

HUMAN ECOLOGY IN AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

**Robert J. Griffore, Ph.D.
Lillian A. Phenice, Ph.D.
Michigan State University**

ABSTRACT

In the early 20th Century, human ecology evolved as a science and as a profession. Large and successful human ecology academic programs flourished at Land Grant and research universities. This paper reports a case study of the elimination of the College of Human Ecology at a large state university. It focuses in particular on complex processes and dynamics of program reorganization and elimination, loss of human ecology identity, loss of internal cohesiveness, and central administration decision-making. The events of this case study are not unique. Human ecology programs have been terminated and reorganized at other universities. Thus, for a variety of reasons, human ecology programs, as they have been known, are disappearing from American universities. The significance of these changes is considered and assessed.

Origins of Human Ecology

Ellen Swallow Richards created the field of human ecology in 1892 with a declaration that *Oekology* would be the science that dealt with normal lives and would teach principles leading to happy and healthy lives, (Clark,1973:120). The name of the field was changed to home economics in part because some felt that the term ecology would be difficult to understand. Moreover the field of ecology was established as a biological science.

Many American higher education institutions established home economics programs. Some of these programs, including the program at Michigan State University, were called women's programs. At the turn of the 20th Century, these programs were considered suitable for educating women in the practical arts and professions. At mid-20th Century, home economics programs had become an established presence especially at land grant universities and teacher education colleges.

By late-20th Century, the field of home economics was ready to evolve. This evolutionary transition received its intellectual impetus from the original conceptualization of the field as human ecology. In 1969, a College of Human Ecology was created at Cornell University. One year later the College of Home Economics at Michigan State University changed its name to the College of Human Ecology (Bubolz, 1996).

Led by enthusiastic faculty and administrators, Michigan State University formulated a model for human ecology that focused on the interaction of humans with their near environment. This formulation came at a time of growing interest in human environments among the general public. An important impetus for the evolution of human ecology from home economics at Michigan State University derived from the work of Beatrice Paolucci (Paolucci, 1962; Hook & Paolucci, 1970; Paolucci, Hall & Axinn, 1977). Her work provided a powerful foundational

perspective. In 1970 a committee of faculty at MSU recommended changing the name of the college to the College of Human Ecology, and the MSU Trustees approved this recommendation.

The years immediately following this transition were years of extraordinary leadership and productivity for the MSU College of Human Ecology. A structure was created in the college that was to become a template for other programs. This structure included the Department of Family and Child Sciences, the Department of Human Environment and Design, and the Department of Food Science and Human Nutrition. A Department of Family Ecology was created as the synthetic and integrative core. Later the Department of Family and Child Sciences combined with the Department of Family Ecology to form the Department of Family and Child Ecology. Several productive undergraduate programs and leading graduate programs were created. For example the MSU doctoral program in Family Ecology was a nationally recognized leader. The Institute for Family and Child Study was created as a major transdisciplinary research unit. It was a recipient of major Head Start funds to conduct training in the 1960s.

The College of Human Ecology enjoyed this pattern of successful development for several of reasons.

- Faculty members were unified in support of the College.
- Faculty members accepted and advocated initially a coherent theoretical position – the human ecosystems model.
- There was a sense of support for ecology in American culture. Environmentalism was an emerging American value. In American universities many of the disciplines, such as psychology and sociology, were becoming increasingly oriented toward ecological perspectives. The Arab oil embargo occurred in 1973, focusing attention especially on family energy use. These events conspired to provide a receptive context for human ecology.
- The College enjoyed the support of University administration.

Changes over Time

The MSU College of Human Ecology and its units continued in a pattern of strong growth, leadership and accomplishments during the 1980s and into the 1990s. This included significant expansion of the Child Development Laboratory and expansion of the Institute for Family and Child Study into the Institute for Children, Youth and Families.

However, beginning in the 1990s several ominous trends became progressively discernible.

- Faculty of the College lost their focus on a common intellectual core of ecological principles and concepts.
- Newly appointed faculty did not always share an affinity for a core of ecological principles and concepts.
- There was less attention on the national scale to environmental concerns.

- On a national scale, there were troubling signs that similar programs, called human ecology, home economics, and other similar names, were in jeopardy.
- Over time, the College of Human Ecology was supported less by Michigan State University central administration.
- The College of Human Ecology lost status at MSU.

The Decision to Eliminate the College of Human Ecology

The MSU College of Human Ecology exists within significant national and global professional communities. In many universities human ecology programs are known by other names, such as Family and Consumer Sciences. According to Smith (2004) 191 universities appear to have programs by this name, including 73 doctoral research-extensive universities. Other specific names include Human Science, Arts and Science, Life Sciences, Human Environmental Science, and Human Ecology. In addition, the MSU College of Human Ecology offers programs that are represented by the American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences (AAFCS). The MSU College of Human Ecology also is a member institution of the Board on Human Sciences (BOHS), in the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges (NASULGC). These professional affiliations are important indicators of national professional status.

Regardless of national stature and affiliations, early in 2004 Provost Lou Anna Simon announced that the College of Human Ecology would be eliminated. The closing of the College was announced in the context of a broader set of reorganization discussions involving the College of Human Medicine, the College of Arts and Letters and the College of Communication Arts and Sciences.

It would not be unusual for faculty members to unify in opposition to an announcement that their college will be closed. While a few College of Human Ecology faculty members voiced opposition to the elimination of the College, many seemed to take no position, and some suggested a degree of support for college elimination.

Among Michigan State University faculty in general, the proposal to close the College elicited virtually no commentary. This was quite in contrast to keen interest expressed broadly regarding proposed changes to Human Medicine, Arts and Letters, and, to some extent, Communication Arts and Sciences. Although there was discussion of reorganization of these other units, including discussion at a singular meeting of the University Academic Senate, the elimination of the College of Human Ecology caused no significant reaction.

Consequences and Implications

Approximately one year later, the College of Human Ecology still exists. It has not been formally eliminated by action of the Board of Trustees. Many academic programs have been relocated. The faculty of Family and Child Ecology have requested transition to the College of Social Science. It seems

likely that most programs from the College of Human Ecology will be retained in some form. However, as programs are scattered, Human Ecology will be lost.

At several major universities Human Ecology programs have been combined with other units. For example, at the University of Nebraska the programs were combined with education programs to create the College of Education and Human Sciences. Combinations with education are also found at the University of Delaware, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, Texas A&M University, the University of Vermont, Western Illinois University, Bowling Green State University, Marshall University and many others. The apparent resolve at MSU to eliminate all vestiges of Human Ecology appears to be unique.

In summary, the College of Human Ecology has maintained an excellent reputation through significant national and global academic and professional contributions and affiliations. While these are important factors, two other factors contributed to the vulnerability of the College of Human Ecology at Michigan State University. One was lack of cohesiveness and support among faculty. The other factor was lack of support from university administrators.

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