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What Does It Take to Lead Extension Master Gardener Volunteers?

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Cover Page Footnote

The findings reported here are from a larger study conducted for a doctoral dissertation. In addition to investigating agents' perceptions of the importance of volunteer engagement competencies to Extension master gardener administration, the study also determined agents' self-rated proficiency levels and training needs related to these competencies. The complete dissertation is available online from the North Carolina State University Libraries Institutional Repository, <http://www.lib.ncsu.edu/resolver/1840.20/37088>.

What Does it Take to Lead Extension Master Gardener Volunteers?

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Abstract. We investigated the importance of volunteer engagement competencies to successful master gardener volunteer administration. We used a web-based survey to collect data from a census of North Carolina Extension agents with master gardener volunteer administration responsibilities. Respondents indicated 52 of the 55 competencies were important to the administration of master gardener volunteers. We concluded that although traditional volunteer management skills are essential, a more comprehensive model encompassing personal and leadership skills is needed to inform development of training and resources that will support attainment of competencies required for successful master gardener volunteer administration.

INTRODUCTION

Master gardener volunteers are vital to the delivery of consumer horticulture education, greatly expanding Extension's capacity to reach diverse audiences and provide communities with access to research-based information (McAleer, 2005; Meyer, 2007). Nationwide, over 86,000 master gardeners volunteer a total of over 5 million hours each year (Extension Master Gardener National Committee, 2018). The day-to-day efforts of these volunteers are guided by Extension agents and volunteer coordinators based in local and regional Extension centers. Within the United States, at least 1,534 Extension staff administer the Extension master gardener (EMG) program at the local level (Dorn et al., 2018).

For Extension to fully realize the tremendous benefits master gardener volunteers bring to the organization, staff who oversee the program must be proficient in volunteer administration (Boyd, 2004; Lockett et al., 2010). Gaining proficiency in volunteer administration begins with identifying and understanding the volunteer engagement competencies that are important to success.

Several models have defined volunteer administration processes and competencies within the context of Extension. Among the first to be developed was the still widely used ISOTURE model, the name of which is an acronym for the volunteer development stages of identification, selection, orientation, training, utilization, recognition, and evaluation (Boyce, 1971). Other models include GEMS (Culp, 2012),

LOOP (Penrod, 1991), and PEP (Safrit et al., 2005). While these models have varying names and stages, they all focus on similar core management processes such as volunteer recruitment, training, recognition, and evaluation.

Utilizing a Delphi study, Boyd (2004) identified 33 competencies that all Extension agents engaged in volunteer administration should possess. Organized within the five constructs of organizational leadership, systems leadership, organizational culture, personal skills, and management skills, the range of competencies identified by Boyd (2004) demonstrates that it takes more than management skills for volunteer administrators to be successful. This need for a greater range of competencies, including personal and leadership skills, was validated in a dissertation study by Lockett (2007) that identified competencies needed to be an effective and efficient master gardener volunteer coordinator.

The importance of volunteer engagement competencies to successful 4-H volunteer administration has been well studied (Culp & Kohlhagen, 2004; Schmiesing & Safrit, 2007; Stedman & Rudd, 2006), yet little research has been conducted to determine which competencies are important to successful master gardener volunteer administration. This gap in the research limits agents' ability to understand and develop volunteer engagement competencies that are needed to succeed in their role and potentially limits Extension's ability to identify and hire candidates who are best equipped for success.

METHODS

The purpose of the descriptive research study reported here was to investigate the importance of 55 volunteer engagement competencies to successful master gardener volunteer administration. We conducted a census study among North Carolina Extension agents with EMG program administration responsibilities using a web-based survey.

The 33 competencies and five constructs identified by Boyd (2004) provided the framework for the instrument. Additional competencies identified by Lockett (2007) and Culp (2012) were incorporated in the instrument's five scales. Each scale contained 10 items, except management skills, which contained 15.

For each item, participants were asked to rate their perception of the level of importance of the competency in managing volunteers. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*not important*) to 5 (*extremely important*). Calculating Cronbach's alpha determined the reliability of scales used in this study was acceptable, with scores ranging between 0.83 and 0.93 (Fraenkel et al., 2011).

To maximize the response rate, the tailored design method (Dillman, 2011) was incorporated into the survey's design and delivery. The entire population of 66 North Carolina Extension agents with master gardener volunteer administration responsibilities was invited to participate in the study. A total of 35 agents participated, resulting in a 53% response rate.

To control for non-response error, we used an independent *t* test to compare major demographical variables of early and late responders to determine whether statistical differences existed (Lindner et al., 2001). No statistical differences between the two groups were found, allowing findings of this study to be generalized to the study population.

RESULTS

We assessed the importance of 55 volunteer engagement competencies to successful master gardener volunteer administration. The competencies were organized into the five volunteer administration constructs identified by Boyd (2004): organizational leadership, systems leadership, organizational culture, personal skills, and management skills.

Findings indicated all five constructs were important to the successful administration of master gardener volunteers, with construct mean scores ranging from 4.28 to 4.44 on a scale of 1 (*not important*) to 5 (*extremely important*). The competency construct perceived as most important to master gardener volunteer administration was personal skills, followed by systems leadership and organizational culture. Constructs perceived as less important were management skills and organizational leadership. The overall mean score and rank of each construct, along with the range of mean

scores for competency items within each construct, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Analysis of Agents' Perceptions of the Importance of Volunteer Engagement Competency Constructs to Successful Master Gardener Volunteer Administration

Competency construct	Range ^a	<i>M</i>	Rank
Personal skills	4.12 – 4.71	4.44	1
Systems leadership	3.97 – 4.76	4.41	2
Organizational culture	4.09 – 4.71	4.36	3
Management skills	3.94 – 4.68	4.34	4
Organizational leadership	3.94 – 4.66	4.28	5

Note. Scale: 1 = *Not Important*, 2 = *Slightly Important*, 3 = *Moderately Important*, 4 = *Important*, 5 = *Extremely Important*. ^aRange of mean scores for competency items within the construct.

The importance of each construct was assessed using a 10-item scale, except the construct of management skills, which was assessed using a 15-item scale. Among the 55 competency items investigated, 52 achieved a mean score above 4.0 (*important*), with 17 rated 4.50 or higher. The 17 competency items rated 4.50 or higher are presented in Table 2, arranged within constructs and listed by mean score from greatest to least.

Only three competencies rated below 4.0, with mean scores ranging from 3.94 to 3.97. They were “evaluate master gardener volunteers’ performance and satisfaction,” “creatively use technology to increase program impact,” and “use team-building strategies with master gardener volunteers to increase program impact.”

DISCUSSION

ISOTURE and GEMS are among several volunteer administration models used within Extension that focus primarily on management processes such as volunteer recruitment, training, recognition, and evaluation. Studies using the Delphi technique suggest a wider range of volunteer engagement competencies are needed for successful volunteer administration (Boyd, 2004; Lockett, 2007). The findings of this study also suggest a wider range of competencies are needed, with all five competency constructs investigated achieving a mean score above 4.0 (*important*).

Personal skills was perceived as the most important construct for master gardener volunteer administration. Personal skills are considered important to the success of all Extension agents (Cooper & Graham, 2001; Harder et al., 2010; Lakai et al., 2014), yet personal skill competencies are not represented in volunteer administration models commonly used within Extension such as ISOTURE and GEMS.

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Table 2. Volunteer Engagement Competency Items Achieving an Importance Mean Score ≥ 4.50

Competencies by construct	M	SD
<i>Personal skills construct</i>		
Cultivate successful working relationships with volunteers.	4.71	0.46
Effectively resolve conflict.	4.59	0.50
Actively listen to volunteers when they have a problem.	4.59	0.56
Verbally communicate ideas clearly to others.	4.56	0.56
Maintain an open mind when interacting with volunteers.	4.50	0.56
<i>Systems leadership construct</i>		
Effectively enlist the assistance of volunteers.	4.76	0.43
Delegate responsibility to volunteers.	4.59	0.50
Give volunteers the freedom to plan and implement projects, yet be involved enough to provide guidance and assure compliance with Extension requirements.	4.59	0.61
Explain to volunteers how the EMG ^a program operates within Extension.	4.56	0.56
Inspire volunteers to accept leadership positions.	4.53	0.62
<i>Organizational culture construct</i>		
Create a positive environment in which volunteers can work and learn.	4.71	0.52
Demonstrate respect for the time and contributions of volunteers.	4.65	0.65
<i>Management skills construct</i>		
Plan and implement initial and advanced training that prepares individuals for volunteer service.	4.68	0.48
Disengage volunteers who exhibit problematic behaviors.	4.56	0.56
Provide volunteers with a comprehensive orientation to the EMG ^a program.	4.55	0.56
<i>Organizational leadership construct</i>		
Communicate Extension's mission and goals to volunteers.	4.66	0.54
Use Extension's vision and mission to plan the EMG ^a program.	4.60	0.65

Note. Scale: 1 = *Not Important*, 2 = *Slightly Important*, 3 = *Moderately Important*, 4 = *Important*, 5 = *Extremely Important*.

^aExtension master gardener.

“Cultivate successful working relationships with volunteers” was rated the most important competency within the personal skills construct, and second most important of all competencies investigated. The competencies of conflict resolution and active listening were also highly rated. Working with volunteers can present challenges, yet avoiding conflict or failing to listen to volunteers can result in serious consequences for the program, including decreased productivity and morale of program volunteers and staff, loss of good volunteers, and negative perceptions of Extension by the public (Fry & Langelotto, 2013). Developing their personal skills may increase agents' success as volunteer administrators and Extension professionals.

Systems leadership was perceived as the second most important construct to successful master gardener volunteer administration. Agents who are proficient in systems leader-

ship competencies are able to inspire their master gardener volunteers to engage in volunteer service, ensuring the EMG program fulfills its purpose to recruit and train volunteers who expand Extension's capacity to address local issues (Meyer, 2007).

“Effectively enlist the assistance of volunteers” was the highest-rated competency within the systems leadership construct and the entire study. Other highly rated systems leadership competencies included “delegate responsibility to volunteers” and “give volunteers the freedom to plan and implement projects, yet be involved enough to provide guidance and assure compliance with Extension requirements.”

Organizational culture ranked third in perceived importance among the five constructs. “Create a positive environment in which volunteers can work and learn” was the highest-rated competency in the organizational culture con-

struct. Creating a positive culture in which volunteers feel accepted, supported, and valued has been shown to increase volunteer satisfaction and retention (Terry et al., 2013). Agents can take steps such as minimizing interoffice gossip, redirecting negative conversations, and encouraging friendly interactions with office staff to ensure a welcoming, respectful environment for Extension volunteers. (Vetter et al., 2009).

Management skills ranked fourth in perceived importance among the five constructs. “Plan and implement training that prepares individuals for volunteer service” was the highest rated competency in the management skills construct. This is not surprising considering effective training is essential to prepare master gardeners for volunteer service and is a cornerstone of the EMG program. Gaining horticultural knowledge is the greatest motivator for individuals joining and remaining in the Extension master gardener program (Schrock et al., 2000; Strong & Harder, 2011; Takle et al., 2016; Wilson & Newman, 2011). A coordinator’s ability to plan and provide excellent initial and ongoing training opportunities ensures volunteers can perform the tasks and duties necessary for program success and contributes to volunteer recruitment, satisfaction, and retention.

The ability to disengage volunteers exhibiting problematic behaviors was another highly rated competency within the management skills construct. Building proficiency in other management skills competencies may mitigate the need for volunteer disengagement. Competencies that may minimize the need for disengagement include redirecting volunteers to other roles for which they are better suited; recruiting and screening volunteers to ensure they are a good match for the organization and volunteer roles available; providing well-written, accurate volunteer position descriptions; and orienting volunteers to the mission and policies of Extension (Culp & Doyle, 2011; O’Neill, 1990).

Organizational leadership was perceived to be the least important among the five constructs, yet it represents skills that are critical to effective programming, such as communicating Extension’s mission and goals to volunteers. Volunteer administrators skilled in organizational leadership competencies can connect their volunteers with meaningful, well-planned volunteer opportunities that are aligned with the organization’s mission and relevant to community needs, as well as convey the achievements that result from volunteers’ efforts.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

What does it take to lead Extension master gardener volunteers? Our findings align with those of Boyd (2004) and Lockett (2007): a wide range of competencies are required. These include competencies beyond those emphasized in contemporary volunteer administration models. While core

volunteer management skills such as recruiting, orienting, training, supervising, recognizing and evaluating volunteers are critical for effective volunteer administration, a larger framework is needed to fully capture the knowledge, skills and attributes necessary to effectively lead master gardener volunteers and successfully administer the EMG program.

On the basis of our findings, we make the following recommendations:

1. While traditional management skills are essential, a more comprehensive model encompassing personal skills, organizational culture, and leadership skills is needed to fully represent the competencies required for successful master gardener volunteer administration. The instrument we used provides a framework for such a model. Replication of this study among a larger population of Master Gardener volunteer coordinators and the use of factor analysis to analyze the findings would improve the instrument’s efficacy as a model for master gardener volunteer administration
2. Strong personal skills are critical to successful volunteer administration. Agents that are proficient in competencies such as relationship building, conflict resolution, and effective communication are more likely to succeed in positions that engage volunteers. When hiring individuals who will work with volunteers, seek candidates who demonstrate competency in personal skills and related areas such as systems leadership and organizational culture and include these expectations in job postings and position descriptions.
3. While many agents who administer the EMG program are hired for their horticultural knowledge and expertise, the competencies needed to be successful in this role far exceed those acquired with a horticultural degree. Dedicating resources to professional development and supporting agents in their attainment of volunteer administration competencies will result in Extension fully realizing the benefits volunteers bring to the organization and increase the return on the organization’s investment in the EMG program.

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