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## US FCS professionals' perceptions of the current and future direction of Family and Consumer Sciences as a discipline

Amy Harden  
Ball State University, Indiana, USA

Scott Hall  
Ball State University, Indiana, USA

Deanna Pucciarelli  
Ball State University, Indiana, USA

### Abstract

*The purpose of the study was to understand how US Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS)-affiliated faculty and administrators (N = 140) perceived the current state and future direction of FCS as a discipline. Responses were coded on a positive/negative valence and were thematically analysed. Administrators were somewhat more optimistic about the future than were non-administrator faculty. Comments for the complete sample leaned negatively regarding the current state and the future of FCS. The most common concerns related to a fracturing identity and perceived relevance. The most common reason for optimism was the importance of the inherent interdisciplinary approach to address societal problems. Participants often recommended that FCS should reframe its identity and communicate its strengths with effective marketing.*

**KEYWORDS:** PERCEPTION, FAMILY AND CONSUMER SCIENCES (FCS), FUTURE, HOME ECONOMICS, IDENTITY, RELEVANCE

### Introduction and purpose

For over 100 years, the Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) discipline has had an extensive history of helping families, individuals and communities. The name of this emerging discipline in the early 1900s was Home Economics and through the 20th century, the name in the US evolved to Family and Consumer Sciences as a more descriptive term for the profession. However, internationally, the field is still identified as Home Economics (Nickols & Collier, 2015). The discipline consistently strives to help societies develop healthy, productive and responsible citizens (Piscopo & Mugliett, 2012). Out of concern of the vast economic, cultural and societal changes at the turn of the 20th century, the inception of FCS as an interdisciplinary field brought together knowledge from the sciences, the arts and the humanities, focusing on families as well as the larger environment of individuals and communities (Vincenti, 1990). The International Federation for Home Economics' (IFHE) 21st century position statement characterised the current discipline as:

A field of study and a profession, situated in the human sciences that draws from a range of disciplines to achieve optimal and sustainable living for individuals, families and communities ... [professionals] are concerned with the empowerment and well-being of

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Corresponding author Amy Harden ✉ aharden@bsu.edu

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individuals, families and communities, and of facilitating the development of attributes for lifelong learning for paid, unpaid and voluntary work and living situations ... [they] are advocates for individuals, families and communities (IFHE Position Statement, 2008).

The image and perception of FCS has been discussed over many years. For example, in the 1980s, Harper and Davis (1986) and McFadden (1987) described the discipline as being at a crossroads for growth and development, but with confusion over the current and future direction of the profession. A decade later, Moe, Mullis, Dosser and Mullis (1991) stated that the profession appeared to be struggling despite name changes for existing programs as well as efforts to elevate accreditation with persistent attention to improving its image. More recently, Pendergast (2006) suggested the field was at a “convergent moment” where social factors were aligning, providing an opportunity to re-vision the profession and the discipline. Today, there continues to be extensive discussion over the current and future direction of the profession.

The purpose of this study was to understand how US FCS-affiliated faculty and administrators perceived the current state and future direction of FCS as a discipline. This study was focused on the US since it was part of an investigation that focused on the perceived value of the American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences (AAFCS) accreditation, qualitative questions on the present and future direction of FCS as a discipline were included. Specifically, how positive or negative were overall perceptions of the current and future states of FCS? How did perceptions vary by background and circumstance across various FCS professionals? What were common positive and negative perceptions related to FCS? A systematic effort to study FCS professionals’ concerns, as well as their positive perceptions and recommendations, can help inform efforts that seek to enhance FCS as a field and assist in its adaptability in the future.

## Literature review

Historically, the FCS profession consisted of subject areas impacting the home, household and families and reflected the basic needs of all individuals for food, clothing, shelter, and well-being (physical, social and emotional) (Quilling, 1991; Jarva, 2012; Nickols & Collier, 2015). During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the lack of safety, low standards of cleanliness and environmental hazards were seen as threats to the health of families living within the home. The founders of the discipline identified the need for social reform, activism and education indicating that “a better world and the path to that goal was the application of scientific knowledge to the family and the community” (Apple & Coleman, 2003, p. 106). Although the initial objective was to prepare women for the paid labour force, they “consciously and consistently sought to infuse an ethos of social reform ... whether those women were planning for a career outside the home or for homemaking” (Apple & Coleman, 2003, p.105). The belief was that not only was it critical for women in the labour force to be educated in Home Economics (later known as FCS in the US), but those unpaid and/or volunteers needed training as well. Therefore, it was necessary to bring together women, science, education and activism in the discipline to ensure social reform and improvement of society. However, as decades passed, and specialisations within the profession grew, the message of social reform seemed to become lost (Apple, 2015; Apple & Coleman, 2003; Hjalmeskog, 2012).

The perception of the discipline, especially from the public perspective, has been discussed over time. Nickols and Kay (2015) suggested that the field has been caught in a triple bind of a) the extremely complex focus of societal matters of daily living meeting basic human needs, b) populated largely by women and “work done by women has been devalued throughout history” (p. 2), and c) rapid expansion of specialisations within its scope. Breen and Driscoll (1989) stated that when FCS as a discipline was organised, the education of women for a ‘domestic role’ was unquestioned. However, due to rapid societal changes and the relatively brief nature of the discipline at the time, confusion developed over the current and future status of the discipline and the profession. Their research examined Home Economics programs to determine college and university administrators’ views of FCS. Breen and Driscoll found that administrators clearly defined their understanding of the mission of FCS programs, and, although it was felt that FCS units were maintaining updated curricula, and the quality of students and image of the program at institutions were positive, the quality of research and success in securing outside funding needed improvement. This finding was similar to other contemporary studies where practitioners indicated that improvement of research was vital for the discipline (e.g., Greninger, Durrett, Hampton, & Kitt, 1984).

The importance of FCS programs' mission in relation to an institution's mission has been cited as a significant determinant in the perception of the discipline. For example, Cory (1984) indicated that declining enrolments and a mission that was not central to the institution was cited in institutions where all or part of FCS units had been discontinued. When asked about their view of the public image of FCS, administrators agreed that the general public's image of the profession centred on women who cooked and sewed, and were mostly neutral as to whether the image would be enhanced by changing the name of the profession (Breen & Driscoll, 1989).

Apple and Coleman (2003), in their analysis of FCS and social reform through the early 20th century, observed that a change in direction of the discipline occurred in the 1930s from an emphasis on social reform to an emphasis on training young people for setting up a home, establishing a family, and managing household finances. Benn (2012) described the aim of the discipline was learning how to handle resources of the home and household in the most prudent way. At that point, there was a call for modernising the profession in response to increased industrialisation and the need to adapt to new technology. The effect of this change in direction narrowed the scope of the field and increased professional specialisations. Thus, through much of the 20th century, the social reform drive in FCS was restrained as students were instead prepared for roles in the labour force and in the home.

FCS's curriculum transformation in the US mirrored changes occurring in higher education in general during the early 20th century where specialisation and departmentalisation were prevalent (Quilling, 1991; Vincenti, 1990). Vincenti suggested that in education, preparation to do a particular kind of work became more important than developing the person. As specialisations grew, they became discrete and self-contained resulting in a reduction in the communication between the groups (Quilling, 1991; Heinila, 2012). Vincenti (1990) also suggested that not only has FCS struggled for legitimacy, the trend has been for specialisations within the discipline to "look outward toward their related disciplines rather than to focus on their original reasons for being created" (p. 184). Similarly, Quilling suggested that this process created concern for developing an integrated perspective. She indicated the process, in part, was a product of accumulated scientific knowledge that "remains in discrete categories until usable frameworks are provided that help to point out the unifying themes among speciality areas ... [FCS] is at such a juncture in its development" (Quilling, 1991, p. 253).

Apple and Coleman (2003) highlighted the challenges to the FCS discipline due to the process of continued specialisations. They indicated that graduates of post-secondary programs generally do not view themselves as FCS professionals; instead, they identify with a specialisation. This specialised identity has weakened the cohesiveness of the discipline as a whole. The home economics founders' original ideal of inspiring social responsibility in students was no longer emphasised.

Vinenti (1990), in her discussion of the interdisciplinary context of the field, indicated that overspecialisation weakens the ability to solve complex societal problems that require integration of many specialised fields. She argued that without this integration, home economics professionals may be less effective in the goal of improving the lives of the individual and of families, and that the pendulum needs to swing back to interdisciplinary, integrative collaboration among specialisations to solve today's societal problems. Kolodinsky (2012) described the root of the discipline as multifaceted generalists "who have the well-being of the household as our goal" (p. 160). Lorek and Wahlen (2012) echoed this while adding that issues today such as sustainable consumption can be addressed from the integration of those with various expertise from the specialisations within the discipline.

Benn (2012) described FCS as being "culturally dependent, society determined, [and] individually featured" (p. 59) indicating that the perception of the discipline may be seen in cultural context of the time. Moe et al. (1991) acknowledged concern about the identity and status of home economics (now called FCS), suggesting that even though there had been attempts to improve the image, part of the ongoing struggle could be attributed to the long-held perception of the field as being feminine. "Much of society accepts this narrow conception even though the field has continued to become more specialized and diversified" (p. 7). Benn (2012) stated that the "gender part is based on the context of home, kitchen and household ... context is culturally bound" (p. 53). In addition, Deagon (2012) examined how FCS was portrayed in news and media reports. Her findings suggested that the role of journalism in spreading information about the discipline has not provided change to public perceptions. She suggested that FCS should be presented as a branded and marketable package that "brings together our unique perspective of the family, our specialized and consolidated knowledge" (p. 86).

Harper and Davis (1986) indicated that implications for this type of a stereotype included the probability of lower status for the profession, professionals identifying more with their specialisation than with the discipline, and limited involvement of males in the profession. Moe et al. (1991) suggested that the stereotype has “centred on a lack of clarity and direction within the profession as to what [FCS professionals] do and the respect the public has for such activities” (p. 7). Views of the roles of women and femininity are products of societal perceptions of the time. Moe et al. (1991) suggested that as home economics leaders evaluated the profession’s future directions, two prevalent themes related to traditional feminine attitudes emerged. First, there was a “need to be more open to self-criticism and self-evaluation ... the field has been criticized for perpetuating old values and separating traditionally male and female spheres of activity” (p. 7). Second, an emphasis was needed for “a more holistic and integrative function in society ... [T]he field has been criticized for having an overly traditional approach ... that [is] no longer responsive to societal needs ... limiting diverse and necessary attributes and qualities for members” (p. 7). More recently, however, Piscopo and Mugliett (2012) suggested that current home economics “identify and respond to individual, family and community’s needs, offer targeted and practical education, counselling and guidance, and advocate for appropriate infrastructure, products and services” (p. 228). They indicated a need to market this work to enhance and legitimise the perception of FCS.

The purpose of this study was to understand how US FCS-affiliated faculty and administrators perceived the current state and future direction of FCS as a discipline. Specifically, how positive or negative were overall perceptions of the current and future states of FCS? How did perceptions vary by background and circumstance across various FCS professionals? What were common positive and negative perceptions related to FCS?

## Method

As part of an investigation that focused on the perceived value of the American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences (AAFCS) accreditation (Hall, Harden & Pucciarelli, 2016; Pucciarelli, Hall & Harden, 2016) qualitative questions on the present and future direction of FCS as a discipline were included. A list of email addresses of US FCS/FCS-related post-secondary program faculty and administrators was developed from a database of contacts generated from a prior study (Pucciarelli & Faith, 2012) and a list of programs provided by AAFCS including the AAFCS Community of Colleges, Universities and Research (CUR), the Board on Human Sciences (BoHS), and the Council of Administrators of Family and Consumer Sciences (CAFCS) groups. An Internet-based search identified other FCS programs as well as programs in Human Sciences and other synonymous names that could be related to FCS programs not included in the other sources. A student was hired to gather the email addresses of faculty teaching in all the identified programs, as well as at least one administrator for each program. In addition, FCS/FCS-related program administrators were contacted to verify the information and to encourage participation.

A total of 1,910 faculty and administrators from FCS/FCS-related programs email addresses was gathered. Email invitations, including a brief introduction and link to a consent form, were sent through the *Qualtrics* online survey platform. Fifty-eight email invitations bounced back, leaving a total of 1,852 addresses. An incentive was offered to participants, who were entered into a lottery system to win one of 35 stipends worth \$35 each. Three hundred and seventeen (317) participants responded to the survey (a 17% response rate). Though it is not possible to know how many email invitations were viewed by targeted recipients (e.g., some may have been filtered out through automated servers), a relatively low response rate is unsurprising given our recruitment constraints and the nature of email-based recruitment (see limitations section for additional discussion). The survey included two open-ended questions that asked about perceptions of the current and future state of FCS as a discipline:

1. Describe your observations about the current state of Family and Consumer Sciences as a discipline.
2. Describe your beliefs about the future direction of Family and Consumer Sciences as a discipline.

Nearly half of these respondents (44%,  $n = 140$ ) provided comments on at least one of the two questions, and these were the only participants included in this study.

## Analyses

The data were analysed and coded in two different ways. First, a qualitative content analysis was conducted, using the complete response to each question as the unit of analysis (Robson, 1993), to rate the positive/negative nature of each comment holistically (perception valence). Second, a thematic analysis was conducted to capture common sentiments and meanings (Braun, & Clarke, 2006) that represented various perceptions about the current and future states of FCS.

### *Perception valence*

Responses to the two open-ended survey questions were analysed for their overall positive/negative valence to help capture the extent to which respondents had optimistic or pessimistic perceptions of FCS. The complete response of each respondent to each of the two questions (separately), were coded on a 5-point scale (*overall negative, more negative than positive, neutral, more positive than negative* and *overall positive*). The researchers individually coded each answer and then discussed any differences. Complete consensus of the coding was reached among the researchers through discussion. The numeric values assigned to each statement were used for testing correlation between the two variables and for detecting possible statistical differences between various sample characteristics. Such analyses could help identify factors potentially related to positive or negative perceptions.

### *Thematic analysis*

Responses were analysed and coded to identify themes related to optimistic and pessimistic perceptions of FCS. Working independently at first, the investigators used the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1996) to identify initial, potential themes. Working together, the investigators identified an overarching pattern of organisation for categorizing themes:

- reasons for optimism and concern about the current state of FCS,
- reasons for optimism and concern about the future of FCS, and
- recommendations for making or keeping FCS relevant in the future.

From the agreed-upon patterns, the investigators identified themes across responses that represented distinct perceptions or sentiments. Discussion pursued until complete consensus was reached regarding these themes.

## Sample characteristics

The sample consisted of generally female (81.6%), non-administrator faculty members (instructors) (79.3%), who worked in non-AAFCS-accredited programs (61.9%). Just over a third of the respondents were current members of AAFCS (35.8%), and an additional 13% were former members. Slightly more than half reported working in a high-research-productivity university (54.7%) and had worked in higher education for over 18 years on average ( $M = 18.28$ ;  $SD = 10.73$ ). Participants indicated their location by clicking on an interactive map that divided the country into six regions (see Figure 1). Although participants worked in all regions throughout the country, the largest concentrations were in the South (38%), Midwest (29.5%), and West (15.5%) of the US.



Figure 1 Interactive map for recording region where a respondent’s institution was located

Source: <http://www.usbiathlon.org/foundation/regional-distribution-map.html>

## Results and findings

The perception valences of the two open-ended question responses were significantly correlated, ( $r = .48, p < .001$ ), indicating that while participants were significantly consistent with valence toward both the current state and future of FCS, they were far from being equally positive or negative about both.

Descriptive statistics revealed that approximately 72% of responses included some concern or anxiety about the current FCS state (overall negative, or more negative than positive), as did approximately 67% of responses regarding the future of FCS. T-tests indicated that the valence perceptions on the current state of FCS did not differ based on any background characteristics (gender, administrator status, location, type of institution, and AAFCS membership status), and was not correlated with years in higher education. However, for the future of FCS, administrators were generally more positive  $t(70) = 3.39, p < .05$ , which was the only background characteristic related to this perception.

### Current state of FCS

As noted, approximately 72% of responses included some concern or anxiety about the current FCS profession (overall negative, or more negative than positive). A qualitative analysis of the responses to the open-ended question about the current state of FCS as a discipline were grouped under broad thematic headings. The most common concerns (themes) about FCS were related to (in order from more to less frequent) *fracturing, identity, relevance, respect* and *branding*. (see Table 1).

Table 1 Current FCS theme: concerns

QUOTE	ROLE
<b>Fracturing</b>	
This profession has been through an identity crisis, trying to change its image, and in my opinion, has fractured itself. Specialisation seems to be what is valued today, so programs are being absorbed into other colleges and schools	Instructor
Although many of the individual fields are strong, I think the very idea of FCS as a “discipline” has been dying for a long time. Today, it feels like a loose and archaic conglomeration of fields with disparate interests, methodologies, constituencies, and needs.	Instructor
Many programs in FCS have become so specialized that common values and direction are difficult to find	Instructor
I think that we have become more of a collection of specialists. If we don’t build up the people being trained as generalists, I don’t think that bodes well for the future of ... FCS as a discipline. Specialists will not see the value of interdisciplinary configurations... if there are no/few generalists left to hold programs together and help build cohesion.	Instructor

QUOTE	ROLE
FCS as a discipline is perceived as behind the times because it is focused on homemaking life skills that were needed 20+ years ago and are not valued today; however, those life skills are more necessary today than ever before since they truly do focus on improving the quality of life for everyone. Added to that, FCS has lost strength as a discipline because FCS is so broad and instructors tend to focus their efforts on their specific area and less on FCS in general. Therefore, FCS professionals are not a strong voice as a group—too fractured and self-focused	Instructor
<b>Identity</b>	
There appears to be an identity crisis and many graduates do not understand the historical contexts that has created the discipline.	Instructor
When recruiting, prospective students do not know what Family and Consumer Sciences means or what professions fall into that category. Other faculty members and departments at the University don't know what it means or even how to say it.	Instructor
It has an image problem. People still see us as Home Economics and that we 'stitch and stir'. Students fail to see the integrative nature of FCS and "cling" to their options/interests (e.g., Dietetics, Hospitality) over-identifying with FCS.	Instructor
Still not recognized for what all is taught and learned in this discipline. Old 'home economics' mindset has not changed along with the discipline.	Administrator
On many college and university campuses I think it is still perceived as a soft science. The general public does not recognize the professional direction that the majors within FCS have moved over the last 25+ years.	Instructor
It is continuing to evolve but struggles from the lack of well-defined identity.	Administrator
At a cross-road. Unclear about its purpose and objectives.	Administrator
FCS is unknown as a discipline—it is only recognized by those in the field. At a time when citizens are seeking the skills and outcomes that FCS provides, they do not know that FCS is relevant. Unfortunately, when the name of the field changed, it lost market share.	Instructor
It's a growing discipline that some students are hesitant to major in, because they are unaware of what they can do with a degree in FCS.	Instructor
In spite [of] the large problems associated with the name confusion, the discipline is strong at the post-secondary level. Graduates are getting very competitive jobs in a wide range of areas. General programs that focus on a broad range of topics are weaker than programs that specialize in preparing graduates for more narrow career paths.	Instructor
<b>Relevance</b>	
Unfortunately, I think it is a dying discipline yet all the different components individually are very important to current society.	Instructor
It appears to be on a declining trajectory.	Instructor
It needs to evolve. It is getting to be "old-fashioned" and without more clear career choices, it will fade away. They need to recognize the most profitable careers and gear the dept towards those.	Instructor
It seems to be becoming more obsolete	Instructor
I think it is a great discipline but its importance overall is greatly undervalued by most in the academic world. I also feel that many people believe it is old-fashioned and outdated.	Instructor
<b>Respect</b>	
Needs more research presence to be considered on equal footing with other disciplines.	Administrator
It is not understood and not respected.	Instructor
I think FCS has much to offer but is not perceived as scholarly. There also seems to be a lack of awareness of FCS (what it is, what you can do with the degree, etc.). I also think students (and parents) question job prospects in the field.	Instructor
In finding reviewers for promotion and tenure it is very difficult to find strong programs/faculty in the consumer side. Colleagues report this part of the discipline is weak in their minds as well.	Administrator
Needs more respect as a science and as valuable in society	Instructor
<b>Branding</b>	
We have not done an effective job of communications the meaning and value of FCS as a discipline. Until we can demonstrate a reason why our seemingly diverse programs belong together under the FCS a label, we will struggle with credibility.	Instructor
We need to promote what we do and our skills and why they are important.	Instructor
Could see it farmed out to other departments in some institutions. The general population doesn't recognize the benefit (sew and stir). We (as a whole) don't do a great job of self-promotion. I didn't recognize the value during undergrad or grad school. Not until seeing the educational gap when I began teaching did I then appreciate the breadth of knowledge within FCS and its role in education	Instructor

QUOTE	ROLE
FCS needs to work harder to maintain programs, especially to keep them in the high schools, so students will be able to experience FCS before getting to college. We have the content that will solve a lot of our nation's societal problems—we need to do better about promoting ourselves and our content	Administrator
I think it is largely misunderstood by many observers who relate to their experiences in secondary Home Economics programs. In view of the recurring calls to “bring back Home Ec,” I think we have a prime opportunity to demonstrate our relevance today with targeted education in life skills for all youth	Instructor
FCS is a viable discipline that has to be marketed correctly to stay visible in order to survive.	Instructor

The most common reasons for optimism of the current FCS profession were related to the importance of FCS for addressing societal problems (see Table 2). FCS professionals are experts and highly qualified to deal with the complexities of today's societal issues impacting individuals, families and communities.

**Table 2** Current FCS theme: reasons for optimism

QUOTE	ROLE
<b>Important content</b>	
It is a viable profession that is so, so needed by individuals, families, and communities. Due in part to its decreased presence in secondary education over the last 39+ years, many of today's societal issues have sprung from lack of education on the topics that FCS provides—nutrition, financial management, parenting, child development, etc.	Instructor
While it is extremely important in regard to ongoing problems in the US, it is struggling to make society understand its relevance.	Administrator
FCS is still a very important discipline. FCS professionals are better prepared to handle the major issues facing society today (i.e., bullying, payday loans, college debt, food insecurity, food deserts, the changing family dynamics, obesity and other food-related health challenges, etc.)	Instructor

### Future of FCS

Approximately 67% of responses included some concern or anxiety about the future of FCS (overall negative, or more negative than positive). The following six themes emerged from the thematic analysis (in order from more to less frequent):

- fading,
- need clear identity,
- fracturing,
- important content,
- requires effort to survive, and
- strong/strengthening (see Table 3).

**Table 3** Future of FCS theme: concerns

QUOTE	ROLE
<b>Fading</b>	
I think it's going to fade away as soon as the older generation retires.	Instructor
Although I believe FCS is a valuable field with much to offer, the future outlook for FCS as a holistic discipline is bleak. Again, the trend is toward specialisation.	Instructor
I believe that this discipline is at risk of becoming extinct.	Instructor
Likely to be eliminated in most states or dramatically paired down.	Instructor
FCS will be gone in 20 years if radical changes are not made.	Instructor
In order to remain viable, I think the program is going to have become interwoven with other valued specialized trainings—I worry that as a standalone program, FCS is struggling to remain modern and relevant.	Instructor
As a profession, I think FCS is struggling to maintain membership and recognition. It is ironic when the family structure in our society is in such dire straits. I think programs in post-secondary education are impacted heavily by the strength (or lack of) programs on the secondary level. This link is critical.	Instructor

QUOTE	ROLE
Does not seem as important as more industry-connected fields.	Instructor
It failed to live up to its potential 15–20 years ago. The professional organisation seemed to be moribund and more concerned with internal politics than improvement and critical evaluation. Unless it can demonstrate a unique niche that has not been appropriated by newer and/or more vigorous disciplines, develop a central identity beyond Swallow's ideas, and demonstrate applicability to current issues and families, then it may be time to allow the departments and discipline to merge with others and become a historical note.	Instructor
I think we're at a critical point, and we can either decide to be relevant, and explain what we bring to the table that's unique—or we can just fade away. We have a bad habit of running away from critical and controversial issues affecting families. ...No amount of rebranding will save us if we can't articulate what we bring to the table that's still unique and relevant.	Instructor
<b>Need clear identity</b>	
In our department and institution, consumer sciences no longer feels like a good “fit” with the direction of the rest of the department.	Instructor
For FCS to survive, it must be more dynamic, more relevant, not only in what professors may or may not bring into it, but how it is advertised to outsiders.	Instructor
There needs to be a united front from all FCSers about the who and what we are. As FCS has evolved, viable programs take the resources, such as hospitality programs grow and FCS education dies. Other programs stagnate without sufficient resources. What we and what we teach are fundamentals to family life and to the welfare of communities; however, those values are deeply undervalued. Unless a program is very strong, FCS programs will continue to be eliminated or separated to various campus disciplines.	Instructor
<b>Fracturing</b>	
I have doubts about it surviving. The professional aspects have been siphoned off into nutrition, hospitality management, and interior design industries.	Instructor
I think FCS is going to eventually fade in favor of the specialty areas.	Instructor
It will eventually become just a small interest group. This hurts my heart, but I believe it is the way of the future.	Instructor
Specialization is tearing it apart. We need to go back to why this is called “family’ and show how all these specialized areas are needed for proper functioning of the family. The discipline is too disjointed. We are operating like a dysfunctional family	Instructor

The researchers defined the theme “fading” when participants’ comments were related to the perception of the discipline being outdated; the “need for clear identity” was defined by comments related to the lack of recognition and understanding of the profession; whereas, “fracturing” related to increased emphasis of the specialisations within FCS. These themes were similar to, and seemingly an extension of, thoughts expressed regarding the current FCS profession (see Table 2). Participants described the FCS as being at a critical juncture and voiced concern of survival of the profession unless action is taken to promote its relevance.

The most common reasons for optimism were related to the importance of FCS content for addressing societal problems (see Table 4). The ability to solve complex society program requires integrative collaboration from many specialisations. Participants seemed to feel that, due to its inherent interdisciplinary structure, FCS provides that environment, which is much needed in today’s society. Two participants stated: “I think as families exist today, we need it more than ever” and “FCS is a forever discipline as we will forever need to acquire the basic needs of life: food, water, shelter, and a sense of security and belonging.” Therefore, the future of the FCS profession “will continue to be seen as the go-to discipline for the comprehensive content areas it includes”.

Table 4 Future of FCS theme: reasons for optimism

QUOTE	ROLE
<b>Important content</b>	
I think as families exist today, we need it more than ever. However, that view is not reflected in how new professionals are being trained. Without their “buy-in”, I’m not sure that this approach can continue to exist.	Instructor
Scary, although the programs are vastly needed in middle and high schools as well as universities.	Instructor

The family is central to implementing any policy change, in individual and family functioning, and in the stability of our society so I sure like to think we'll all catch on to how vital these fields are to the world!	Instructor
<b>Requires effort to survive</b>	
I honestly don't think it will survive as a discipline another 10 years and I hate to admit that even to myself, but all indicators say it is ending and I intend to pursue empowering individuals, families and communities in all areas of my life even after I retire because it is what I believe and have passion for.	Instructor
I hope that the discipline can weather this storm. I think it makes a valuable contribution to the social sciences that is unique from psychology, sociology, and social work	Instructor
I see FCS as a discipline continuing, but I feel we have to be forever vigilant to outside groups that don't see our value as a unit and want to break up departments. I don't see industries focus on whether the student graduates from an FCS Program they just want students who can solve problems and communicate ideas. The FCS major who graduates from our program can certainly do these things.	Instructor
<b>Strong/strengthening</b>	
I think FCS should be integrated into others curriculums and tie to other social issues if it wants to survive. We need to advocate for interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary work.	Instructor
In my opinion, academic disciplines seem to go through a cycle of encouraging inclusive and interdisciplinary to individualistic and narrow-focused. ...It becomes harder to have a collective identity as FCS anymore, but I think the importance of the interdisciplinary knowledge will bounce back. No matter what, I think we just try to keep producing quality research, students, and outreach outcomes.	Instructor

Those who expressed hopefulness in the future of the FCS profession indicated that in order to continue, effort is needed to ensure the profession survives (see Table 4). For example, "I hope that the discipline can weather this storm. I think it makes a valuable contribution to the social sciences that is unique". "Frankly, it's getting old hearing the FCS is going away; it hasn't and it won't. There is a resurgence of interest in the discipline even though some have tried to trivialize it".

Throughout the comments offered, participants made recommendations for ensuring the viability of FCS, typically focused on reframing its identity and communicating FCS strengths (see Table 5). Comments included "we need to better market and brand ourselves ... to position ourselves as problem solvers ... to be more visible on the national front" and "Educating the general public, employers, families about what FCS is 'about' will be helpful in continuing to offer these programs".

Table 5 Future of FCS theme: Recommendations

QUOTE	ROLE
Educating the general public, employers, families about what FCS is "about" will be helpful in continuing to offer these programs. Many people within a college/university that offers FCS programs ... do not always understand what the discipline is about. When budgetary constraints come into play often the first thing that comes to mind is breaking FCS departments up and moving the majors to other programs.	Instructor
You need to hire a good marketing team to help elevate through social marketing.	Instructor
I am a big believer in the ideals of FCS as a collective of professionals seeking to advance the quality of individual and family life. Try to focus on increasing the relevance of AAFCS for folks who are researchers as well as teachers.	Instructor
Ongoing need for increased visibility and skillful telling of our success stories.	Instructor
We need to clearly demonstrate the FCS knowledge base. We need to position ourselves as problem solvers. We need to be more visible on the national front.	Administrator
We need to run, run, run, over to the engineering schools and ask to play with them. We were originally founded in the US at an engineering institution and engineering is beginning to be embarrassed by the lack of women in their programs. We need to share our activities with them, not with Biochemistry, Business or Architecture (areas we are currently being pushed towards) because they are also an applied science. ...If the whole future of modern society is looming across a digital singularity, we need to get our hands on what "quality of life" means in the coming world or risk being left behind.	Instructor

## Discussion

Two main perspectives on the current and future state of FCS were evident among FCS-affiliated faculty and administrators in the US. There is a cohort who is positive about the current and future state of FCS, with the two viewpoints correlated ( $r = 0.48, p < .01$ ), and another cohort that strongly

felt that FCS needs significant restructuring to maintain viability. From its inception, the FCS profession has emphasised its focus on social reform in order to empower individuals, families and communities in producing responsible and productive citizens in safe and healthy environments. As stated by Nickols and Kay (2015), “despite being misunderstood, trivialized, and underresourced, [the discipline] has been addressing the persistent problems of daily life for more than a century” (p. 3).

Respondents said that FCS needs to continue to contribute to solving societal issues today as it was when the profession was founded. FCS, as a discipline, needs to be an entity that will continue to respond to the basic human needs of life and aid in the development of a sense of security and belongingness of individuals, families and communities. In order to be effective in the process of solving complex societal issues, Vincenti (1990) argued that interdisciplinary, integrative collaboration among specialisations is required. Many participants felt that FCS has all of the components available if the pendulum would swing away from overspecialisation.

Similar to studies dating back over 30 years (Breen & Driscoll, 1989; Greninger et al., 1984), participants in this study felt that the discipline places a greater value on specialisations than the interdisciplinary whole. This stance has resulted in a loss of perceived strength for FCS as a discipline, and the trend is not anticipated to change in the future. This concern of emphasis on specialisation has been a reoccurring topic for many years. For example, Apple and Coleman (2003) identified a shift toward an increase in professional specialisation in the 1930s moving the emphasis from social reform to an emphasis on the sub-disciplinary areas as well as preparing individuals for careers and consumer roles in managing the home.

As further demonstration of the recurring topic on specialisation, in the 1980s, Harper and Davis (1986) and McFadden (1987) discussed confusion over the current and future direction of the profession. In the 1990s, Vincenti (1990) identified the tendency to look toward related specialisation disciplines rather than the original integrated focus. Quilling (1991) suggested that the process of specialisation created concern for failing to develop an integrated perspective. Continuing into the 21st century, Apple and Coleman (2003) indicated that graduates of post-secondary programs generally identify with the specialisation rather than viewing themselves as FCS professionals. This has weakened the cohesiveness of the discipline that is no longer emphasised to inspire social responsibility in students.

As the sub-disciplines have organised and/or strengthened individual organisations over the past 25 years, such as the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, and as those organisations' newer members self-affiliate with their discipline-specific groups, less interest is seen in joining a second cross-discipline organisation. Themes from the data support this assertion; “[FCS is] going to fade away as soon as the older generation retires” and “the areas seem to continue to differentiate”. Although this study did not measure motives to the perceptions, we hypothesise one reason for professionals in the discipline may be the costs involved in maintaining multiple professional organisation memberships. This is a question needing further exploration.

Similarly, participant concerns about FCS currently and in the future converge on marketing and relevance. Findings indicate that respondents think FCS has identity and branding issues. Respondents voiced similar thoughts to Piscopo and Mugliett (2012) that there is a great need to market FCS to legitimise the perception of the discipline, Breen and Driscoll (1989) found that the quality of research and success in securing outside funding needed improvement and Greninger et al. (1984) reported that improvement of research was vital for the discipline.

Along a similar vein of thought, some participants said that FCS has much to offer, but the data suggests it is not perceived or respected as a scholarly discipline. Several things are needed, including more research presence, increased visibility, advocating for the benefits of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary work, and a more effective job of communicating the value and the meaning of what FCS offers. Additionally, it is paramount that the discipline and the profession educate the general public, employers, and prospective students as to what FCS offers. These types of problems may be addressed through marketing efforts and FCS can use these results to tease out how to improve the discipline's image.

The results of findings from this study seem to suggest that FCS professionals' perceptions of the discipline mirror concerns and express similar issues that were identified in the review of the

literature in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. Similar challenges remain related to relevance, identity and respect of the profession. Little improvement has been documented addressing these issues although researchers at various times expressed being at a crossroads where we had to reflect and revision the discipline for the future (e.g., McFadden, 1987; Pendergast, 2006).

Similar to Pendergast, McGregor and Turkki (2012), who stated that for the discipline “to be more visible and accessible, we have to be able to define and articulate distinctive characteristics” (p. 9), several participants described a need for attention on identity and rebranding. Furthermore, Pendergast (2012) suggested that what FCS has “failed to achieve is recognition for the role it plays intentionally to address the optimisation of well-being and the development of lifelong learning attributes as core to the discipline” (p. 16). In consideration of the discipline as a sustainable profession, she suggested the key messages for the future such as:

- rebranding of the name,
- end the fragmentation of the profession into various micro-fields, and
- development of an internationally united philosophy.

The data beginning in the 1980s’ studies inclusive to the current study creates a pattern of outcomes and themes that are consistent. The discipline has studied its strengths and areas needing improvement for close to thirty years with similar results. That perceptions remain the same, at least in the United States, while environmental context changes over the decades suggest that any interventions planned and executed to shift perception of the organisation have not been successful.

Two interconnected themes emerged from this study of US FCS-affiliated faculty and administrators:

- a) In order to maintain relevance, a change is needed in marketing and messaging to both external scholars and internal FCS members within the discipline. FCS’s greatest strength is its interdisciplinary structure; hence, marketing should focus on this theme.
- b) The research arm of FCS’s mission needs more emphasis, and members should be encouraged to conduct interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary studies, which would reinforce FCS’s strongest asset.

Findings from this study suggest that chronic and complex societal problems are best approached from networked disciplines like FCS, an idea that can feed the marketing campaign. For the last thirty years, researchers have concluded that maintaining the status quo means FCS will continue to fracture. This issue must be addressed.

## Study limitations

Though we were able to assemble a large, regionally-diverse set of email addresses, the low response rate (17%) limits the extent to which all perspectives were captured. Using only modest incentives (based on budgetary constraints) and relying on emails sent to busy faculty likely contributed to a low response rate. US FCS/FCS-related program administrators were contacted to verify the program presence and to encourage participation prior to the email invitations being sent. However, it is unknown if the email invitations were viewed by the targeted recipients. Program administrators were notified that a survey was being sent, but it is not known if that information was communicated to faculty in the program.

It is possible that larger financial incentives, particularly the ability to compensate each participant, and contacting potential participants through multiple diverse methods (e.g., phone call, mailer, face-to-face contact at conferences), would likely improve responsiveness. Obtaining the resources necessary for such a thorough approach can be challenging, but could result in broader data with additional nuance. Is also possible that the main focus of the survey (perceptions of the value of AAFCS accreditation) narrowed the sample due to potentially less intrinsic interest in that particular focus than on the current and future state of FCS. Additionally, other methods of data collection such as focus groups and interviews could provide valuable information regarding their perception of the profession.

More research is needed to identify the motives behind the perceptions in the current research findings. The findings from this study imply that there may be a link between decreased membership in AAFCS (sample 35.8% current and 13% prior) and the cost of dual memberships (FCS and sub-discipline). Future studies may want to examine this relationship. To offset the heavy focus from the US regions of the South, Midwest and West, multiple focus groups representing all geographic regions could be conducted. Findings may account for varying regional cultures and determine motivating factors to both inclusion and exclusion to the FCS discipline by members and non-members.

This case study from the US provides a dataset from which other researchers can measure differences between global regions. Information gathered internationally to determine if the perceptions identified by professionals outside the US are shared by those expressed through this study. Are the US-centric perceptions similar to or different than other nation states? Measuring the differences and exploring the hows and whys of those differences may illuminate solutions to the US organisation.

## Biographies

Amy Harden, PhD is an Associate Professor of Fashion Merchandising in the Department of Marketing in the Miller College of Business at Ball State University. She earned her doctorate degree from The Ohio State University, majoring in Clothing and Textiles with a minor in Marketing. Amy's main research interests focus on consumer perceptions, technology, and pedagogical issues.

Deanna Pucciarelli, PhD is an Associate Professor of Nutrition and Dietetics, Ball State University, Muncie, IN. Her research projects include investigating environmental determinants to human food consumption patterns. Some of the variables that impact food intake: cultural, familial, local and national food policies, psychological, socio-economical level have been the focus of her research program. Another area of investigative interest is institutional and pedagogical best practices. She co-facilitated Ball State University's New Faculty Academy 2015-2016.

Scott Hall, PhD is a Professor of Family Studies in the Department of Early Childhood, Youth, and Family Studies at Ball State University. He earned his doctorate degree from Purdue University, majoring in Family Studies. Scott's main research interests focus on pre-marital and marital relationship issues.

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