A college by another name

Eight names over the years:

- 1889  Department of Household Economy and Hygiene
- 1896  Department of Household Science and Hygiene
- 1908  School of Domestic Science and Art
- 1911  School of Home Economics
- 1983  College of Home Economics
- 1991  College of Home Economics and Education
- 2002  College of Health and Human Sciences
- 2011  College of Public Health and Human Sciences

The College of Public Health and Human Sciences includes:

- The School of Biological and Population Health Sciences (athletic training; biostatistics; environment, safety and health; epidemiology; exercise and sport science; nutrition)
- The School of Social and Behavioral Health Sciences (health management and policy; health promotion and health behavior; human development and family sciences)
- Design and human environment is slated to move from PHHS to the College of Business in July 2012
- Hallie Ford Center for Healthy Children and Families
- Center for Healthy Aging Research
- Moore Family Center for Whole Grain Foods, Nutrition and Preventative Health
- Extension Service programs in 4-H and family and community health
- Outreach Collaborative for a Healthy Oregon.

Oregon Agricultural College home economics students learn to repair faucets in a house sanitation course circa 1910, in what was then called the “Laundry Laboratory” in the Home Economics Building (now Milam Hall).

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By Ann Kinkley

Few academic units at Oregon State have reset their goals and scope as dramatically over the years as has what was once the College of Home Economics, whose 123-year tenure has been influenced by changing societal prejudices, budget cuts and enrollment, and whose modern-day mission is as cutting-edge as that of any OSU college.

However, the mission of what is now known as the College of Public Health and Human Sciences — lifelong health and well-being for every person, every family and every community — is also deeply rooted in history.

In the late 1800s, social reformers and scientists sought ways to improve the sanitation of American homes and therefore the health of the people living in them. Improved living conditions and quality and safety of food were goals of early courses in “Household Economy and Sanitation.”

Eager to stay abreast of the latest educational trends, Oregon’s land grant college began to search for the perfect candidate to develop this new curriculum. Wallis Nash, secretary of the Board of Regents of the State Agricultural College, was convinced the teaching of “...sanitary matters for household & person, for sickness & health, may have the most far reaching power of good in this young State.”

Nash (greatly encouraged by his wife Louisa, historical records confirm) wrote to a California medical doctor, Margaret Snell, in August 1888, requesting that she consider coming to Corvallis to create a course of study in household economy.

Snell was teaching at a girls’ seminary in Oakland. According to a letter written by Louisa Nash after visiting Snell: “…one of her aims is to teach the young how they may keep well & to avoid the illnesses that require the doctor’s services.”

Some of the regents balked at giving the job to a “lady-doctor,” but Snell was hired in September 1889 as professor of Household Economy and Hygiene at Oregon’s State Agricultural College, the fifth college in the nation to introduce this department.

A description of the “Domestic Economy Course” in the 1889-1890 course catalogue states: “Few things contribute so much to the welfare of a family, and hence of the State, as attention given to secure the good health of the household. The proper preparation of food is useful in two respects: first, it leads to health, and secondly to economy. The best methods of preparing food for the table, as well as the best methods of serving it, are taught in this department. And let no one suppose this matter a small one; there are good methods and bad ones.”

Snell greatly influenced the level of scientific study and the general atmosphere of the young campus. Within 10 years the department was known as Household Science.

Courses covered general hygiene, sewing, dressmaking, cookery, etiquette, aesthetics and domestic lectures. Snell spoke to civic leaders to raise funds for “shade trees about the public buildings” (still thriving in downtown Corvallis) and she designed homes with as much open-to-the-air spaces as possible, facing away from the street to private, tree-lined courtyards. One of her houses still stands on Monroe Street and has, for many years, housed a Catholic campus ministry.

Snell traveled the state with the college’s Farmer’s Institutes, lecturing on sanitation, public health, scientific nutrition and household management. These efforts were precursors to the founding of the OSU Extension Service, which to this day employs home economists to share the university’s expertise in all corners of the state.

Coursework and focus evolved through the years. A master’s degree was offered in 1897 and research became an integral part of the school.

Snell retired in 1908, leaving a thriving School of Domestic Science and Art that would become the School of Home Economics in 1911. During World War I and the Great Depression, the school provided home demonstration agents to work throughout the state to teach the latest conservation methods. In 1922-23 Dean Ava Milam (Clark) surveyed home conditions in China and established a department of home economics at Yenching University in Peiping (now Beijing). International outreach continued with researchers and advisers dispatched to several continents. Back in Corvallis, a nursery school was established in 1925 to help with the study of child development. Correspondence courses and non-credit home study courses began in 1930.

For 90 years the popular name of the school/college remained the same — “Home Ec” — although its offerings and department names changed often as societal needs changed. Course offerings grew to include family life, housing for those with special needs, retail clothing and food specialities, clothing and textile design, and historical and ethnic costumes. Researchers delved into food and nutrition, institutional food service, child development, and later added gerontology, human sexuality and clothing merchandising. For about 10 years the college also included the School of Education.

The name of the college shifted most dramatically in 2002 when the College of Home Economics and the College of Health and Human Performance was merged to become the College of Health and Human Sciences.

For the first time in more than 100 years, the program was no longer branded “household,” “domestic” or “home.”

Some saw this as a step forward, adding value to the degree in the eyes of the public. Others argued that it minimized the central focus of the home as essential to improving society.

The current name, the College of Public Health and Human Sciences, reflects a decision in 2011, when the national Council on Education for Public Health approved OSU’s request to start the accreditation process to become the state’s first nationally accredited college of public health.

“It’s a good name for today,” says 1959 home economics alumna Suzanne Karat Darley of Stayton, although she did concede that “Home Ec” was easier to say. “I’d be thrilled to go back to school to take the courses that are offered today because we were much more limited in my day.”

Today’s PHHS students, 23% of them men, will continue to influence change — not only for the good of Oregon, but for people and societies around the world, with their increasing expertise in public health and human sciences.

One has to assume that Dr. Margaret Snell would be pleased.

Ann Cassinelli Kinkley, class notes and history & traditions editor of the Oregon Stater, is a 1977 home economics graduate with an emphasis in housing. She is pleased to report that as expected, she has used everything she studied at OSU at some time in her personal, professional or volunteer life.