

2018 McMurren Convocation Address
April 20, 2018
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Family and Consumer Sciences

**“Gross Domestic Product, Household Production, and
Macaroni and Cheese”**

Provost Beard, Distinguished Colleagues, family members, friends, and McMurren Scholars, it is an honor to be here today, for what are career beginnings for our newly inducted McMurren Scholars, and what is ominously called the “Last Lecture” for me. Previous last lectures have included heady quotes from Walt Whitman, Socrates, Galileo, Stephen Hawking, and other well-known writers, scientists and philosophers. I am not quoting from well-known people, but I do remain undaunted in my quest to provide a relevant lecture. So, a quote from THumper in the Walt Disney movie, *Bambi*, will have to suffice - “If you can’t say somethin’ nice, don’t say nothin’ at all.” This is going to be a “nice” lecture.

Historically people equate the study of Family and Consumer Sciences with “cooking and sewing,” which, in my opinion, is akin to studying biology without including Darwin’s ideas about evolution by natural selection. This is not to say that cooking is not important. In fact, its importance will become clear later in this talk. At the undergraduate level, I studied mostly personal finance and resource management along with a few sewing and fashion-related classes, but I have never had a cooking class. I’m now more interested in retirement planning, and I am content with the cooking and baking expertise of

my friends Betty Crocker, Duncan Hines and, of course, the Pillsbury dough boy, who are all frequent visitors at my house. This leads me to the main objective of my lecture, which is to present remarks on: the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), household production, and macaroni and cheese.

Most of you know the Gross Domestic Product, in a nutshell, is a measurement of economic output within a nation or the total of all products and services that are bought and sold for money including paid work. The GDP measurement includes income and expenditures, but does not include household production, which consists of unpaid services completed in the home - usually by the occupants.

There are several arguments as to why excluding household production makes the GDP inaccurate. Most stem from feminist theories that homemaking and other activities referred to as “social reproduction” are foundational to all social normalcy and therefore economic activity. Others argue that excluding household production from the GDP devalues women because it excludes primarily female-based activities. In the most recent American Time Use Survey, it was reported that on an average day, 21% of men do housework such as cleaning and laundry, while 50% of women engage in the same activities. Interestingly, 12% of the men reported they performed lawn and garden care, which most of us would typically, or at least historically, consider male activities, while 8% of women reported they mowed the lawn or gardened. Note the larger discrepancy between males and females in household chores such as dishes, vacuuming, and child care than in lawn care and gardening. This

discrepancy exists despite the increased number of women entering the paid labor force over the past 50 years.

The main argument against the inclusion of housework in the GDP is that increased female participation in the paid labor force, in addition to household production, would shift market output thereby increasing the GDP by approximately 26%, and creating a misleading picture of the overall growth of the economy. Shifting a man from market labor to home production would not increase home production hours much while a woman who was shifted from household work to paid labor would have a bigger impact because there is a significant difference in hours that employed and non-employed women devote to home production activities.

No matter what side of the argument you are on, it is important to realize that on average 85% of women and 69% of men spend some time during the day cooking, doing lawn care, or family bookkeeping, while still working outside the home. So, for a moment let's leave the discussion about household production and the GDP, and think about the value of human life because the two concepts are interconnected.

When I was a young professional and just beginning my academic career, I was contacted by an attorney who wanted expert testimony in the alleged wrongful death of a young mother. While unfortunate, the entire process was fascinating to me as a consumer scientist. I became increasingly aware that it was impossible to use the GDP, or any government-provided estimates, such as those suggested by the Food and Drug Administration which values a human life

at \$6 Million, or the Environmental Protection Agency which set the value of a human life at \$9.1 Million. Generally, these figures are not considered accurate because they tend to be politicized, and they wouldn't necessarily include family-provided household services. A third way of estimating the value of human life is based on how much harvested body organs are worth individually on the open market. The most recent estimate I found was \$45 Million which includes bone marrow, lungs, kidneys, and the heart. This estimate, for obvious reasons, could not be used in a wrongful death case. This left household production replacement value and a time span perspective as the only way to provide an objective monetary value to something as subjective as the services provided by a loved one in the home, including possible loss of consortium. The replacement value figure, which included calculating future earnings loss, children's education, and loss of household services was so high in the final analysis of the wrongful death case, that the opposing party settled out of court. In other words, the work of caring for family and loved ones—matters in astoundingly important ways.

So, what does this have to do with academic pursuits and McMurranscholars? You are the "crème de la crème" of this institution. You are the future of scientific research, education, health care, social services, technology, literature, and much more. Many of you may go on in your careers to publish articles, perhaps argue cases before the U.S. Supreme Court, or cure cancer. However, I suggest that all the important research we do in no way diminishes the value of home chores, child care, or other work that we might

find routinely performed at home for or by family members, and when compared to paid market employment, is no less important because it is what we value MOST in our lives. Home and family ARE THE REASONS workforce participation matters.

My point is that most of you will be employed in the labor force at one time or another. The products you produce, and the services you provide for a salary will, most likely, be included in the GDP. However, at the end of the day it's the personal service components of our lives, as mentioned a moment ago, that matter most despite the snub from economists. This leads me to my third point - That American favorite - macaroni and cheese.

The price of food away from home can, with a little economic or statistical analysis, be included in the GDP. The value can be computed because there is no emotional tie to the cook, the waitress, or the restaurant. Price is the key factor. However, if one of your parents makes macaroni and cheese for dinner, it can be transformed into a family tradition, and no amount of econometric mumbo jumbo can render the true economic value of the homemade macaroni dish and its importance to you.

Let me give an example. A few years ago, I was helping with a local church funeral dinner which consisted of store bought fried chicken and homemade macaroni and cheese, the latter prepared by several different women in the church. Mourners began to file past the buffet finishing off trays of chicken and mac-N-cheese like voracious raptors in a Jurassic Park movie. The bereaved were not there because a lot of chickens decided to give their

lives for a taste-test, but because someone's relative had died - a person whose value might very well be the subject of this paper. One man, in the line, asked where his mother's macaroni and cheese was. He was told his mother's tray of food had already been served, and the empty tray was in the kitchen. Without hesitation, he made a beeline to the kitchen, and proceeded to scrape and eat the remnants of his mother's macaroni and cheese from the sides of the empty aluminum serving pan. For this man, the best macaroni and cheese was made by his mother. But, he was wrong - I make the best macaroni and cheese - Just ask MY son!

Case in point, it's not the macaroni and cheese that's important, but who makes it. So, the question arises: why do we find it so difficult to put a value on those things that are most important to us but which we do not pay for? There are many examples about this in literature and the movies. Who can forget Orson Welles in *Citizen Kane*? As his character nears death, he whispers "Rosebud" as a poignant reminder that our family and friends, even to the end of life, are more important than making money. Oh, you could be buried with your money, but do you really want to be the wealthiest person in the cemetery?

How much are services such as reading a bedtime story, giving your child a bath, spending time with your spouse or partner, kissing a wound and applying a Band-Aid to a "boo-boo," or making macaroni and cheese really worth?

There are many arguments as to why household production should be included in the GDP, and just as many counterarguments. But the bottom line is that it is impossible to put a value on everyday activities such as making Halloween costumes, pushing a child on a swing, or holding hands with a loved one when the value of the service is based on who provides the service.

It is stimulating to debate what should be included in the measurement of our economy. But, how we apply and use our knowledge, raise our children, recognize the value of family members, and treat our communities are, in my opinion, what matters most.

There are many bright individuals here today especially in the front rows. You have lots of potential in your future, and hopefully will have rewarding careers, but don't forget the value of everything in your life. Harry Chapin's ballad "Cat's in the Cradle" poignantly laments life's opportunities are fleeting - grab them while you can. Some of you may need to Google this reference.

So I leave you with three final points to consider regarding household work and the value of life. First, don't take housework for granted. Someone will be grateful to you for doing it, and you need to appreciate those who do it for you. Second, remember your community is made up of family members, and friends. Seize every chance you can to perform community service. It's a sort of housework for the community, and it will be among the most rewarding and valuable roles of your life - It may actually define your worth. Both these are THumper-worthy "nice" things to do. Finally, learn how to make macaroni and

cheese. It won't do anything for the economy, but your family will always love it. Congratulations McMurrin Scholars, and enjoy your day. Thank you.