

Futuring for Families Think Tank: Reflections on the National Extension Family Science Specialists' Preconference

Caroline E. Crocoll, National Program Leader-Family Science, USDA-CSREES,
Washington, D.C., ccrocoll@csrees.uda.gov

Brent Elrod, Program Specialist-Family Science, USDA, CSREES, Washington, D.C.
belrod@csrees.uda.gov

Jane Schuchardt, National Program Leader-Economic and Community Systems, USDA-
CSREES, Washington, D.C., jschuchardt@csrees.uda.gov

Joseph L. Wysocki, National Program Leader-Housing and Indoor Environments,
USDA- CSREES, Washington, D.C., jwysocki@csrees.uda.gov

National Program Leaders (NPLs) working in Family and Consumer Science (FCS) disciplines at the United States Department of Agriculture's Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service (USDA-CSREES) have an ongoing interest in networking and collaborating with land-grant university partners and other stakeholders to identify relevant problems, opportunities, and issues requiring federal attention and support. CSREES places a high value on interdisciplinary FCS programming to address the many and complex problems facing the nation's families from an ecological or systems perspective.

In July 2007, CSREES NPLs in Family Economics, Family Science, and Housing and Indoor Environments hosted a "Futuring for Families" (FFF) Think Tank in Atlanta, Georgia to:

- Understand the benefits of addressing family issues from an interdisciplinary perspective;
- Gain exposure to integrated Extension programs with potential for national reach;
- Frame priorities for program leadership at the national, state and local levels.

The think tank was held as a preconference to the National Extension Family Science Specialists' Biennial Conference. Hosted by the College of Family and Consumer Sciences at the University of Georgia, specialists and administrators from all FCS disciplines were invited to attend. FFF attendance included 61 Family Science Specialists, eighteen Administrators, six Housing Specialists, five Family Economists, two Nutrition Specialists, and one Health Specialist. NPLs and administrators from CSREES' Families, 4-H, and Nutrition; Economic and Community Systems; and Plant and Animal Systems units also participated.

Prior to the FFF event, prospective attendees were surveyed about the challenges they foresaw confronting the FCS field over the next decade.

Top Issues (grouped where appropriate)	
1	Financial Security/Literacy Including Home Affordability
2	Health/Obesity
3	Relationships (Couple, Marriage, Parent-Child)
4	Aging and Caregiving

At the event opening, attendees heard presentations on how these high-priority concerns can be addressed using an integrated, collaborative approach. Extension practices and models applying interdisciplinary approaches to address family challenges were featured as examples.

System partners then assisted in facilitating the FFF event, with discussions and group consensus captured in graphic recordings by Visual Logic of Atlanta. This article synthesizes the results of the FFF process, links to graphic recordings, and provides a matrix of programs that serve as examples of successful integrated programs in the System.

Framework

In establishing a framework for the FFF event, three types of program integration were defined: multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary. Each term is often used interchangeably to describe collaborations without clearly distinguishing among them. Using Derry and Fischer's (2006) definitions to clarify meaning, the terms were described to participants as follows:

- **Multidisciplinary:** loose cooperative interaction among scholars of different disciplines.
- **Interdisciplinary:** problem solving in which there is cross-disciplinary learning and intensive blending of ideas from disciplines.
- **Transdisciplinary:** collaborations that transcend specific disciplines to define new knowledge in between and at the borders of disciplines.

Using these definitions, FFF attendees were encouraged to identify the emerging trends or challenges facing families and the type(s) of integrated approach(es) that would prove most effective in strengthening families and enhancing quality of life.

Discussion

Emerging trends and challenges in family life were captured in a "[Most Important Trends](#)" diagram and included:

- Early childhood, childcare
- Youth education and development
- Aging
- Health, obesity
- Debt, poverty, workforce
- Immigration, culture

Attendees then considered how the challenges might be addressed in the next decade using collaborative approaches. The resulting diagram, "[World of FCS Extension in 2017](#)," illustrates the group's collective thinking. Further distilled, successful interdisciplinary strategies across FCS might be benchmarked against how well they embrace the *'R's for the 21st Century: Reach, Rhythm, and Relevance*.

- **Reach:** Reach employs new and improved technologies, offering cross-training and professional development opportunities that drive an inclusive, multi-generational Extension workforce. Reach embraces and reflects diversity across background, language, and culture, providing avenues for Extension and collaborators to connect with new and harder-to-reach audiences.
- **Rhythm:** In rhythm with the dynamic needs of families and communities, trends are foreseen and challenges proactively addressed. High quality, multi-media educational programs engage the "whole" family. When crises arise, Extension mobilizes pre-established rapid response partnerships that restore balance more quickly. These EFTs (Extension Family Teams) are as integral to community planning as EMTs.
- **Relevance:** Building on core strengths and Extension's long and rich history, evidenced-based practices developed using interdisciplinary approaches may produce significant breakthroughs, such as blended funding streams and incentives to increase program participation, wide replication of high impact program models, and reduction of duplicative services and costs.

A fourth 'R', "risk," is the catalyst that makes the envisioned results achievable in the next ten years. Risk is weighted on the belief that programs can be developed and delivered differently, tailored, nuanced, and scaled appropriately. Purposeful interdisciplinary collaboration and theoretical understanding informs that risk. Consider the following program example that demonstrates the payoff using an interdisciplinary approach.

Program Highlight

Small Steps to Health and Wealth™ motivates consumers to implement behavior change strategies that simultaneously improve their health *and* personal finances. Applying an interdisciplinary approach, the program developers looked beyond the specific challenges of health and finance to discover human behaviors, that when modified, could positively influence outcomes across both domains. The resulting program materials encourage incremental behavioral change in a person's physical and financial well-being.

Citing additional program examples, a matrix was created to further illustrate how interdisciplinary Extension programming currently benefits families. These program examples address two or more areas of concern for positive individual and family functioning (health, housing, finances, nutrition, and relationships). Each intersecting box

within the matrix lists examples of what learners will know or achieve after engaging in Extension education.

Table 1. Examples of interdisciplinary Extension programs for families.

	Health	Housing	Finances	Nutrition	Relationships
Small Steps to Health and Wealth™ http://www.extension.org/pages/SmallStepsToHealthandWealth	X		X	X	
Powerful Tools for Caregiving http://www.legacyhealth.org/body.cfm?id=769	X	X	X	X	X
Strengthening Families Program for Children and Youth 10-14 http://www.extension.iastate.edu/sfp/	X	X	X		X
Healthy Homes www.healthyhomespartnership.net	X	X	X	X	X
Extension Disaster Education Network (EDEN) www.eden.lsu.edu	X	X	X	X	X
Homebuyer Education http://www.fcs.uga.edu/ext/housing/homebuyer.php		X	X		X

Conclusion

During the Futuring for Families Think Tank, progress was made in framing current and future family challenges from an interdisciplinary perspective, and the role Extension can take in helping meet such challenges. An intentional process of questioning and reflection by FFF participants and National Program Leaders identified how the System is well-positioned to seek out and apply interdisciplinary approaches. This article synthesizes the results of the FFF process, links to graphic recordings, and provides a matrix of programs that serve as examples of successful interdisciplinary programs in the Land-Grant University System.

References

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Abstract

This article reports CSREES National Program Leaders' reflections on the process and outcomes of the 2007 Futuring for Families Think Tank. Specialists and administrators in Family and Consumer Sciences used the think tank to share innovative interdisciplinary strategies proven successful in addressing contemporary and emerging family and social concerns. In addressing family issues in the future, these approaches are recommended as a way of enhancing impact and maximizing limited resources. Graphic recordings and a matrix of programs from the meeting demonstrate how interdisciplinary approaches produce outcomes that help family members enhance the quality of their lives.