MEETING THE FUTURE NEED FOR FAMILY AND CONSUMER SCIENCE EDUCATORS IN CONNECTICUT

Nancy H. Bull, University of Connecticut
Janice Uerz, Manchester Public Schools
Joyce Yoakum, Bridgeport Public Schools

The shortage of practicing family and consumer science teachers (FCS) and the lack of a teacher preparation program in Connecticut have created a growing crisis. During the next 15 years, 77% of the family and consumer science (FCS) workforce in Connecticut will retire. During 1996-97, 1,772 students were turned away from FCS K-12 programs due to a lack of certified teachers. Is there a future for the 78,315 K-12 Family and Consumer Science students in the state? A survey of 312 middle and secondary school educators representing 192 schools provided baseline data for discussions with the University of Connecticut. A coordinated and collaborative effort was used to build linkages and to involve multiple partners to develop a FCS teacher education program. The synergy is building with the anticipation that a teacher education program will be in place soon.

The challenges for higher education are complex and range from leading academic transformation to responding to stakeholder needs (Penney, 1996). The 1996 American Association for Family and Consumer Science (AAFCS) resolution, which identified the shortage of teachers, became the catalyst for the Connecticut Affiliate to examine the current situation, develop new partnerships, and work to implement change.

Units at the University of Connecticut, relevant to this issue, include the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, which houses Nutritional Science and the School of Family Studies which focuses on human development and family relations. The University's School of Education had closed their home economics teacher education program in the late 1980s. The University's strategic plan called for a University program review needs assessment and evaluation process to include interdisciplinary programs. The strategic plan became the impetus for working across the University to build new partnerships. What is the future need for family and consumer science teachers and what should be the University's response to this need?

This situation is not unique. Since the Family and Consumer Science (FCS) profession has the unique focus of being the only profession exclusively focused on solving problems of the family in the context of a family, the Connecticut Affiliate needed to make its case to the University administration. The acting dean of the School of Family Studies requested that the Connecticut Affiliate of AAFCS work to establish baseline data to justify the need for FCS teacher education. A review of literature provided the basis.

Review of Literature

Schultz (1994) found that in recent years, the focus of consumer and homemaking programs had shifted to an increased emphasis in the areas of family relations and child development. The complexity of family issues with which teachers deal means that additional family life education would be required during teacher preparation.

Teacher attrition, age, and teacher involvement in recruitment affect the workforce demographics. Shen (1997) found that attrition was more prevalent early in the career and that regardless of race, teachers in urban districts had shorter teaching careers. The attrition rate was higher for young teachers during the early stages of the career and high again for older teachers approaching retirement. Secondary level teachers left the profession sooner than did elementary level teachers.

Rehm and Jackman (1995) found that the decline in home economics majors in higher education institutions did not parallel an equivalent decline in teaching positions. This critical need for teachers challenged the profession to reverse the trend. Teacher involvement in student recruitment was crucial to secondary students choosing family and consumer science careers. Hall and Miller (1989) found that if the supply of educators did not meet the demand for the program, the K-12 FCS program was often eliminated.

A study by Miller and Meszaros (1996) reported Connecticut had an undergraduate enrollment of three students with no data reported for a five-year forecast. In this same study, Maryland projected 95% of the state's new hires in FCS would come from out-of-state, and that 65% of the FCS workforce in Michigan would retire in the next five years. The authors projected that, in the next five years, 77% of all family and consumer science teaching positions could not be filled.

Home economics has historically been perceived as an integrated discipline (Collins, 1994). Bailey, Firebaugh, Haley, and Nickols (1993) reported that in order to survive in today's higher education environment, family and consumer science programs must contribute to the knowledge base, provide high quality instruction, attract outside resources, receive a fair share of university resources, and contribute to both the quality of life and the state's economic development.

In a study of baccalaureate degrees awarded in 1991-92 and in 1992-93, only two institutions (Texas Tech and Iowa State) awarded more than 20 degrees, with the University of Connecticut, one of seven institutions which awarded no degrees (Rehm and Jackman, 1995).

The School of Family Studies at the University of Connecticut and a home economics program at St. Joseph's College were the only two FCS programs in the state. The University of Massachusetts had a consumer science program without teacher education, and Framingham State (MA) prepared FCS teachers. The State of Connecticut required a Masters' degree prior to the completion of ten years of teaching. If a degree in FCS teacher education was not possible, what were the options? Would a graduate degree be an option? Were there certified teachers who would be interested in changing their area of emphasis to FCS?

Methodology

Beginning in July 1996, a small group of concerned FCS professionals, appointed by the AAFCS Connecticut Affiliate president, met to discuss the possibility of re-initiating a FCS teacher education program. The discussion focused on concerns identified by AAFCS for the nationwide teacher shortage and the need for advanced training of the current workforce. Other concerns were the fact that FCS courses were being taught by teachers not certified in the area and lack of understanding of K-12 administrators of the requirements for FCS certification.

A meeting was held with the acting dean of the School of Family Studies to discuss the current FCS teacher shortage in K-12 and the University's priorities. The dean requested that the group conduct a survey to answer the following four questions:

1. What is the profile of the current Family and Consumer Science programs in the state in regards to courses offered, student enrollment, and characteristics of the current workforce?
2. What is the anticipated future profile of the FCS K-12 teaching workforce?
3. What professional development opportunities would be of interest to FCS teachers?
4. What strategies is a current FCS professional willing to employ to contribute to the development of a teacher preparation program?

A two-part instrument was developed and pilot tested. The first section, which assessed the current course offerings and the grade levels at which the courses were taught, was to be completed by the FCS department facilitator, chair, or teacher. The second section was to be completed by all FCS professionals and focused on the length of time they had taught, retirement issues, educational opportunities of interest, and AAFCS membership status. A drawing for two free state conference registrations was added as an incentive for a timely response.

The survey was funded by the Affiliate and was compiled for mailing by the retiree members. Using the State Department of Education's mailing list, the first mailing of the survey packet, including a cover letter, was sent to 248 schools. With a 60% response rate, a second mailing was sent to 98 non-respondents. The second mailing increased the response rate to 77% with a total of 312 individual teachers responding.

Ninety-three percent (n=312) of respondents were K-12 teachers. Of that number, 310 (92.5%) were currently teaching. Eight respondents (2.3%) were employed by the Cooperative Extension System, fourteen (4.2%) were employed in the business sector and one individual (<1%) was associated with teacher education at the university level. More than one-third of the respondents were members of AAFCS and 27.2% of respondents were interested in joining the Association.

Schools offering FCS programs during the 1996-97 school year included 18 elementary schools, 161 middle schools, 60 junior high schools and 156 senior high schools for a total of 192 schools responding. The FCS programs currently being offered in the K-12 school system included nutrition and food (197 courses taught in the state), fashion and textile technology (151), child development (148), family life (124), personal management (120), and living environment (58).

Courses offered only at the high school level included child care (51), early childhood (49), food service/culinary arts (42), food service management (37), family and human services (16), fashion and textile products and services (12), and other (19). The other category included consumerism, home planning, independent living, parenting, careers in home economics, and health occupations.

For the 1995-96 school year, there were a total of 74,412 students enrolled in a FCS class or program. For the 1996-97 school year, the number of students enrolled increased 5%. For the 1995-96 school year, a total of 1,613 students in the state were turned away from a FCS program for a lack of qualified teachers. In the 1996-97 school year, a total of 1,772 students were reported to have been turned away.

There were 307 people teaching FCS with 16 vacancies identified from the previous school year (1995-96). There were 16 positions filled during the 1996-97 school year with 3 (19%) non-certified teachers hired. A total of 45 people were identified who were interested in FCS certification.

Fifteen percent of the current workforce planned to retire in the next five years with an additional 29.5% retiring within ten years. By the year 2012, over 77% of the current workforce would retire.

When asked to identify strategies for maintaining the FCS workforce, 32% identified support for a FCS teacher education program, 14% identified a willingness to recruit students for teacher education, and 11.2% were willing to develop FCS recruitment and marketing materials. Seventy-seven percent of the respondents were interested in in-service workshops of which 37.2% were interested in credit courses and 28.2% in non-credit courses. FCS teachers recognized the loss of student teachers to both infuse the current teachers with new ideas and to support the heavy teaching load of the current workforce.

Next Steps

By the time the base line data were established, there were new deans in the School of Family Studies and the School of Education. An Alumni Society for the School of Family Studies was also initiated. This group appointed a committee to work on the teacher certification problem as well. A new state supervisor for FCS provided another new partner.

The results of the survey process provided a strong indication of the need for teacher preparation. The Alumni Society worked with the Family Studies dean to conduct a workshop for FCS teachers and Family Studies faculty members. This forum provided the basis for discussion on how home economics education had evolved into a strong orientation on family and child development and on food and nutrition. Convincing the faculty members of how far the profession had evolved in the last 15 years provided the impetus to take the next step.

The survey of FCS teachers was the first step in an on-going process to create a partnership with the University of Connecticut. The Family Studies Alumni Society has continued the conversation with the School and with Nutritional Science in the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources. Since July 2000 one person has been focused on working through the details for a combined baccalaureate and master's degree program leading to certification. Financial support is needed for a teacher educator position. The synergy is building with the anticipation that a teacher education program will be in place soon. We can only hope it is not too late to impact the future of the FCS profession within the state.

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About the Authors

Nancy H. Bull, Ph.D., is an Associate Dean at the University of Connecticut, Janice Uerz, works with the Manchester Public Schools, in Vernon, Connecticut, and Joyce Yoakum, Ph.D. is a Supervisor for Bridgeport Public Schools in Cromwell, Connecticut.

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