

Family Science Undergraduate Programs: Time For a New Approach?

Gregory W. Brock*

The viability of undergraduate family science programs is of concern throughout higher education. Casual observation shows that the number of majors in many programs is decreasing. With this decline, faculty allocations to family science departments are being withdrawn along with other resources. Some universities no longer have a family science program or department. Other disciplines in the social sciences with student credit hour problems are stepping up turf-raiding efforts. All the social sciences are under stress. Times are hard!

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

One source of the problem certainly lies with the lack of a clear-cut occupational identity for those who study human development and family. The Family Discipline Task Force documented this issue (Burr, 1984; Davis, 1985). In response to their findings and recommendations, the members of the Task Force voted to use the label "family science" to denote our discipline. Even with this change, it will be some time before the lay public gets the message about what we know that is of real value.

In a similar vein, family science majors suffer from the lack of an occupational identity. Psychology students can say to Mom or Dad, "I'm studying to be a psychologist." Majors such as hotel and restaurant management or fashion merchandising have occupational labels (chef or buyer) with real meaning for most people. Our students use the occupational title of counselor or youth worker in speaking about their occupational goals. These job titles, however, are social work and psychology titles. In the minds of most lay persons, as well as those in the academic community, family science programs do not train majors for any job role. As department and program names change, our academic identity will become clearer, but that change will not easily translate into occupational titles for the undergraduates planning on nonacademic careers.

A second source of our problem is that the traditional family science curriculum does not include professional training. Historically, the undergraduate degree prepared students for marriage or graduate work in family science. Curriculum goals, emphasizing theory and acquaintance with the problems faced by families, worked well until the 1980's. Today, an undergraduate degree in family (studies), followed by a graduate degree in counseling or social work and then a professional position in mental health or university teaching, is not economically competitive with other career paths.

* Gregory W. Brock is Chairman, Department of Family Studies, 315 Funkhouser Building, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY 40506.

No wonder
other major
services of
few depart
undergradu

Over
emerged.
interventio
training in
suffice for
instructing
interperson
neurosis. e
(L'Abate
psychother
problems t
Relationsh
Parent Eff
approach t
strategy is
late adoles
empirically
services G

The r
professiona
(psycholog
service pro
practicum
skills train
courses ser
the practic
Naturally.
also means

For se
that partia
parent edu
models of p
to conduct
our undergrad
content and

A com

A. T

No wonder students are taking credit hours elsewhere. They are going to other majors also because we are not training them to provide specific services other than university teaching and early childhood education. Only a few departments have adopted the idea that family science at the undergraduate level can focus on professional training.

THE DIFFERENT IDEA

Over the past 15 years, a new type of mental health service has emerged. Several labels describe it: prevention services, educational model intervention, psychoeducation. More recently, authors use the term skills training in the literature. That is probably not a good label, but it will suffice for this discussion. Skills training is a form of intervention based on instructing individuals, couples, families, and groups in new intrapersonal and interpersonal skills to prevent and remedy problems in living usually labeled neurosis, existential crises, delinquency, psychosis, developmental delay, etc. (L'Abate & Milan, 1985).¹ At one time these issues belonged to the psychotherapists. Now, however, we know enough to teach solutions to problems through packaged educational programs. Couple Communication, Relationship Enhancement, Systematic Training for Effective Parenting, and Parent Effectiveness Training are examples. Skills training is a systematic approach to the delivery of mental health services in which the intervention strategy is clear cut and easily teachable to undergraduates who are in the late adolescent, early adulthood phases of development. It is also an empirically tested, possibly superior alternative, to traditional mental health services (Guerney, 1982).

The route to becoming a skills trainer is different from that for the professionals we once believed were the proper family change agents (psychologists, social workers, family therapists, and other mental health service providers). Their training consists of course work in theory and then practicum where practice procedures are learned. In the training regimen for skills trainers, courses in theory are necessary. So is the practicum, but courses serve as the site for learning procedures of practice. The purpose of the practicum is to integrate practice procedures into a particular setting. Naturally, changing an undergraduate program so it includes skills training also means changing curriculum and faculty skills.

For some time now, many family science programs have offered courses that partially meet the needs of a skills training curriculum. One example is parent education. Unfortunately, this course is usually a survey of different models of parent education rather than a skills course in which students learn to conduct parenting programs. As I see it, if we are to regain vitality in our undergraduate curriculum, we must shift from content and little else, to content *and* the skills needed to change family life.

A comprehensive curriculum in skills training could include:

- A. Theory courses in:
 - 1. Child and human development

2. Courtship and mate selection
3. Marriage and family development
4. Family systems

B. Generic courses in skills training:

1. Program design (methodology and curriculum development)
2. Program implementation (leadership and group management)
3. Program evaluation (basic evaluation research methods)
4. Basic helping/counseling skills

C. Training in specific, well tested, and effective skills training programs such as:

1. Parent education (e.g., Systematic Training for Effective Parenting, Parent Effectiveness Training, or Parent Child Relationship Enhancement)
2. Marital communication (e.g., Relationship Enhancement, Couples Communication, or TIME)
3. Interpersonal skills
 - a. children
 - b. adults
 - c. elderly
4. Assertiveness
5. Family violence
6. Drug and substance abuse
7. Family finance
8. Heterosocial skills in the work-place
9. Sexual competence skills
10. Child birth preparation
11. Family enrichment
12. Infant stimulation
13. Child guidance
14. Creative activities for young children
15. Child abuse
16. Stress and coping
17. Interpersonal problem solving and decision making
18. Behavior change and habit management
19. Step-parenting
20. Coping with death and grave illness

D. Internship in family intervention

1. Practicum within the department
2. End-of-program internship in the community

The above curriculum could replace or augment existing family science degree programs. Students could specialize in preschool, business, or public practice expressions of their expertise. Existing content courses in human development and family science would provide the theory base. Students would take the training courses most appropriate to their interests. Courses now taught on special topics, such as the step-parent family or death and dying, would change from content only classes to courses where students learned skills training programs developed for those populations. Lastly, practica and internships within and at the end of the program would provide

the real world
trainers.

What is
Among other
design, deliv
Economics
development
rely heavily
training prog
listed above.

The int
useful in s
consultants
time. Once
basic skills
the low cost

To beco
learn. Impi
groups. Tra
evenings. I
earn college
undergraduat
including the
funding.

Hopeful
science major
Several force
confusion abo
our students
do with it. S
to the lay pu
faculty coule
department g
and revision.

Second.
could earn
certification
adopt. beyon
Legislature p
attend parent
certification.
legislation jus

the real world exposure that students need to perform as competent skills trainers.

AVAILABLE RESOURCES

What faculty resources are available to carry out such a curriculum? Among others, we have strength in the areas of curriculum development, design, delivery, and evaluation. The recent drop in the number of Home Economics Education majors has reduced demand for the curriculum development expertise in many departments. A skills training focus would rely heavily on the curriculum development skills of faculty to create new training programs and to teach curriculum development in the generic courses listed above.

The intervention faculty in most departments have well developed talents useful in skills training programs. Where such expertise is not present, consultants can teach existing faculty to lead these programs in a very short time. Once a faculty member becomes proficient in one program, the same basic skills can apply to other programs. There is no reason to assume that the low cost expertise needed to train students does not exist.

To become proficient as skills trainers, students must practice what they learn. Implied in such a curriculum are facilities to conduct skills training groups. Training groups can use empty classrooms on weekends and weekday evenings. In addition, group participants can take courses for which they earn college credit. Adopting a family intervention thrust for the undergraduate curriculum can open the door to many interesting options, including the opportunity to conduct research and to seek demonstration grant funding.

ANTICIPATED OUTCOME

Hopefully, as a result of adding a skills training component to the family science major, both male and female students would find the major attractive. Several forces may account for this change. First, student and faculty confusion about the goals and intent of the major would lessen. Currently, our students do not have a clear grasp of what they know or what they can do with it. Similarly, many faculty have difficulty articulating their expertise to the lay public. As a result of greater specificity of program goals, we as faculty could do a better job of directing ourselves toward specific department goals. Department profiling might be easier. Course development and revision would take on renewed importance.

Second, as a result of providing a skills training emphasis, students could earn certification as Family Life Educators (FLE). While this certification is not widely recognized, it can provide a goal for students to adopt, beyond merely completing course work. Recently, the Minnesota Legislature passed a bill allocating funds for parents of preschool children to attend parent education training led by a FLE certified instructor. With FLE certification, our students could compete for the positions created by similar legislation just beginning to affect the field of mental health.

Third, a skills training based curriculum would enable students to access a soon-to-expand job market. One example of such expansion is with health maintenance organizations (HMO). The HMOs are learning that spending a little money on preventative education can save a lot of money in treatment costs. Consequently, they have instituted childbirth preparation classes, smoking cessation programs, high blood pressure management classes, etc. Also, as the remedial potential of skills training becomes better known, it may supplant traditional mental health services. HMOs will want to hire our students because they will cost less than Ph.D.s. and because they can competently design, conduct, and evaluate prevention programming. Business and industry employers, through Employee Assistance Programs (EAP), also are realizing the need for prevention and remedial programming. Other potential employers include business management training organizations, churches, and community mental health agencies. There are many, many opportunities both currently and potentially available to those with expertise in family science content and skills training.

In conclusion, family science undergraduate programs have not kept pace with the needs of today's students. If we are to increase the attractiveness and vitality of the family science major, we must add a component to the undergraduate curriculum. That component needs to be training in real skills that will allow students to sell their knowledge. We can no longer depend on the largeness of other majors to generate the bulk of our student credit hours through a basic courtship and marriage course. We must redevelop a thrust of our own. I believe skills training is one of the best and most easily implemented thrusts that is now available.

FOOTNOTES

1. More information about skills training is available from the Interpersonal Skills Training and Research Association, Luciano L'Abate, University Plaza, Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA 30303.

REFERENCES

- Burr, W. R. (1984). Family discipline task force report. *NCFR Report*, December.
- Davis, K. (1985). The study of marriage and the family as a scientific discipline. *NCFR Report*, March.
- Guerney, B., Jr. (1982). The delivery of mental health services: Spiritual vs. medical vs. educational models. In T. R. Vallance & R. M. Sabre (Eds.), *Mental health services in transition: A policy source book*. New York: Sciences.
- L'Abate, L., & Milan, M. (1985). *Handbook of social skills training and research*. New York: Wiley.

The
supporters
discipline.
While the
not have th

The
coordinate
of identify
can be a
implementa
can be cha
colleagues
can be di
subsequent

The
foremost is
the Family
people who
are the fron

A sec
acquisition
Science Rev
supporting p

At the
Anyone int
send their n

E
I
S

A

A review
lead to all
Prior to the
taught in the