as both an intellectual and an emotional experience.

Discusses the emergence of a philosophical base for family and consumer sciences and reports on the movement toward a process-oriented curriculum that emphasizes critical thinking and practical problem solving focused on the family.

Gives an overview of the development of home economics in higher education and describes one university's revision of its core curriculum.

A survey of Canadian home economics teachers found considerable support for a global perspective. Results indicate that home economics should not jump on the bandwagon, but relate global issues to its central focus on the family and on critical thinking/practical reasoning.

Examines the educational ideals explicit in Marjorie Brown's conception of home economics education and describes the necessary dispositions and attributes in light of contemporary critiques in education.

Thompson, P. J. "Reconceptualizing the Private/Public Spheres." *Canadian Home Economics Journal* 45, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 53-57. (EJ 504432)
Recasts home economics using systems theory, social construction, and feminist principles in terms of private/public (Hestian/Herman) space. Suggests that this framework provides a gendered vocabulary with which to look at family and state as interacting, self-regulating systems.

It is not gender that differentiates home economics, but the Hestian principles it addresses. Rather than name changes, home economics needs descriptive and explanatory theory that supports its reason for being.

Discusses the complex character of everyday life as the deep ecology of home economics/human ecology. Explores the meanings of ecology and the ways in which diversity and harmony are interrelated companions of dynamic living systems.

**Resource Organizations**

American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences, 1555 King Street, Alexandria, VA 22314 (703/760-4600; fax: 703/706-HOME)

Family and Consumer Sciences Division, American Vocational Association, 1410 King Street, Alexandria, VA 22314 (800/826-9972; fax: 703/683-7424; Internet: anvocass@m.aol.com)

Family and Consumer Sciences Education Association, College of Professional Studies, Central Washington University, Ellensburg, WA 98926 (509/963-2304 or 963-2766; fax: 509/963-2787)

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