

## **Financial Security for All: A Pioneering eXtension.org Community of Practice**

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### **Abstract**

Launched in September 2005 as one of eight eXtension.org Pioneer Communities of Practice, the Financial Security for All (FSA) CoP continues to lead by engaging and empowering those seeking unbiased, research-informed education and tools to manage their personal finances and build financial well-being. It has also been a learning laboratory for CoP members, connecting intrigued and committed members to technology-enhanced learning environments and expanding Cooperative Extension personal finance programming efforts. Examples of recent FSA CoP deliverables include webinars, research briefs, Twitter chats, social media campaigns for America Saves Week, live video presentations via Google+ Hangouts, and Qualtrics surveys to evaluate program impact. In this article, we celebrate 10 years of FSA CoP connection, innovation, creative collaboration, and impact. We also look to the future, inviting fellow Extension professionals who seek to match content with technology to join the FSA CoP and share their subject matter and technology expertise.

List of Keywords: Financial education, Cooperative Extension, Financial Security for All, educational innovation

In 2015 the eXtension Financial Security for All (FSA) Community of Practice (CoP) celebrated 10 years of connection, innovation, creative collaboration, and impact. As one of the eight pioneering communities of practice, FSA joins 6 other communities that are celebrating this milestone. They are: Extension Disaster Education Network (EDEN), Imported Fireants, Consumer Horticulture, HorseQuest, Just-In-Time Parenting, and Wildlife Damage Management (Meisenbach 2006). In this article, we celebrate 10 years of FSA CoP connection, innovation, creative collaboration, and impact. We also look to the future, challenging fellow Extension professionals who seek to match content with technology to join the FSA CoP and share their subject matter and technology expertise.

## FSA CoP History

From its inception, one of the strengths of eXtension, and especially the Financial Security for All community, was the opportunity for connection. At a time when many family economics educators had just a few, or perhaps no other, subject matter colleagues in their states, the FSA community connected them to Cooperative Extension colleagues doing similar work to their own and to subject matter resources. Financial Security for All has connected family economics and family resource management Extension professionals from across the country. An early organizational chart for the community (n.d.) listed 88 Extension professionals from 45 states and 1 territory. Members represented 1862, 1890, and 1994 land-grant institutions as well USDA Cooperative State Research Education and Extension Service (CSREES; now organized as USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA)).

When they launched in 2005, the goal of eXtension communities of practice, was to provide reliable, research-based, and up-to-date information, including learning modules, fact sheets, and frequently asked questions (FAQs), with unbiased, peer-reviewed answers 24/7/365. Today such information availability and personal responsiveness is expected: at the time it was a leading-edge innovation. eXtension's original tagline, "More mind reach," expressed this spirit of innovation. Working in the eXtension collaborative "wiki" space and Drupal environments (i.e., online content management systems), FSA CoP members produced thousands of pages of online content. Other deliverables over the past 10 years include webinars, research briefs, Twitter chats, social media campaigns for *America Saves Week*, live video presentations via Google+ Hangouts, journal articles and conference presentations, and the use of the Qualtrics survey website to evaluate educational outreach efforts.

By 2011, the FSA CoP was curating 2,916 pages of published content. This included more than 1,800 published frequently asked questions (FAQs) (FSA CoP Profile 2011). In addition, nearly 1,200 incoming Ask an Expert (AaE) questions had been resolved, 19 learning modules were published or in progress, and 17 fact sheets or featured resources were available. An innovation at the time, FSA included a link to an evaluation survey on every one of its published FAQs. This link took readers to a web page that asked them to indicate if the response was useful and if they would put the information to use. While the total number of responses was limited, an analysis completed in 2010 indicated that 71 percent of respondents found the answer to a specific FAQ useful or very useful and 50 percent said they would definitely put the information into use (FSA CoP Profile 2011). The survey also collected valuable qualitative data such as these comments: "*Concise; direct to the question; will pass on. Thank you for this informative service*" and "*It's wonderful to have clear and understandable banking information from a source you can trust*" and "*Exactly what I wanted to know.*"

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## FSA CoP Accomplishments

Although the goals and purpose of eXtension have evolved over the years, the vision and mission of the Financial Security for All community (FSA CoP) have remained steady. The community's vision is: To be widely recognized as an educational provider that engages and empowers people to become capable to earn, save and invest, protect, spend, and borrow to build financial well-being across the life span. Its mission is: To be a community of Cooperative Extension family economics professionals who provide research-based information about personal finance topics to help people manage their money wisely and improve their lives. The vision and mission of the community are accomplished through collaborative activities, direct interaction with consumers, and research projects. Some activities have involved all of these components.

Along with innovations spurred by access to leading technologies, Financial Security for All has been a leader in creating and sustaining collaborations that benefit the Cooperative Extension system broadly. From longstanding collaborations such as America Saves Week to maturing collaborative activities such as Money Smart Week and a timely focus on health insurance literacy, the FSA CoP is a trusted and valued collaborator both with outside entities and within eXtension.

As an example, by 2015 the FSA CoP America Saves Week social media campaign, led annually by a state Extension specialist, reported the average number of recorded tweets with the hashtag #eXasw during the campaign month of February was 1,198 tweets from 2011 to 2015 (O'Neill 2015a). In 2015, more than 9 of 10 respondents to the professional collaborator end-of-campaign survey indicated they would participate in another social media financial education project and 52% said they received direct messages, retweets, likes, comments, and/or shares in response to their messages. Most importantly, almost all (95%) of consumers who received FSA CoP social media messages and completed a follow-up survey indicated that FSA CoP savings messages were useful or very useful and 39% joined America Saves, a campaign managed by the Consumer Federation of America that motivates households to save money, reduce debt, and build wealth, or said they planned to.

Other examples of collaborative social media activities include a first-ever one hour concurrent Twitter chat and Google Hangout during Money Smart Week in April 2015 using the hashtag #MSWchat and an end of year chat/hangout focused on end of year financial tips, #eXchat. Data from the #MSWchat report show that chat and hangout attracted several influential Twitter users. One definition of Twitter influence is having over 1,000 followers (O'Neill 2015b). Another measure of influence is reported by Hashttracking.com Their combined Twitter influence increased the outreach of the chat.

Members of the Financial Security for All Community of Practice (FSA CoP) have been actively involved in the planning and execution of Extension pre-conferences held ahead of the annual AFCPE Symposium. These regular pre-conferences provide an opportunity for both new and seasoned Extension professionals to come together to disseminate scholarship, participate in professional development activities, and network. The CoP has also been well represented by members presenting at national eXtension conferences.

Community leaders have also collaborated on research projects related to the activities engaged in by FSA. For example, one project sought to describe the development and evaluation of a financial education program delivered by social media (O'Neill, Zumwalt, Gutter, & Bechman 2011). Another research project sought to identify important and timely topics for the FSA community to focus on by comparing responses of educators and non-educators via an online survey (Abdul-Rahman, O'Neil, & O'Neill 2013).

As a component of eXtension, America's research-based learning network, the FSA CoP and its leaders have been recognized for the impact of their activities. For example, in 2007 the leadership team received the Outstanding Consumer Education Award from the Association for Financial Counseling and Planning Education. In 2009, it was recognized by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation with the Chairman's Award for Innovation in Financial Education. Other organizations recognizing the FSA CoP for the impact of its activities include: Epsilon Sigma Phi (2007), eXtension (2009), and the National Extension Association of Family and Consumer Sciences (2010 and 2015). The most recent award recognized the communities' social networking through Twitter chats and Google hangouts.

### **The Future of the FSA CoP**

In 2014, Cooperative Extension celebrated the 100-year anniversary of the signing of the Smith-Lever Act which created the national Cooperative Extension system. This state-by-state network extends knowledge and changes lives. Also in 2014, a process was undertaken by eXtension to review and re-invent itself. Not only does the resulting NEW eXtension retain its public-facing content, but there is also an increased emphasis on serving the needs of Extension professionals and a determination to continue to address the issues of the day in innovative ways to achieve visible and measurable impact.

Membership in the Financial Security for All community is open to anyone with an eXtensionID. In general, individuals working at or closely associated with the U.S. Cooperative Extension System, land-grant institutions, or individuals working on projects with Cooperative Extension staff are eligible for an eXtensionID (eXtension.org 2016). Everyone meeting these criteria is welcome!

Benefits of joining and becoming active in the FSA community are many and varied. The connections fostered with other family economics and personal finance Extension professionals provide access to a network of colleagues. These colleagues can be called upon to provide accurate answers to subject-matter questions when an extension educator lacks a particular expertise. They can also be a valued source of contacts and mentoring. Participation in the community provides members with opportunities to explore and innovate with new programming initiatives and technologies. For those interested in a leadership role, the community's leadership meets monthly. Again, all are welcome.

Going forward, the leaders of the Financial Security for All community are committed to continued connection, innovation, creative collaboration, and demonstrated impact. We will achieve this by supporting Cooperative Extension family economics professionals and the public they serve. We embrace the future and challenge fellow Extension professionals who seek to match content with technology to join us!

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