Family and consumer sciences (FCS)—previously and widely known as home economics—has been about science, technology, engineering and math since long before STEM was an acronym. Add skills like the basics of clothing and interior design, and FCS becomes a STEAM discipline with an “A” for art.

No matter what you call it, 2019 marked the year that Utah State University has been preparing future secondary school teachers to teach important skills for daily living for 100 years. While the field has been around for more than a century, the ways in which skills are taught and the topics FCS covers have evolved to reflect the times. One change in USU’s program came in 2003, when its academic home, the College of Family Life, was disbanded and FCS education moved to the College of Agriculture. It is one of the degrees that put the “applied sciences” in the College of Agriculture and Applied Sciences.

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If there is one thing faculty in the program want people to recognize it’s that FCS is more than just still here after all these years, it is a vibrant, adaptable, and important field that applies to everyone’s life. After all, every scientist, engineer, business owner, salesperson, musician (fill in the occupation of your choice) eats, deals with personal and family finances, shops for and lives in some sort of housing, navigates personal relationships, and wears clothes.

Principal Lecturer Julie Wheeler is no longer surprised when new acquaintances look puzzled when she says she teaches family and consumer sciences, so she usual clarifies by adding, “Home ec.” She is accustomed to people asking, “Do they still teach that stuff?” and responds with, (or, at least, feels like responding) with a question of her own: “Do you have a mortgage, wear clothes, eat, organize your home, and manage family relationships? Of course we still teach these skills!”

The thing is that exactly what is taught and how it’s taught are changing all the time. “I’ve taught some of the same courses here probably 50 times, but I’ve never taught the same class twice,” Wheeler said. “And we tell our students that if they’re not willing to keep up with changes and adapt to new methods, don’t be a teacher because it won’t be fair to your students.”

Whether middle and high schools call the courses FCS, home economics—or, in some recent cases, adulting—the topics fall into categories of food and nutrition, clothing and textiles, consumerism and financial literacy, interior design and housing, and family and human development, and each of those areas are comprised of hundreds of subtopics and learning modules. Programs are reviewed every three years to determine what changes will be made to keep the curriculum relevant to how students and their families live.

For example, in a junior or high school foods class, there will be cooking and also lessons about safe food handling and nutrition. Lab days may mean following recipes to create dishes from scratch, perhaps using math
to scale quantities up or down, and learning basic food preparation and cooking techniques that people have used for generations. A lab may also aim to give students experiences like transforming a cake mix or can of biscuit dough into something beyond their standard package directions.

“There is room for both approaches,” Wheeler said. “If all you teach is how to cook from scratch, and then your students go home and there is no from-scratch cooking or ingredients there, they are in a bad spot. But if their classes help them get past the feeling that they can’t cook, then they are more likely to try.”

Because most FCS classes focus on hands-on learning, not just “paper and pencil” exercises, Wheeler finds they are great opportunities for her students to learn and then teach creative problem solving.

“We teach problem solving skills in many ways,” Wheeler said. “If they make a mistake in a project, it’s okay, and we’ll talk about how they might fix it. You damage your pants, let’s figure out how you can repair them.”

Learning to make things work and problem solve is also an important skill in financial literacy and consumer education. Professor Lucy Delgadillo explained that may mean learning to make a spending plan that brings a personal or family budget into balance, or doing the internal work of coming to understand how your emotions and life experiences shape the way you feel about money.

“My field is fascinating and changing,” Delgadillo said. “It’s not just that the economy changes, but even the way we teach personal finance has changed and we respond better to the needs people have now.”

A big shift in how financial literacy is taught has happened just in the past decade. It’s no longer just about budgets or how and why to have bank accounts. It recognizes that money management is not a one-approach-fits-all topic, that how you feel about the money you have is as important as the amount of money you have.

“Economists and others involved in financial literacy recognized around 2010 that cognitive knowledge about finances is necessary, but not sufficient.” she said. “Basically, I don’t do any good by just teaching you to have a savings account or a checking account and about being part of the financial system but ignore that people are emotionally driven, that they have biases and have developed ‘money scripts’ about how they feel about money.”

It is certainly simpler to measure cognitive knowledge than sort out feelings about money: give a pretest on knowledge of some aspect of money management, teach new concepts, and give another test to measure the change in knowledge. Done. But if knowledge alone was enough to change behavior, nearly everyone would eat well, exercise regularly, and never go into bankruptcy. Helping young people identify their emotional biases and money scripts, and recognize that others have their own as well, prepares them to make better financial choices.

“We teach people to recognize their decision-making processes and tolerance for risk taking,” Delgadillo said. “Junior high and high school students are largely at stages of development where they are not looking at the big picture and how actions will impact the future. That’s why it is important to teach affective parts of handling money. Some content may not seem relevant to them and they think ‘Why are you teaching me about retirement saving? Are you crazy? I’m 17 years old.’ But we can teach them to recognize their emotions and identify their triggers.”

For example, someone may learn to recognize that they want to shop when they are sad, or shop as celebration, and when they are especially happy. They may recognize that certain events, like Black Friday, make them feel they should spend money and learn to use strategies to avoid overspending, such as setting a spending limit and using only that amount of cash, no credit or debit cards, so they have a physical reminder of how much they have spent.

USU students pursuing many different majors take some FCS classes either as general credits, their
own interests, or for their degrees. Textiles, clothing design and construction classes are currently filled with students pursuing degrees in outdoor product design and development who are learning to draft patterns, understand different materials, and use home and industrial sewing machines. But the education components of family and consumer sciences education are as important as the skill they plan to teach. Courses in curriculum development, classroom management, and teaching methods round out students' degree programs and make USU's FCS education graduates highly sought after teachers. Wheeler said among FCS educators across the country, Utah is considered a state with outstanding school programs. Districts looking to fill teaching positions frequently contact USU's department hoping to employ its graduates.

Wheeler said incoming students sometimes have the idea that when they graduate and become teachers they will be able to just choose to teach the things they like best. They learn in a hurry that state and national standards for curriculum and learning outcomes direct what they teach, though teachers have a lot of creative control over how subjects are taught and opportunities to tailor programs to local needs.

Over the years, students have sometimes left the program because they didn’t want to teach the whole range of courses FCS teachers must cover, or discovered during classroom experiences in public schools that they don’t want to teach school after all.

“Students may have had a great teacher and think they want to become teachers too, but they are usually naïve about what it is that really teachers do,” Wheeler said.

A recent change in USU’s FCS education program is the option of a degree that doesn’t focus on teaching secondary school. Instead, students may use their skills to become community-based educators, perhaps working in Extension programs or in other careers that could include humanitarian work or turning an interest into a small business. Students in the program do two internships rather than traditional student teaching, and those experiences help them explore or create career options. For example, one student decided that her goal is to have a catering business, and she arranged an internship with a wedding planner. An introductory course now helps students see career possibilities that may include teaching cooking skills to adult learners or providing services to people in the growing population of senior citizens.

The program may have started 100 years ago and made many changes, but at its core, FSC could always have been summed up with a modern phrase: It has always been about helping people live their best lives.

Additional content

Women of USU: Then and Now Home Economics, by Abby Marlett and Katie Brown