

Executive Summary

A Review of the Labour Market Status of Home Economists in PEI

Submitted To: PEI Home Economics Association & UPEI (Dept. of Family & Nutritional Sciences)

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Foreword

In completing this Study, the Consulting Team gathered a wide range of information and data in an effort to fully identify and explore the issues facing the profession within the current labour market. The attached Reports attempt to capture the range and scope of the information collected, and provide some analysis, interpretation, and possible directions.

In completing the task, it was apparent that there was often a “spectrum” of views and interpretations regarding the nature of the Study itself, the research methodology, the findings, the interpretations and the possible directions. These Reports in and of themselves will not answer nor reassure all the questions and concerns that may be generated by their contents.

While certain findings, facts and interpretations may be subject to further question and critique, the overall message that comes through in terms of the essential issues and challenges facing the Home Economics profession are clear. The following reports are intended to provide additional direction, guidance and support to both the PEI Home Economics Association and the Department of Family and Nutritional Sciences at UPEI as they continue on a their mutual journey toward the renewal of the profession.

I **Executive Summary**

1.1 Introduction

In April 2001, with funding assistance from Human Resources Development Canada, the PEI Home Economics Association (PEIHEA), and the Department of Family & Nutritional Sciences (FNS) at the University of Prince Edward Island initiated a Study into labour market status of home economists on PEI.

The essential objective of the study was to identify and explore both the employability barriers and opportunities that are facing the profession, and to gain a clearer understanding of what the profession needs to do to re-establish itself as a viable force in the labour market.

A team of local consultants, Steve McQuaid, Terry Allen and Nishka Smith, were contracted to complete the Study. The Study Team was guided by the Project Sponsors, and a Steering Committee made up of a number of local home economists, including: a person from PEI Business Development, a private consultant, a representative from Human Resources Development Canada, two former members of the UPEI Home Economics faculty, a members of the UPEI Women in Management Extension Program, and the President/Board Chairperson of the Canadian Home Economics Association.

The Project sponsors believe the knowledge base and skills, that home economists and Family and Nutritional Science graduates have, continue to be relevant in terms of current family and community needs. However, it is clear that the demands and requirements of labour market have changed, and there is a need for the profession to more fully understand these changes, and develop strategies to better position and promote itself to the broader community.

1.2 Immediate Issues

The PEIHEA has seen its membership numbers decline in recent years. A large part of this decline can be attributed to the significant increase in the Canadian Home Economics Association (CHEA) fees in the early 1990's; many existing members either were not able to afford the increase, or were forced to choose between Associations. The Association has also experienced difficulty in attracting new and younger members. As its membership base has declined, this has weakened the Association's capacity to actively promote itself to the community generally, and to employers in particular.

Over the past decade, the student enrollment in the Home Economics program at UPEI was static, and there was a continuing concern with regard to attracting and retaining quality level students. While it appeared that the program and curriculum content was relevant to many of the health and social needs at the community level, an insufficient number of students saw Home Economics as an attractive or viable career path. In response to this the University undertook a process to change the name of the Department to the Family and Nutritional Sciences Program. The program curriculum was reorganized into two programs: the Food and Nutrition major and the Family Science Major.

1.3 Study Methodology

The Project methodology included a series of quantitative and qualitative methods and tasks including:

- A literature search, conducted in an effort to get a sense of key factors that seem to be impacting on the issue of employability, and any other current or emerging issues which are impacting on the profession generally.
- A series of focus group consultations/interviews with groups from within the profession including members of the PEIHEA, retired home economists,

students, members of FNS faculty, members of the Home Economics Teachers Association, Dietitians, home economists employed in roles in which home economics was not the primary focus, and home economics professional from out-of-province/country.

- A series of telephone interviews with potential employers in the community, and public and private sectors. And lastly,
- A performance skills mapping exercise to identify and document the current knowledge base and skill sets of the profession.

2.0 Summary of Key Findings & Themes

In terms of the research findings, a number of strong themes emerged which were instructive in terms of both the history and strengths of the profession, the challenges that it is facing, and the future possibilities that lie before it. Some of the highlights include:

2.1 Strengths of the Profession

While the current challenges are daunting, the home economics profession has a number of inherent strengths which can be used as a basis to build toward the future. These strengths have been expressed in a number of ways, and at their essence, they remain very much relevant in terms of many current family and social issues. Some of these strengths or assets include:

- Home economics, in terms of its vision, has seen itself as a profession interested in, and responsive to social and community needs. Many of the family and community needs that challenged the profession over the past century continue to be much in evidence (albeit in a more modern, different context) as we enter the new century. Issues such as family and child poverty, domestic violence, balancing work and family life, timely access to

health care services, helping people deal with life transitions, and addressing the needs of the elderly remain very much with us.

- The profession has always embraced a “holistic” approach, and views human and social issues as being multi-dimensional and complex. Hence, the profession has always been committed to a diverse study/preparation curriculum with a solid balance of both theoretical and practical applications; this ensures that its graduates are well prepared to respond/adapt to a wide variety of work/career options.
- A belief in the importance and value of a multi-disciplinary approach as a more effective response to many human and social issues. Over the years, the profession has developed collaborations and partnerships with other like-minded professions, groups and associations. In the future, this interface is going to be very critical as the profession moves through a transition period.
- While our modern current is different, the family and social issues that confront many professionals today are familiar; many of these issues still demand society’s attention and response, and the Home Economics profession can still play an important role. The well-being of individuals, families and communities has always been the central focus of the profession; no other profession has so comprehensively centred itself on working to ensure family success. This focus can serve as an “anchor point” in addressing the current challenges.

2.2 Challenges:

The specialization of the disciplines that were originally part of the Home Economics domain. In addition to new social and scientific research, and the explosion of knowledge generally, there are a number of social factors

which moved the profession toward greater specialization: changing social and cultural values, the roles of women, changing family structures, and the balance between work and family.

Many Home Economists speak highly of their education/training experience, but believe that the profession is not well “positioned” to effectively respond to many of today’s pressing family and social issues. While many acknowledge the inherent capacity of Home Economists to contribute, and can identify what they see as future possibilities, they see a profession that is not well connected with today’s labour market.

Employers confirmed this perception. With the exception of nutrition and dietetics, most employers consulted were unaware of what the generalist home economist, or Family Sciences graduates from UPEI had to offer. Even though the generalist has a diverse range of skill and knowledge, the employment market is generally weak. Unless an individual is specialized, or is entrepreneurial and proactive, there appears to be limited employment options available. Many employers who were approached to discuss their awareness of the profession, and their staffing needs, were open to receiving more information, and most were open to exploring the concept of student practicums.

- General labour market data further reflects this picture. There appear to be fewer new job opportunities for the home economist who is a generalist. In addition, there appears to be a “disconnect” between the growing needs of families and communities, the awareness/recognition of what skills and competencies that home economists have to contribute, and the employment opportunities that are available for people with these skills.

Professional title and image is an important issue. The overwhelming view and perceptions was, despite the history and inherent strengths of the

profession, that the title does not adequately describe today's practitioner, nor does it convey a positive public image of today's practitioner. In short, the title of "Home Economist" no longer resonates well with many practitioners working in the field, especially with many of the younger practitioners, recent graduates and students.

3.0 Strategic Directions & Actions

In attempting to outline some broad strategic directions, it is acknowledged that the current position and needs of the two sponsoring partners are different. The PEI Home Economics Association, together with its national and provincial counterparts, is in the early stages of a process of defining a new purpose and direction which will be able to capture the interests and commitment of potential members, and can be sustainable over the long term. On the other hand, the Family and Nutritional Sciences Department has already made some critical decisions about how it wishes to design and develop the future of its program. Its needs are to seek ways to strengthen and build on this new direction.

The following strategic directions are first stated in the form of a broad statement, then each one is accompanied by a series of recommended actions to achieve the goal. Some of these goals are things that can be addressed reasonably quickly and with limited resources; others are more long term, and will require additional resources to achieve.

3.1 The PEI Home Economics Association

Given the broader trends noted above, and the PEIHEA's interest in increasing its membership, increasing the employability of members, and its profile and influence on the community generally, the following strategic directions and actions are proposed.

Issue # 1 – Managing Change

The Association has been (and will continue to be) impacted by change: e.g. the focus and direction of CHEA , (fee change, the CHEA Summit), the focus and direction of the UPEI FNS Department, the perception/issues with regard to professional title, and changing consumer/employer needs and expectations.

Strategic Direction:

Begin to More Effectively Manage the Transition Issues: the Association needs to begin to more effectively manage the “change issues” in a way that allows its traditional strengths and capacity to adapt and respond to the new needs of families, consumers and employers, and labour market challenges.

Strategic Actions:

- (1) Mobilize/Energize the Profession:** Using this Report as a basis, the Association should conduct a series of meetings with a broad cross section of members and potential members. This exercise will provide background and context to the issues facing the profession generally, and begin to stimulate awareness and commitment regarding the need to re-establish a stronger community profile and presence. It will also provide an opportunity to invite a broader range of ideas and suggestions on future directions and priorities.

- (2) **Establish a “Creating the Desired Future” Committee:** This Committee should have broad membership including existing members, potential members, younger graduates, and students. The essential task of this Committee would be to assume a leadership role in addressing the “change issues”. Using this Report as a starting point, develop an action plan to implement a new direction for the Association.
- (3) **Address the Issue of Professional Title:** Make a decision to address the issue of title, and establish a structured process to allow/invite members of the profession to explore the option of a change of professional title/name. The outcome(s) of the Canadian Home Economics Association Summit which is to be held later this fall (2001) may help to assist/support this initiative.

Issue # 2 - Declining Membership Base

There is a need to build up the existing membership numbers to provide the Association with the necessary capacity to develop a long term direction and implement a plan of action.

Strategic Direction - Develop Steps to Strengthen and Expand the Membership Base of the Association.

Strategic Actions:

(1) Establish (or strengthen the role and mandate of an existing committee) a membership committee whose task is to develop and implement a strategy to recruit new members. This process would involve examining a range of issues with regard to membership; e.g. whether there could be various member categories, the benefits of being a member, how to add value to the experience of existing members, etc. The strategy should build on the new direction of the Association, and identify the type of expertise and experience it needs to get there.

(2) The Committee should target its recruitment energy in three areas:

- a) The recruitment of past members who may have let their membership lapse;
- b) The recruitment of members who could bring specific organizational knowledge and skills to the task of managing change and building capacity; and
- c) The recruitment of new graduates and students.

Issue # 3 - Profile and Visibility

The Association and the profession is not highly visible within the community generally, and with the employers community in particular.

Strategic Direction: Continue the Process of Reframing the Profile and Activities of the PEI Home Economics Association.

Strategic Actions:

- (1) Develop A Strong Theme/Message And Actively Promote It:** Drawing on the strengths of the profession, identify one or two key themes or messages (focus on the interests and needs of families and consumers) that can be easily presented and understood by the public, government leaders and agencies, and employers. Use these messages/themes as a basis to inform, and to convince others you have the knowledge and skills that are needed.
- (2) Focus On Changing Behaviour/Actions of the Association:** There is a need to demonstrate/show the community at large, and public/private sector employers what Home Economists and Family & Nutritional Science graduates can do, and how the profession contributes to, and fosters conditions which impact on the well-being of individuals, families and communities. The Association could more actively promote existing initiatives (Skills Development Project, work with School Breakfast Programs, Children's – Family Expo, letters to the editor, etc).
- (3) Focus On Issues Relevant To The PEI Community:** Continue to explore/act upon current issues that are important and relevant to individuals, families and communities (eg: child poverty, work/family balance, healthy/active living, etc). People tend to be more animated and inspired by issues that are meaningful and important to them.
- (4) Promote And Celebrate The Competencies And Skills Of The Profession:** actively support and promote Association members who are engaged in the community; look for creative ways to promote and celebrate the competencies that professional Home Economists, Family & Nutritional Science Graduates, Dietitians, and Nutritionists bring to their respective roles, and the contributions they are making to the community.
- (5) Develop A Media Strategy:** using the core message(s) identified above, develop and implement a media strategy which will help to increase the community's level of understanding and awareness of the issues and the

profession's capacity. Explore how to creatively use the media, and develop both the tools, and the outlets to distribute the message, eg. newspaper, radio or T.V. (See appendix H for an outline of a possible media strategy).

Issue # 4 – Developing Partnerships and Collaborations

The Association may be working too much in isolation; there is a need to begin to develop working relationships with associations and groups with similar views and interests.

Strategic Direction: Build on the diversity of the profession, and develop strategic alliances or collaborations with prospective partners.

Strategic Actions:

- 1) **Reach Out To Home Economics Teachers Association, Dietitians, and the FNS Department:** Invite these two groups to join the HE Association in addressing an issue of mutual concern. E.g. approaching Dept. of Education and School Boards with regard to changes in school curriculum, or the qualifications of teachers teaching home economics.
- 2) **Identify Other Likely Allies:** Identify other groups, associations and organizations which share some of the same population health concerns, and would be logical groups to with which to collaborate; e.g Healthy Eating Alliance, Active Living Alliance, Child Alliance, etc.
- 3) **Host A Discussion Forum:** Invite representatives/participants from some of these organizations and groups to explore how potential collaborations and partnerships might strengthen everyone's capacity to contribute to healthy family and community outcomes.
- 4) **Set A Goal:** Establish at least two strategic partnerships with allied professional groups or associations (within the province) over the next year; this will help to increase awareness of the home economics profession among other groups, and will help to demonstrate the capacity of the profession.

Issue # 5 – Build Capacity and Resources

In order to move forward to strengthen and re-position the profession, resources (time, energy, dollars) will be required.

Strategic Direction: Establish an infrastructure and resource base to

support the vision, goals, and activities of the Association.

Strategic Actions:

- (1) Develop a plan to have an office base and an executive staff position in place within the next three years; develop a concept plan of what this might look like and how it could be implemented.
- (2) Explore this concept with the Association membership, and representatives from the Dietetics Association and the Home Economic Teachers Association to get their view of benefits and potential barriers. Seek views and consensus on the direction.
- (3) Conduct an asset mapping exercise within the Association and its potential membership base; this would involve documenting the experiences and skills that individual home economists could bring to the collective efforts of strengthening the Association.
- (4) Contact other professional associations and/or provinces (who may have taken this step), and explore how they approached the task, how funding was secured, the setting up of the office, etc. (e.g Nurses, Licensed Nursing Assistants, Province of Ontario)
- (5) Identify potential funding sources (governments – through project funding streams, Foundations, others)

3.2 Department of Family & Nutritional Sciences

Issue # 1 – Student Enrollment and Retention

The capacity to increase the number and retain a quality level of student in the program (particularly Family Science) continues to be a concern.

Strategic Direction:

In collaboration with the Faculty of Science Administration and the UPEI Information and Alumni Office, establish a goal to attract and retain 15-20 students to the FNS Program each year.

Strategic Actions:

- (1) **Establish Target the Alumni of UPEI FNS:** Former/recent graduates should be some of the best sales people for the program. A first step would be to develop a database of all former FNS students, and break this list down into those who have direct contact with potential students, and those that might have some influence. Send regular updates on the program and ask for their support to solicit students for the program.
- (2) **Develop a UPEI FNS Multi-Media Promotion:** A multi-media promotional package could be developed to promote the FNS program. Once developed it could be on CD, on line through the UPEI website, or both. This would require resources and Holland College may be able to help. The College has recently started an Interactive Multimedia Program in co-operation with Sheridan College. Students take on multimedia projects as a group activity as part the program. The cost is minimal the FNS faculty would need to be prepared to provide time to develop content information for the project.

The projects are usually developed over a four-month period. They start in September and January. For more information contact Ann Greyborn – Learning Manager IMM Program, Holland College. (902) 566-9567 agreyborn@hollandc.pe.ca

- (3) **Develop FNS Students-in-School Projects:** Existing FNS students may be a good link with potential FNS students because of their age. Consideration should be given to developing small (in terms of time and resources) but interesting projects that could be delivered to high school students by FNS undergraduate students. This could be coordinated through high school teachers. The potential subject areas for such and

initiative would need to be discussed between faculty, FNS students and schools.

- (4) **Student/Group Tours:** Arrange opportunities to have potential students visit the FNS facilities on campus. A general invitation to all senior high schools could be sent out from the FNS Department annually. Any tours given should include access to both faculty and FNS students so that potential students can be exposed to all aspects of the program. Again, this could be coordinated with the high school home economic teachers.
- (5) **Solicit Family Studies Teacher Support:** In many instances, high school teachers who are involved with aspects of the school curriculum that complement the FNS program, can be a prime support group for recruitment. Consideration should be given to hosting an annual meeting with these teachers at the UPEI FNS Department; the agenda might include a small in-service, an update on the FNS program and a social time.
- (6) **Develop Professional Quality Promotional Materials:** Re-develop existing a high school specific brochure/materials, and target to high school teachers and guidance personnel. Again, Holland College graphic art students may be a resource.
- (7) **Ensure Program Flexibility/Diversity To The Degree Possible;** e.g. strengthen the community development focus, include some health promotion and wellness options. In addition, students should also be encouraged (or perhaps it should be mandatory) to take additional courses in management, business (marketing, business planning, and entrepreneurship).
- (8) **Continue Promote The Value Of The “Soft Skills:** Continue to promote other important skills such as; teamwork, communication, problem solving, leadership skills and management; (ensure that students know the importance employers place on these skills).

Issue # 2 – Strengthening the Family Science Major

The Family Science Major is currently underdeveloped.

Strategic Direction: To develop and promote the Family Science Major stream to ensure that it is an attractive option for students.

Strategic Actions:

(1) Develop the Family Science link with the Certified Canadian Family Educator (CCFE) program. Family Service Canada administers this program, and there is a PEI contact who would support efforts to help graduates obtain the CCFE certification.

(2) Continue to strengthen the FS curriculum: e.g training family education, human development, human sexuality, interpersonal relationships, values education, and program planning.

(3) Develop a formal student placement/practicum program for students; in collaboration with the University Cooperative Program Office, design it so students can gain practical experiences throughout their program. (use the Integrated Dietetic Internship Program as a model).

(4) Explore student interest in the aging/gerontology studies option by providing some course options to students.

(5) Explore the possibility of an articulation agreement between UPEI and Holland College to allow students who graduate with an Early Child Development or a Human Services diploma, to transfer over and pursue a bachelor's degree.

Issue # 3 – Identify Employment Options

The labour market has changed and there is a need to develop new strategies to open up employment opportunities for graduates.

Strategic Direction:

To expand the employment options for Family and Nutritional Science graduates.

Strategic Actions:

(1) Broaden The Base Of Student Exposure And Experience: By expanding practicum options in both Family Science and Food & Nutrition, continue to strategically place students in a wide range of work areas. This diversity of experience will help build exposure for the knowledge/skills base, and broaden future employment options for students.

For Family Science in particular, options and/or project initiatives should be developed to help students increase their visibility and profile; e.g. students could become involved in making presentations to family living classes in junior/senior high schools; they could be involved in helping to organize conferences/workshops for community agencies, developing resources for community agencies, working on projects/practicums with the Department of Health & Social Services, or doing research with the Centre for the Study of Health & Aging.

(2) Be Proactive With Prospective Employers: There is a need to “get the message out” to prospective employers; this can be done through a number of strategies: targeted promotional materials, expanding the diversity of student practicum placement, and developing “insider” contacts

and networks wherever possible.

(3) Develop The Link With The University Cooperative Education

Program: A new Cooperative Education Staff person has been recently hired, and she has already approached the FNS Department. There appears to be a good possibility that FNS students, particularly Family Science majors, will be able to participate; this option should be fully explored .

(4) Connect The Program, Faculty And Students With The Broad

Community; develop partnerships and/or alliances with agencies like the Food Technology Centre, Food & Processing Industry, the Restaurant Association, the Culinary Institute, the Health, Wellness and Fitness sector, and the Dept of Health & Social Services.

An example of how this might work: the Executive Director for the Food & Beverage Association has indicated that they could provide the Family & Nutritional Sciences Department with an opportunity to make a presentation to the Association's Employers Group (about 12 different employers, including businesses such as Polar Foods, Purity Dairy, and Cavendish Farms). This would provide a good opportunity to promote both the program and students to a group of employers, and perhaps open up future placement and employment prospects.

(5) See The Current Home Economics Newsletter Mailing List As A

Resource - Use a networking strategy to approach former home economists who are working in non-traditional public and/or private sector roles to host information/promotional sessions within their jurisdictions to promote students in terms of possible practicum and/or employment placements. In addition, the Newsletter could be used as a communication vehicle to better link high school teachers and students, university faculty

and students, and PEIHEA members.

- (6) Continue To Develop The Family Science's Profile With The Department Of Health & Social Services:** The Department of Health & Social Services is embarking on a broad health strategy which is placing a high emphasis on early childhood development, and health and wellness. Divisions such as Child & Family Services, Income Support, and Public Health Nursing are areas to approach. Identify some "friends" inside in the Health and Social Services system; these would be persons who are knowledgeable with the FNS program and its students, and would be willing to promote and advocate for practicum placements.
- (7) Expose Students to Self Employment Options:** Explore the option of having 3rd or 4th year students develop a business project/self-employment proposal as part of their entrepreneurial study and/or experience. This could be adapted after an existing student "Policy Project" that 4th year business students must complete.

Issue # 4 – Build On Existing Direction and Focus

There is a need to continue to strengthen and expand the profile and influence of Family & Nutritional Sciences Program within the University and the community generally.

Strategic Direction:

Continue to strengthen the profile and image of the Family & Nutritional Sciences Department within the University, High and Junior High Schools across the province, with employers, and the community generally.

Strategic Action(s):

- (1) Develop Critical Partnerships with Other University Stakeholders:** In collaboration with the Faculty of Science, the Office of Recruitment and Retention, and the Information & Alumni Office, develop a FNS promotional plan. The series of strategic actions outlined with regard to issues # 1 and # 3 could be used as a basis for this plan.

- (2) Create A Power Point Presentation For The Family & Nutritional Department** – this would be an a presentation which would highlight mission/vision of the Department, its history, the two program majors, core curriculum, its practicum and internship features, what graduates can go on to in terms of career and employment, and some of the unique ways in which the Department contributes to the community generally. This presentation could be used as an promotional tool in a wide variety of settings – with government, with businesses, and with community organizations and groups.

4.0 Conclusion

The PEI Home Economics Association

The PEI Home Economics Association has seen its profile slowly diminish over the past two decades, both in terms of member interest and participation, and in terms of visible activity within the community generally. There is a sense that, unless the profession takes steps to re-position and promote itself, it will continue to decline in terms of active membership, and its contribution to the community.

The Association, together with its national and provincial counterparts, is in the early stages of a process of defining a new purpose and direction which will be able to capture the interests and commitment of potential members, and can be sustainable over the long term. Some of the essential questions around purpose, focus and title have been around for this past decade or more, and the searching process is likely to be continued into the foreseeable future. The Association is looking to this Study to provide content and structure to guide a renewal process.

The Department of Family and Nutritional Sciences

The Department of Family and Nutritional Sciences (previously the Home Economics Department) has already taken a number of steps in addressing its own questions of profile and relevancy. In 1997, in response to its concern over student enrollment, it moved to change the name of the Department to the Family & Nutritional Sciences, and provided students the option to major in either Family Science or Foods and Nutrition.

In many respects, the Family and Nutritional Sciences Department has

already made the critical decisions about how it wishes to design and develop the future of the program. While the transition is still new, and the initial results regarding enrollment are promising, the quality of the incoming student and student retention remain important issues. The Department hopes to build on its work to date, expand its efforts to further cultivate student interest, and build its profile within the broader employer community.

Both the PEIHEA and the Department of FNS have acknowledged that the profession is at a crossroads. While each organization has its own individual challenges to address as they move forward, both partners see themselves continuing to work together to create the conditions to help current home economists, and future Family and Nutritional Science graduates, find relevant, satisfying and appropriately paid employment.