

UM recognizes history of oldest program

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MONTEVALLO — More than 100 years ago, women in Montevallo were becoming self-sufficient by attending the state's first home economics program at what is now the University of Montevallo. Today, the program has evolved into family and consumer sciences, teaching a very different set of topics and skills. Hat making has turned into retail merchandising. Animal butchering has become dietetics.

This summer the university recognized the program for its history in a resolution declaring it an "Alabama College Heritage Program."

The resolution was passed Aug. 5 by the UM Board of Trustees, calling the program "a significant part of the history and future of the University of Montevallo."

Laura Bloom, program coordinator, said the resolution was meaningful to the college.

"It recognizes the heritage and the impact of the program on campus," she said. "We're the oldest program on campus and this recognizes our contribution and rich history."

The college was the first institution in the state to offer instruction in home economics. Its creation in 1896 was merely an experiment, said Cynthia Shackelford, UM director of public relations.

"The number of males had been reduced because of the Civil War," she said. "Women here didn't have many opportunities to be self-supporting. The program helped women live on their own without the support of a husband, brother or uncle."

As times changed, so did the program, Bloom said. The college continued teaching cooking, sewing and childcare, but as the dynamics of families and women's careers evolved, so did the courses.

"Think of all the things that have changed since the 'Leave it to Beaver' family," Bloom said. "That's not the traditional family anymore. We still focus on kids, food and clothes, but it's so much more than that."

Today's family and consumer sciences students study topics such as the economy's effect on families, wellness and nutrition for children, diversity in the community and workplace, the aging population and maintaining a healthy environment.

The college is involved with research on purifying water, and students in retail merchandising can take a course on e-retail, selling clothes online.

The students learn in the community by participating in internships and community service, Bloom said. They work with childcares, non-profit organizations and local schools and churches.

“What I love about our courses is they’re not just academic, they’re real life,” Bloom said. “The classes are very hands on. Students aren’t just sitting in the classroom, they can go out and get a feel for what they’re reading and hearing about.”

Bloom said the focus of the college today is no longer just on changing the lives of individual students, but helping the students change the community around.

“The people in this field are a different breed, they have a different calling,” she said. “It’s about making a difference in the world.”