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Reasons for Volunteering as a Mississippi Master Gardener

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Abstract: The purpose of the study reported here was to describe current Master Gardener perceptions of the Mississippi Master Gardener program. Participation was voluntary, and the participants were chosen through a computerized random sampling, with a total of 233 completing the online survey. Motivation was described through six functions: Understanding, Values, Enhancement, Protect, Social, and Career. Results showed that Master Gardeners' highest ranked reasons for volunteering were related to the Understanding, Values, and Enhancement functions. They volunteered to learn more about horticulture and to help others. This will assist County Directors and Master Gardener groups in recruiting and retaining Master Gardener volunteers.

Introduction

People have been gardening throughout the centuries and have used numerous methods to grow and maintain their gardens. Extension has been assisting these gardeners since the early 1900's (Smith-Lever Act, 1914). This has created a need for Extension to receive assistance to help with its gardening clients. Personnel cuts and limited travel budgets have also forced Extension to reexamine the delivery of their programs, information, and services. One method of reaching these clients is through the use of Master Gardener (MG) volunteers (Rohs & Westerfield, 1996).

The MG Volunteer Program began in Mississippi (MS) in 1992 and has since grown to involve 51 of its 82 counties. According to the 2007 Annual Report, 770 MGs volunteered by contributing their expertise 11,000 times to make 78,000 contacts. Since 2004, these volunteers have made over 280,000 horticulture contacts to assist the Mississippi State University Extension Service (MSUES) (Mississippi Master Gardener Web site, 2007). These contacts were attained through face-to-face meetings, answering phone calls, performing horticulture projects, and assisting with other Extension events.

The purpose of the study reported here was to determine demographics and to describe current MGs reasons for volunteering within the MS MG program. Understanding why these MGs volunteer is important in being able to do a better job of managing and retaining them. The MG program was described through motivation and retention factors by incorporating the Voluntary Functions Inventory (VFI) Model (Clary et al., 1998), with the Master Gardener Social and Personal Benefits Survey (SPBS) (Schrock, Meyer, Ascher, & Snyder, 2000b).

The most extensive study done to date regarding MGs motives for volunteering was done by Rohs and Westerfield (1996). Their survey studied the combined broad factors of social background, societal and community benefits, and personal benefits and the influence of other individuals to determine the relative importance of factors influencing volunteering. They found that motivation and retention are very closely connected when discussing the management of volunteer groups. Keeping volunteers motivated is a critical part of maintaining or retaining them within that program. Matching volunteer tasks to their motivations is one way to create a meaningful volunteer experience (Schrock et al., 2000b). Extension agents should also recognize their MGs accomplishments and involve them in the program's planning phase (Culp & Schwartz, 1999).

MGs rated the highest overall motivating factors as being related to increasing knowledge or understanding (Schrock et al., 2000b; Simonson & Pals, 1990; Finch 1997) and as being related to values benefits. Enhancement benefits with social aspects, protecting one's ego, and career-related motivational factors were each subsequently rated lower. Nine of the top 10 motivational factors were related to new learning experiences (understanding) and altruism and humanitarian concerns (values). The top reasons reported were to learn more about horticulture and to learn through direct, hands-on experience (Schrock et al., 2000b; Carlton, 1981). Rohs, Stribling, and Westerfield (2002) showed that reputation or status of Extension volunteer programs attracted persons and influenced participation.

Rohs and Westerfield (1996) found demographics can be a useful predictor of volunteer motivation. Those who were married, older, and employed in business/industry were more likely to volunteer. Rohs, Stribling, and Westerfield (2002) found that the five items most personally attractive to volunteers that affect how they are recruited and retained were status of belonging to the MG program, program flexibility, learning materials quality, rewards for being a MG, and excellence of training.

Materials and Methods

The study primarily utilized a descriptive design along with an ex post facto design. There were a total of 773 MG volunteers in MS, and a computerized random sample was taken to determine the sample of 407 MGs. Participants were asked through an online survey using Survey Monkey[®] to indicate their level of agreement with 30 statements about reasons for volunteering. Responses were based on a seven-point anchored scale, from 1 (not at all important/accurate) to 7 (extremely important/accurate). The initial email resulted in 117 responses. Three follow-up emails resulted in 63, 37, and 16 responses, respectively. This resulted in a total of 233 responses, for a 57% response rate.

To control for non-response bias, respondents were compared to a random sample of 20 non-respondents. These two groups' means were compared by a One-Way ANOVA on the demographics of age, highest level of education, years living at current residence, years active as a MG, and hours volunteered in the previous year. All were found to be non-significantly different at the 0.10 a priori alpha level. They were also compared with Chi-Square Tests of Independence on gender $p = 0.457$ and relationship status $p = 0.766$ and again found to be non-significant. Based on these comparisons, non-respondents were judged to be no different from respondents, and results were generalized to all MS Master Gardeners.

Collected data included information based on constructs from the adapted VFI model and the SPBS model, along with variables relating specifically to MG demographics. There were five questions for each of the six motivational functions: Career, Enhancement, Values, Protective, Social, and Understanding. Demographic questions included age, gender, marital status, ages of children, household income, occupation, education level, and length of residence. Respondents were also asked in what year they took the initial training, how many years they had been active, and the level of volunteer commitment time spent. A MANOVA was used to test data from the reasons for volunteering section, while applying the six functions.

Results and Discussion

Demographics

The majority of respondents were married (85%) females (85%). While 87% had children, 72% of these children were now adults. Almost all had some level of college education (95%), with over 70% having graduated college. Retired individuals (52.4%) made up the largest category, with professional (14.6%) and homemakers (13.2%) in the next largest categories. Over 84% had an annual household income of at least \$40,000. Most (64.6%) were trained after 2005, with 26.7% being trained between 2000 and 2004, and only 8.9% being trained before 2000 (Table 1). Race was not collected for the study.

Table 1.
Demographic Profile for MS Master Gardeners

Parameter	n	%
Gender		
Female	185	84.5
Male	34	15.5
Relationship Status		
Married	185	84.5
Single	24	11.0
Divorced/Separated	10	4.5
Ages of Children		
Adult	171	73.4
College	18	7.7
Jr./Sr. High	13	5.6
Elementary/Preschool	7	3.0
None	30	12.9
Household Income		
> \$60,000	113	61.1

\$40,000 to \$59,999	43	23.2
\$20,000 to \$39,999	23	12.4
< \$20,000	6	3.2
Occupation		
Retired	115	52.4
Professional/Medical/Ed.	32	14.6
Homemaker	29	13.2
Business/Sales/Service	23	10.4
Trade/Technical	11	5.2
Other	9	4.2
Highest Level of Education		
Post Graduate	78	35.8
College Graduate	75	34.4
Some College	54	24.8
High School Graduate	10	4.6
Some High School	1	0.5
Trained what Year		
2005 - 2009	132	64.6
2000 - 2004	55	26.7
Before 2000	19	8.9

In general, respondents tend to be late middle age, stable in their current home environment, and recently active in the program. For summary statistics of these demographics, see Table 2.

Table 2.
Demographic Means for MS Master Gardeners

Parameter	N	Mean	SD
Age	200	61.2	9.11
Years at Current Residence	209	16.2	12.67
Years as an Active Master Gardener	202	4.2	3.29
Hours Given as a Master Gardener	179	58.3	58.21

Using the MANOVA, no differences were found for gender, relationship status, income level, education level, year initially trained, number of years active, and between numbers of hours volunteered in previous year, according to the Wilk's Lambda within the multivariate tests. A significant difference was found between those participants who have children at home ($M = 2.05$) and those who do not ($M = 3.12$), $F(6,222) = 3.072$, $p = 0.007$. The tests of between-subjects effects indicated a difference within the *Career* function, $F(1,227) = 15.318$, $MSE = 2.030$, $p < 0.001$.

Perceptions of Reasons for Volunteering

Master Gardener functions related to Understanding (gaining new learning experiences and exercising knowledge, skills, and abilities) and functions relating to Values (altruism and humanitarian concerns) headed the list of perceived reasons for volunteering. The Enhancement function (satisfactions related to personal growth and self-esteem) was next, followed by the Social function (concerning relationships with others). The Protective function (protecting ego from being more fortunate than others and addressing personal problems) and the Career function (preparation for a new career) respectively, rounded out the group (Table 3).

Table 3.
Perceptions of Reasons for Volunteering for MS Master Gardeners

Principal Factor	N	Scale Mean	SD
Understanding	233	5.61	1.04
Values	232	5.52	1.04
Enhancement	232	4.16	1.48
Social	231	4.04	1.44
Protective	231	3.18	1.49
Career	230	2.20	1.49
Anchored scale: 1 = not at all important/accurate, 7 = extremely important/accurate.			

The rankings of specific reasons for volunteering with the MS program as perceived by MGs are listed in Table 4. Upon examining specific motivations, eight of the top nine and 10 of the top 12 reasons for volunteering were related to Understanding or Values functions, respectively, with the top two reasons both receiving scores of 6.0 or greater.

The first reason was to "learn more about horticulture and home gardening" ($M = 6.48$), and the second was to "learn horticulture through hands-on experience" ($M = 6.22$). Reasons three through 11 all had means greater than 5.0. Six of the next seven reasons were related to the Enhance and Social functions. Out of the 10 least important reasons for volunteering, nine were related to the Career and Protective functions. "Volunteering as a Master Gardener can help me get my foot in the door at a place where I would like to work" was the response that ranked the lowest ($M = 1.89$).

Table 4.
Ranking of Reasons for Volunteering for MS Master Gardeners

Motivational Factor	Cat	Mean
I can learn more about horticulture/gardening.	U	6.48
Volunteering lets me learn horticulture through hands on experience.	U	6.22
I feel it is important to help others.	V	5.98
I can do something for a horticultural cause that is important to me.	V	5.63
I am genuinely concerned about the home gardeners I am serving.	V	5.45
Volunteering as a MG allows me to gain a new perspective on things.	U	5.42
Volunteering is a way to make new friends.	E	5.38
I feel compassion toward people in need.	V	5.29
I am concerned about those less fortunate than myself.	V	5.22
People I know share an interest in the community.	S	5.19
Through the Master Gardener program I can explore my own strengths.	U	5.16
I can learn how to deal with a variety of people as a volunteer.	U	4.68
No matter how bad I've been feeling, volunteering helps to forget about it.	P	4.59
Others with whom I am close place a high value on service.	S	4.50
Volunteering is an important activity to the people I know best.	S	4.33
Volunteering increases my self-esteem.	E	4.13
Volunteering helps me feel better about myself.	E	4.10
Volunteering makes me feel needed.	E	4.00
My friends volunteer as Master Gardener's.	S	3.30
Volunteering makes me feel important.	E	3.24

Volunteering is a good escape from my own troubles.	P	3.09
By volunteering as a Master Gardener I feel less lonely.	P	3.07
Volunteering helps me work through my own problems.	P	3.04
People I'm close to want me to volunteer.	S	2.92
The Master Gardener program lets me to explore different career options.	C	2.40
I can make new contacts that might help my business /career.	C	2.29
Master Gardener volunteer experience will look good on my resume.	C	2.25
Doing MG work relieves me of guilt over being more fortunate than others.	P	2.09
Volunteering will help me to succeed in my chosen profession.	C	2.07
MG volunteering can help me get a foot in the door at a place I'd like to work. work.	C	1.89
<p>Anchored scale: 1 = not at all important/accurate 7 = extremely important/accurate. U = Gaining new learning experiences and exercising knowledge, skills, and abilities. V = Altruism and humanitarian concerns. E = Satisfactions related to personal growth and self-esteem. S = Concerning relationships with others. P = Protecting ego from being more fortunate than others and addressing one's personal problems. C = Preparation for a new career.</p>		

Conclusions

Mississippi MGs have favorable perceptions towards the program. Their mean on the 30 statements ranged from 2.20 to 5.61, on a scale of 1 to 7. Seventeen of the 30 questions ranked above the median value of 4.0. The top two reasons for volunteering were related to the Understanding and Values functions. Enhancement and Social functions followed the first two, with the Protective and Career functions being ranked as less important. This mean order of functions is the same as found by Schrock Meyer, Ascher, and Snyder (2000a) and similar to results found by Schrock et al., (2000b).

The data also revealed that there were many reasons why MS Master Gardeners volunteered. They mainly volunteered to learn more about horticulture (gardening) and to help those in need. MS MGs stated that the program was a great service, the information was great, the people were great, and they loved it. One person

said "they have been rewarded with horticulture knowledge, friendships, and pride in their accomplishments of personally serving others in the community". As a group, they were not volunteering to protect their egos or to advance their careers.

The MANOVA showed no differences were found for gender, relationship status, income level, education level, year initially trained, number of years active, and numbers of hours volunteered in previous year. A significant difference was found between those participants who have children at home and those who do not, within the Career function. This function had the lowest ranking mean and was perceived to be the least important reason for volunteering.

Recommendationsâ Managing MGs

Survey results could be used by County Directors (CD) when managing volunteers. It could show a candidate's intent as to whether he or she is volunteering for personal gain or to actually help others. The survey could also help with volunteer placement by matching participants' interests and reasons for volunteering with local group projects. CDs should also be aware of who is the average person that becomes a MG and target those groups.

In order to successfully recruit adult volunteers, CDs should focus on the Extension's history; the opportunity for personal interaction with others; and the opportunity to contribute to the local community. Extension agents should recognize their MGs community accomplishments and involve them in the program's project planning phase, as noted by previous research (Culp & Schwartz, 1999). MG programs and volunteer experiences should be designed to give MGs what they value most, learning about horticulture/gardening through hands-on experiences. Also, giving MGs praise for what they have done and providing them with ongoing learning opportunities are other great methods to motivate and retain them. These retained MGs can serve as mentors to new volunteers to encourage their involvement.

County Directors should explain their expectations to MGs before they go through the training program. The more CDs understand about motivation, the more likely they will be able to retain and manage volunteers through modifying the local programs or by modifying MG expectations. For success to occur, both groups need to have the same goals for the program. This can only come through dialog and communication between the local MGs and the CDs.

Suggestions for Future Research

Follow-up research of this same nature should be done in a few years to see if MS MGs perceptions of the overall program have changed. Further work should also be done to determine the exact reasons MS MGs are leaving the program and at what rate. Further research should be performed to find methods to attract more males to the program, since they only currently make up about 15% of the population. Finding topics and areas of greater interest to males would be one avenue to explore. Further research should also be performed to determine exactly what types of advanced training should be offered to keep MGs motivated and interested in the program.

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