Comprehensive Overview: The Full-Semester Personal Finance Course Curriculum

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Executive Summary

The "Full-Semester Personal Finance Course" is a standards-aligned, 16-week turnkey curriculum designed by the Council for Economic Education (CEE) for 11th and 12th-grade students. Funded by the Charles Schwab Foundation, the course shifts personal finance education from theoretical study to active, project-based learning. The central pedagogical driver is the **"Driving Question"**: *How do we as financial advisors help our clients make informed financial decisions so that we can help them build a secure financial future?* Students spend the semester acting as financial advisors for the fictional **Green Family**. Through nine units, learners apply economic principles—such as scarcity, opportunity cost, and human capital—to manage the family's income, debt, risk, and investments. The course culminates in a "Personal Finance Showcase" presentation and prepares students for the National Personal Finance Challenge (NPFC).

Course Framework and Objectives

The curriculum is structured around 80 days of instruction, utilizing simulations, case studies, and multimedia workshops.

Core Learning Goals

- **Conceptual Mastery:** Deep understanding of earning income, spending, saving, investing, managing credit, and managing risk.
- **Decision-Making:** Application of rigorous economic models to financial dilemmas.
- **Financial Management:** Practical skills in budgeting and portfolio construction.
- **Professional Communication:** Development of teamwork and presentation skills through "Skills Workshops."

Unit Structure

Unit	Theme	Key Activities/Concepts
1	Introduction	Norm-building, "Millionaire Game," and Pre-test.
2	Decision-Making	Scarcity, PACED decision grid, and Economic reasoning.
3	Earning Income	Career research, Human capital, and Soft skills.
4	Managing Risk	Auto and renters insurance, and Risk tolerance.
5	Spending	Paychecks, taxes, and budgeting.

Unit	Theme	Key Activities/Concepts
6	Managing Credit	Interest rates, loans, credit scores, and reports.
7	Savings	Banking institutions and online banking.
8	Investing	Stocks, bonds, mutual funds, and retirement.
9	Final Presentations	Case Study #10 "Family Plot Twist" and Showcase.

The Central Case Study: The Green Family

The curriculum utilizes the Green family to provide a consistent, real-world narrative for financial analysis. Each unit requires students to add a specific component to the **Green Family Finance Portfolio**.

Family Profile

Member	Age	Professional Status	Financial Context
Hunter	40	Investigator ($82k)	Veteran; considering a career shift to government; moderate risk taker.
Kelly	38	Business Owner ($62.5k)	Online retail owner; frugal; nervous about market volatility.
Sage	16	Student	Approaching post-secondary education.
Forrest	13	Student	Grandparents contributing to a 529 plan.
Jade	10	Student	Grandparents contributing to a 529 plan.

Current Financial Challenges

- **Relocation:** Moving to a new state to reduce costs and open a storefront for Kelly.
- **Debt Burden:** $12,000 in credit card debt (16.9% APR) and a $127,000 mortgage balance.
- **Asset Management:** Need to replace a 2011 Dodge Grand Caravan; considering a timeshare in Cancun.
- **Retirement Gaps:** Hunter has $145,000 across retirement accounts; Kelly has $22,000.
- **Insurance Gaps:** The family currently lacks life and disability insurance.

Key Economic and Financial Principles

1. The Economic Way of Thinking

The course emphasizes six principles of economic reasoning to solve "mysteries," such as why professional athletes earn significantly more than public service workers.

- **People Choose:** Choices involve the least cost and greatest benefit.
- **All Choices Involve Costs:** Opportunity cost is the value of the next-best alternative.
- **Incentives Matter:** People respond to rewards or consequences in predictable ways.
- **Rules Influence Choice:** Written and unwritten rules govern economic behavior.
- **Voluntary Trade:** People gain when they trade specialized skills or goods.
- **Future Consequences:** Decisions are about influencing the future, not the past.

2. Structured Decision-Making (The PACED Grid)

To minimize impulsive behavior - defined as a tendency that "reduces opportunities to buy things in the future" - students use the **PACED Decision-Making Grid**:

1. **P** roblem: State the issue clearly.
2. **A** lternatives: List all possible options.
3. **C** riteria: Identify factors like cost, convenience, and safety.
4. **E** valuate: Score alternatives against the criteria.
5. **D** ecision: Select the optimal path and identify the opportunity cost.

3. Human Capital and Wealth Building

The curriculum challenges the "get rich quick" myth. Key takeaways from the "Millionaire Game" and Unit 3 include:

- **Millionaire Traits:** Most millionaires achieve wealth through education, hard work, early saving, and long-term stock market investment.
- **Human Capital:** Defined as the knowledge, skills, and experience that make a person productive.
- **Investment in Self:** Education and "Soft Skills" (communication, leadership, work ethic) are primary drivers of earning potential.
- **The Scarcity Reality:** Because human wants exceed available resources, allocation methods (price, merit, force, or share) must be weighed for their costs and benefits.

Professionalism and Assessment

Multimedia Learning Theory

Students are trained in the **Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning** to ensure their financial advice is delivered effectively. They must avoid "Information Overkill" and "Redundancy," focusing instead on:

- **Coherence:** Keeping presentations simple.
- **Signaling:** Highlighting essential keywords or graphics.
- **Spatial Continuity:** Keeping related text and images near each other.

National Personal Finance Challenge (NPFC)

The course serves as a pipeline for the NPFC, a nationwide competition where students:

- Analyze complex family case studies under pressure.
- Present recommendations to a panel of professional judges.
- Participate in high-speed "Quiz Bowls" to demonstrate mastery of financial vocabulary and concepts.

Important Quotes and Definitions

- **Scarcity:** "The condition that exists because people’s wants exceed the resources available to satisfy those wants."
- **Fiduciary Standard:** "Acting solely in your clients’ best interests."
- **Opportunity Cost:** "The value of the next best alternative given up when making a choice."
- **Human Capital:** "The knowledge, skills, education, training, experience, and talents that make individuals productive and valuable in the workplace."
- **Financial Literacy Goal:** "How do we as financial advisors help our clients make informed financial decisions so that we can help them build a secure financial future?"