

Chance Fields

Family and Consumer Sciences Education

3 June 2026

Why Practice Houses Should Return to Family and Consumer Sciences Education Nationwide

Practice houses should return to Family and Consumer Sciences education because they offer one of the strongest ways to connect the history of the profession with the needs of students today. For much of its history, home economics, now known as Family and Consumer Sciences, was built around the belief that education should improve daily life. The field was never meant to exist only in textbooks. It was meant to help people understand food, housing, family relationships, consumer choices, child development, health, work, and community responsibility. A practice house gave students a place to live out those ideas. It allowed them to move from theory into action. At a time when many people still misunderstand FCS or reduce it to cooking and sewing, the return of practice houses would help prove that the field is broader, more serious, and more necessary than the stereotypes suggest.

The need for practice houses begins with the need to better explain what FCS actually is. The American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences defines FCS as a people centered science focused on helping individuals, families, and communities live healthy and successful lives through education, research, and technology ("What Is FCS?"). That definition matters because it places FCS directly in the middle of daily human needs. The field includes content areas such as nutrition, wellness, housing, interior design, human development, family relations, personal and family finance, textiles, apparel, hospitality, and education ("What Is FCS?"). These are not minor subjects. They are the areas people carry with them throughout life. If FCS teaches life, then FCS needs learning spaces that look and function like life.

Practice houses also matter because they fit the original purpose of the profession. Home management houses were once a major part of home economics programs in higher education. Sharon Y. Nickols explains that, for much of the twentieth century, living in a home management house so students could apply household resource management was a core feature of the home economics curriculum (218). These houses were more than buildings. They were educational laboratories where students learned by managing real responsibilities. They practiced planning, cooperation, decision making, and household organization in a setting that demanded more than memorization. The fact that these spaces existed across many colleges and universities shows that the profession once understood something important. Some lessons in FCS become more meaningful when students must actually use them.

At the same time, the return of practice houses should not mean copying the past without question. Early practice houses reflected the gender expectations and social views of their time. A modern practice house should be different. It should be inclusive, open to all students, and built around shared responsibility rather than assigned roles. It should not teach one narrow idea of what a home is supposed to look like. Instead, it should teach students how homes, families, and communities function in many different situations. The goal would not be to recreate an old fashioned version of homemaking. The goal would be to reclaim the best idea behind practice houses and update it for the world students actually live in today.

Homemaking itself also needs to be understood more seriously. Too often, the word is treated as if it only means chores. In reality, homemaking is life management. It includes creating safe and healthy spaces, making responsible financial decisions, planning meals, caring for others, communicating well, managing resources, and building community. These are not outdated responsibilities. They are human responsibilities. A person may live alone, with

roommates, with a partner, with children, with extended family, or in another living arrangement, but everyone still has to manage daily life. A modern practice house would help students understand that home is not only a location. It is a system of decisions, relationships, resources, and care.

The educational strength of a practice house is also supported by the theory of experiential education. The Association for Experiential Education explains that experiential education engages learners in direct experience and focused reflection so they can increase knowledge, develop skills, clarify values, and strengthen their ability to contribute to communities ("What Is Experiential Education?"). That description fits FCS extremely well. A student can read about budgeting, but it is different to plan a household budget and see how every decision affects the group. A student can study nutrition, but it is different to plan meals, prepare food, manage costs, clean the kitchen, and reflect on what worked. A student can learn about communication, but it is different to share a space, divide responsibilities, and solve conflicts. A practice house turns classroom content into direct experience.

This kind of learning also connects strongly to the National Standards for Family and Consumer Sciences Education. The National Standards state that FCS prepares students for family life, work life, and careers by helping them develop knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors for success. The standards include goals such as strengthening individual and family well being, becoming responsible citizens and leaders, managing resources, balancing personal, home, family, and work lives, and using critical and creative thinking to solve problems in diverse environments (Family and Consumer Sciences National Standards 3.0). A practice house directly supports those goals. It gives students a setting where they can practice responsibility, leadership, resource management, problem solving, and teamwork in a way that feels real.

The same standards also recognize that FCS has moved beyond a narrow focus on technical homemaking skills and now addresses broader family, society, and career issues (Family and Consumer Sciences National Standards 3.0). That is exactly why practice houses should return. They would not pull FCS backward. They would move it forward by showing how modern FCS can still be practical, professional, and relevant. Students could use a practice house to study financial literacy, food systems, housing choices, child development, wellness, family communication, consumer decisions, community outreach, and career preparation. The house would become a visible model of the field itself. It would show that FCS is not one subject. It is an integrated way of understanding how people live and work.

Practice houses would also strengthen preparation for future FCS educators. A future teacher should not only know the content of FCS. A future teacher should understand why the content matters and how to explain its value to students, families, administrators, and communities. Participating in a practice house would give teacher candidates experiences they could carry into their own classrooms. They would be able to teach from lived examples rather than only from lesson plans. When students ask why a topic matters, a teacher with practice house experience could explain how budgeting, meal planning, laundry, cleaning, teamwork, family communication, and housing decisions connect to real life. That kind of preparation would make future FCS teachers stronger advocates for their programs.

This teacher preparation argument is important because FCS faces serious workforce concerns. The National Institute of Food and Agriculture states that there is an established and growing shortage of FCS professionals serving in educator positions in secondary education, higher education, and Extension education. NIFA also notes that these shortages can lead to positions being unfilled, filled by people without FCS credentials, or result in program closures

("Family & Consumer Sciences Education"). A practice house will not solve the national shortage by itself, but it could be one part of a larger solution. It could make FCS teacher education more visible, more meaningful, and more connected to the profession. When students can see and experience the value of FCS, they may be more likely to choose it as a career and remain committed to the field.

Practice houses could also help rebuild public understanding of FCS. AAFCS explains that FCS is a comprehensive body of skills, research, and knowledge that helps people make informed decisions about well being, relationships, and resources ("AAFCS & FCS FAQ"). That statement is powerful, but many people outside the field still do not see FCS that way. A practice house would make the definition visible. Instead of only saying that FCS teaches life skills, schools and universities could show students practicing them. Visitors could see FCS students managing budgets, preparing meals, organizing living spaces, planning family and community programs, practicing communication, and reflecting on their responsibilities. The house itself would become an argument for the value of the field.

A national return of practice houses could also support community outreach. Colleges and universities could use these spaces for workshops on budgeting, nutrition, food preparation, basic home care, independent living, child development, consumer decision making, and family communication. These are topics many people need but are not always taught directly. A practice house could allow FCS students to serve communities while also gaining experience in teaching, planning, and leadership. This would connect the profession to public service and would show that FCS is not only about what happens in a classroom. It is also about improving quality of life for individuals, families, and communities.

Another reason practice houses should return is that they develop the soft skills that students need in almost every career. Running a shared space requires leadership, cooperation, communication, organization, conflict resolution, accountability, and flexibility. These skills are often talked about in education, but they are not always practiced in meaningful ways. Research on home management house alumnae found that participants valued what they learned about group dynamics and cooperation after living in those residences (Tifft, Fletcher, and Junk 17). That finding matters today because students still need to learn how to work with others. A practice house would give them a real reason to practice those skills because the success of the house would depend on them.

Practice houses do not have to look exactly the same in every state or every university. Some programs may be able to support a full house. Others may use an apartment, a residential laboratory, a home management suite, or a community living space. The exact structure can change based on resources, campus size, and student needs. What matters most is the purpose. Students need a dedicated space where FCS becomes visible, active, and connected to life. If the profession wants people to understand that FCS is still here and still needed, then the field needs spaces that show that message clearly.

The Family and Consumer Sciences Body of Knowledge says that FCS professionals apply and share knowledge across disciplines while viewing human needs from a holistic perspective ("FCS Body of Knowledge"). A practice house would put that holistic perspective into action. It would bring together food, housing, relationships, money, wellness, leadership, education, and community. It would also show that no part of daily life exists completely by itself. A food decision can affect health and finances. A housing decision can affect safety and

family relationships. A communication decision can affect the whole group. This is the kind of connection FCS is built to teach.

Practice houses should return to FCS education nationwide because they honor the history of the profession while answering modern needs. They would help students practice real skills, prepare future teachers, strengthen public understanding, support community outreach, and give FCS a visible example of its own mission. Most importantly, they would remind people that homemaking is not simply a set of chores. It is responsibility, care, planning, leadership, and community building. Those lessons are not old. They are necessary. If FCS is truly about preparing people for life, work, families, and communities, then practice houses deserve to be part of its future again.

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