

AAFCS Credentialing: Quality Support for Quality Families*

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In our everyday lives we get advice from all directions on how to raise our children or how to take care of our elderly parents or how to increase the quality of the relationship with our spouse. Talk shows on television, magazine columns or countless friends and relatives are only too eager to lend an ear and offer a suggestion. How do we know what advice to listen to and how do we know whether the person giving the advice is qualified as a family professional?

This question is a difficult one simply because we all have had experiences in families and thus usually have an opinion. The personal experience of others is often actually helpful but we should be always a bit wary. With an ever-increasing amount of information, we need a guide to sort out fact from

fiction from fantasy. In the more extreme cases for which therapeutic intervention is needed, we have licenses covering the qualifications of psychologists, psychiatrists and even marriage and family therapists. But the bulk of the information needed by families is demanded well before the onset of any clinical diagnosis. So how do we assure families they are getting the right information from the right people at the right time? How can we know if the information being put forward is based in the latest research and is applicable to the real problems of real people in real time?

Questions asked by families are usually not simple; rather they reflect the complex interactions of everyday life. Childrearing connects to nutrition, which connects to financial management, which

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connects to living situation and values. Design changes in a home will alter the dynamics of family interactions, and thus parenting, and perhaps resource management. So how do families prepare for the flood of information and sort out the reliable and research-based from the exceptional and anecdotal?

About a decade ago the American Association for Family and Consumer Sciences recognized the need to certify to the public the credentials of professionals in the field. The certification process provides assurance that these professionals have the skills needed to help individuals and families in decisions about their health, relationships and family financial issues. This focus has led to the development of the AAFCS Certification program. This program not only assures that beginning professionals are competent but also requires ongoing professional development throughout a career, assuring continued competence.

As cited on the AAFCS website (www.aafcs.org), certification is based on individual mastery of the knowledge common and essential to all family and consumer sciences professionals. It also requires a minimum of a baccalaureate degree and successful completion of the National Family and Consumer Sciences Examination.

The certification program is designed:

- To assure the public that credentialed family and consumer sciences professionals have attained a threshold level of knowledge;
- To foster excellence in the profession and develop criteria for assessing such excellence; and
- To promote professional growth of individuals by encouraging a systematic program of continuing education.

To touch on the impact of certification, I want to focus on three ideas. First, we need to address why

this integrated application-in-context approach is so important. We do this in light of recent conceptualizations about the evolving role of universities and our understanding of human development. Then I will focus on examples of how certified professionals apply these principles working in community-based programs. Finally, I will provide some examples of how certified and licensed professionals in public secondary schools are working to strengthen families.

Most students completing the certification requirements not only have the interdisciplinary content background but also have gained knowledge and experience in communicating that knowledge to others. So far most professionals who have sought this credentialing are involved in either extension (community-based youth and adult education) or secondary family and consumer science or home economics programs in high schools. As such, they not only have expertise in the interdisciplinary aspect of ecological theory but they also have expertise in understanding the teacher-learner relationship in an applied setting. They know what to teach and how to teach it.

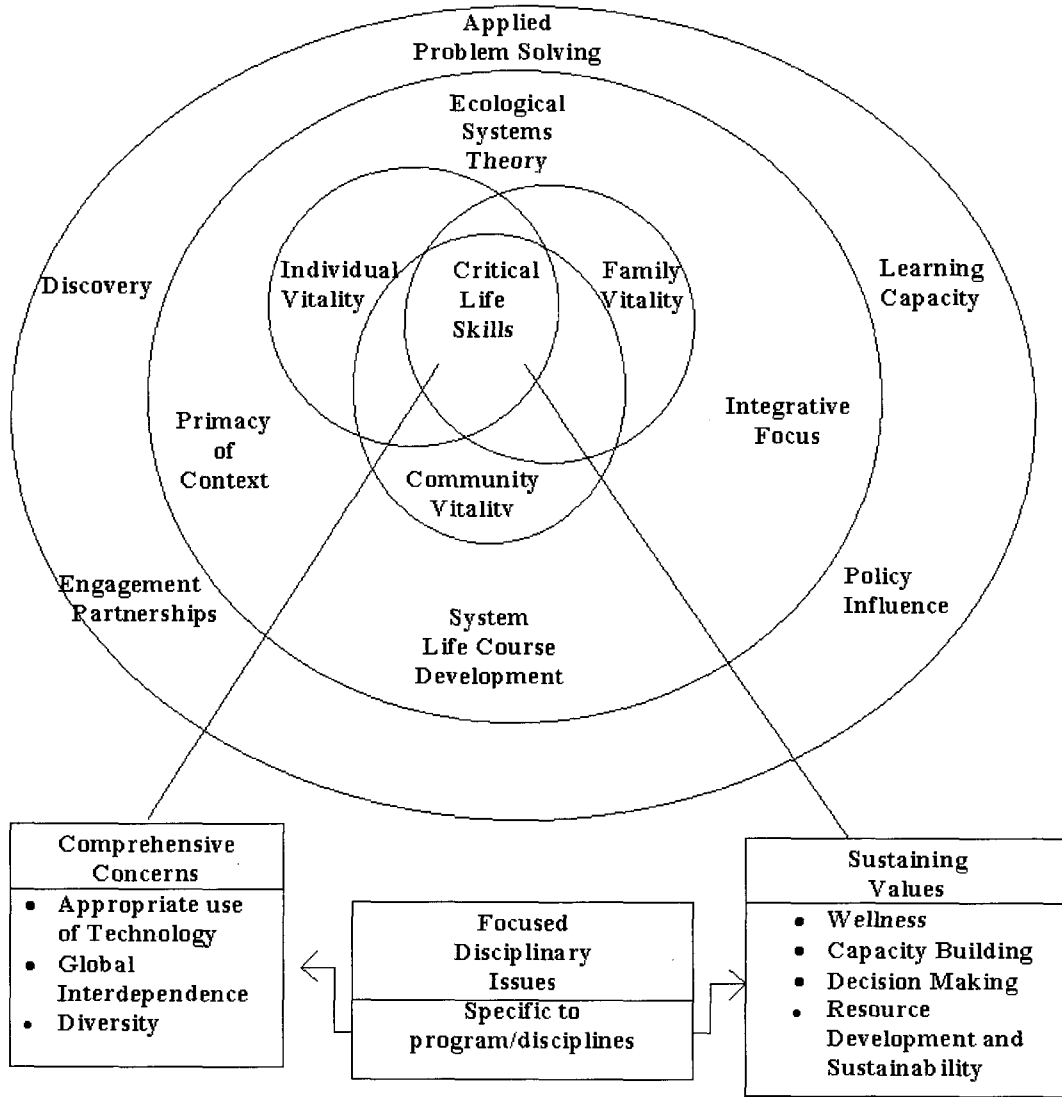
Examination questions are rooted in the AAFCS body of knowledge (Anderson & Nickols, 2001; Baugher, et al, 2000) assuring attention to ecological systems perspective.

An adaptation of that model is included in Figure 1. The questions also reflect the concepts contained in the AAFCS accreditation documents (Council for Accreditation, 2001). Over the past decade these have begun to include more and more process skills. These concepts include:

- Understanding of the interaction and interrelatedness of individuals, families, consumers and communities;
- Understanding the dynamics of capacity building of individuals within context;

Human Ecology Conceptual Model

Conceptual Framework



- Applying knowledge in the environment in which individuals, families, consumers, and communities function;

- Integrating concepts of global interdependence;
- Understanding and applying appropriate technologies;

- Understanding the impact of resource development and sustainability (pp.49-50).

I. Theoretical Considerations

Our intent is that certified professionals understand how to build "developmental assets" and construct communities to foster development. The concept of developmental assets and applied developmental science are recent theoretical conceptualizations quite compatible with the human ecological tradition of home economics/ family and consumer sciences and of public health. The developmental assets position focuses on identifying sets of environmental and intrapersonal strengths known to enhance the educational and health outcomes for children and adolescents. Community settings that foster or hinder such growth are critical to that analysis (Benson, 2003).

Rich Lerner has argued that core knowledge in the discipline "must be integrated with knowledge of (a) the context surrounding it and (b) the relation between knowledge and context" (Lerner, Wertlieb, & Jacob, 2003, p. 12). For Lerner, development must be understood as a process of "systemic change in the multiple and integrated levels of organization comprising human life and its ecology (ranging from biology to culture and history)" (p. 7). Content without context is not knowledge.

To incorporate these theoretical perspectives, the AAFCS revised the scope of its focus to include not just individuals and families but also communities. This perspective is now reflected in the body of knowledge and our current focus on "bringing people together to improve the lives of individuals, families and communities". As Meszaros (2003) points out, such an approach embodies the history of home economics/ family and consumer sciences

and is not so much a "new" idea but rather a clear articulation of the contextual basis of the field.

On the other hand, we need to recognize that the skills required for accomplishing this task involve both content and process. Simply expecting disciplinary expertise is not enough for today's professional. Certified professionals should be prepared to work within the complex context of the lives of families with an understanding of the constraints and opportunities within communities. Knowledge is gained through practical experiences.

II. Extension Programs

Graham Spanier, current President of Penn State and a family scientist, has argued that our universities' contribution to national economic development is rooted in the "well-established commitment to the development of individuals, communities, and families and youth on which to build a stronger future for society" (Spanier & Crowe, 1998, p. 75). The Extension Service has been one of the primary vehicles to bring the university to the community in the United States. The Extension Service works at the local level with governments, community leaders, families, and individuals to help improve people's lives.

Extension is engaged in a broad range of educational programs for the community including community resource development, nutrition, health, family issues, and youth development. In the United States these programs are under the sponsorship of the U.S. Department of Agriculture in conjunction with individual state and local community support. The Family and Consumer Science Extension and the 4-H programs for youth bring interdisciplinary education directly to youth and families. Developing healthy families is one of

the key goals for extension and the certification credential is often used as one of the key criteria for hiring extension personnel.

A sample of the publications from Tennessee Extension will give you some sense of the nature of these programs. These publications, available online and free to the public, include *Building Positive Relationships*, *Strengthening Your Marriage*, *Challenge of Being a Parent*, and *Enjoying Each Child*. The mission of 4-H in Tennessee, for example, is to provide research-based extension educational experiences that will stimulate young people to gain knowledge, develop life skills, and form positive attitudes to prepare them to become capable, responsible and compassionate adults. These programs are designed to impact the range of behaviors and skills identified as essential for adult success. Certified professionals have the skills to bring these programs to life.

Additional skill requirements seem to be emerging. Recently we have seen a trend for professionals to be asked to work with other groups to deliver more effective programs to youth and families. Marilyn Swierk (2003) points out that effective programs are those that involve partnerships extending beyond the classroom. The expected competencies of professionals working with families must include the ability to network and work in teams with various partners such as local schools or health departments. In Tennessee, as one example, we are partnering with local health departments and pharmacies on poison control. Information about some of the Tennessee programs can be found at the following URLs:

- (a) utextension.tennessee.edu/topics/FamilyIssues
and
- (b) www.utextension.utk.edu/4H.

III. School Programs

The focus on prevention that permeates home economics/family and consumer sciences leads to an emphasis on addressing family education with children and youth. Many of the certified professionals in the U.S. are involved in teaching at the secondary level. In the U.S., individual states usually require licensing of teachers thereby affirming their competence both in subject matter content and in pedagogy. The family and consumer science teacher in public school focuses on critical life skills related to health, financial welfare and building relationships.

A new program at AAFCO is designed to utilize the national certification examination as part of state licensure for middle and secondary school teachers verifying subject-matter competency in family and consumer sciences education. The revision of the certification examination has used as a guide the National Standards for Family and Consumer Science Education (2003). Such activities reflect the movement to national rather than local standards in education-based criteria. These standards require that teachers have the ability to:

- Integrate multiple life responsibilities into family, career, and community roles;
- Evaluate management practices related to the human, economic, and environment resources;
- Evaluate the significance of family and its impact on the well-being of individuals and society;
- Analyze factors that impact human growth and development;
- Demonstrate respectful and caring relationships in the family, workplace, and community;
- Demonstrate nutrition and wellness practices that enhance individual and family well-being;

and

- Evaluate the impact of parenting roles and responsibilities on strengthening the well-being of individuals and families.

Numerous programs exist in schools to attend to preparing these students for life and for their critical societal role as parents. The Parenting Project describes a number of these programs, many of which are used by family and consumer science teachers across the country. Examples include The Parents Under Construction Curriculum, the Baby Think It Over program; Dads Make a Difference; Roots of Empathy and Educating Children for Parenting. In this volume Shiffer (2002) notes that parenting education does work under the guidance of a qualified professional. That is, under the guidance of a competent and sensitive professional, youth are better able to grasp the concepts of what it takes to become a productive adult in our global society.

IV. Concluding Remarks

At the beginning of this paper we asked: How do we assure families they are getting the right information from the right people at the right time and how can we know if the information is based in the latest research and is applicable to the real problems of real people in real time?

The answer to me appears to be in the process of credentialing those professionals who plan to work with families in their everyday life experiences. Recent theoretical advances in developmental science suggest that preparation of professionals must involve more than subject matter content and must also involve an understanding of the community and cultural context. To be competent in building community developmental assets one

needs skills related to networking, collaboration and communication.

We see that programs rooted in the community such as local extension or school programs have the potential to assure that family life is adequately preserved. However, the key to success lies in the preparation of professionals sensitive to context and community. At AAFCS we have taken seriously our responsibility to provide a mechanism to certify professionals as competent in these skills at a national level. We know this is making a difference in the lives of our communities and we have confidence that our process works.

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