

Competencies Needed by Master Gardener Volunteer Program Administrators

Landry L. Lockett, Ed.D.
Assistant Professor & Extension Specialist
Tel. 979-845-2250 * FAX 979-845-2970 * E-Mail: l-lockett@tamu.edu

Scott Cummings, Dr.P.H.
Associate Professor & Extension Specialist
Tel. 979-847-9388 * FAX 979-862-7190 * E-mail: s-cummings@tamu.edu

Jeff Ripley, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor & Extension Specialist
Tel. 979-845-7280 * FAX 979-845-2970 * E-mail: j-ripley@tamu.edu

Texas AgriLife Extension Service
Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communications
148 Scoates Hall, 2116 Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843

Abstract

The skills and actions of a volunteer program's administrator (i.e., volunteer resource manager) are critical factors in the success or failure of the program. A panel of experts identified best management competencies for Cooperative Extension county agents who are volunteer Master Gardener program administrators. A Delphi technique was implemented utilizing 15 county Extension agents throughout Texas. Consensus was reached on 64 competencies needed by volunteer Master Gardener program administrators. The panel placed an emphasis on "people" skills, positive attitude, management skills, and the ability to articulate Extension's mission and goals. The results of this study provide insight into effectively leading Master Gardener programs, and provide concentration points for volunteer program administrators of all types to effectively utilize their time, energy and resources for maximum impact and volunteer program success.

Key Words:

volunteer master gardener, competencies, volunteer program administrator,
Cooperative Extension

Introduction

The Cooperative Extension program in the United States utilizes volunteers as an essential part of the delivery of its educational programs (Boyd, 2004). Boleman and Burkham (2005) noted that volunteers are a valuable asset helping Extension reach more clientele, ensuring the relevancy of programs, delivering Extension

education, and interpreting the value of Extension to stakeholders.

Extension master volunteers were first utilized in United States Extension education efforts in the 1960s (Wolford, Cox, & Culp, 2001). These are individuals with an intense interest in a particular subject. After participating in educational classes to increase their knowledge, they use

that knowledge to work as volunteers within their community. They are unique volunteers who receive a specified number of training hours with a commitment to return a designated number of hours in volunteer service. Master volunteer programs provide Extension with several advantages by multiplying expertise in a subject area, building a support base, allowing agents to have time for advanced programming, enabling Extension professionals, or agents, to focus on issue-based programming, increasing self-esteem of volunteers, and providing for volunteer support to Extension programming (Laughlin & Schmidt, 1995). Extension agents are community educators who work through each state's land-grant university system as part of the USDA's Cooperative Extension program.

Master Gardeners are one type of Extension master volunteer program. These volunteers support Extension horticulture programming efforts by participating in, and sometimes leading, various educational projects throughout the year (Welsh, 2004). Master Gardeners augment county Extension agents' efforts to help fulfill the mission of Extension of providing quality, relevant outreach and continuing education programs and services to citizens.

Studies have researched various aspects of volunteerism, such as motives, benefits, reasons for remaining a volunteer, and competencies needed by volunteer program administrators (Culp, Deppe, Castillo, & Wells, 1998; Cooper & Graham, 2001; Boyd, 2004; Safrit, Schmiesing, Gliem, & Gliem, 2005). Much time and research efforts have gone into developing volunteer management models such as I.S.O.T.U.R.E. (Boyce, 1971), L-O-O-P (Penrod, 1991), G.E.M.S. (Culp, Deppe, Castillo, & Wells, 1998), and P.E.P. (Safrit & Schmiesing, 2004).

Safrit et al. (2005) outlined requisite competencies for contemporary volunteer administration. In their study, data were solicited from members of the International Association of Volunteer Administration regarding perceptions of the importance of components of contemporary volunteer administration that had been identified from the literature and best practice. The result of their research was the identification of seven holistic factors pertaining to the contemporary management of volunteers comprising 62 specific competencies. These seven factors include: (a) Volunteer Recruitment and Selection, (b) Volunteer Administrator Professional Development, (c) Volunteer Orientation and Training, (d) Volunteer Program Advocacy, (e) Volunteer Program Maintenance, (f) Volunteer Recognition, and (g) Volunteer Resource Development.

Purpose and Methodology

While the studies cited do much to define the general concepts involved in volunteer resource management and subsequent competencies needed by administrators of volunteer programs, no specific competencies have been identified for administrators of volunteer Master Gardener programs. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify best management competencies needed by county Extension agents who are volunteer Master Gardener program administrators. The term "volunteer administrator" in this article is used to describe professionals who lead and direct volunteers in Extension, typically county Extension agents. This term is used more commonly within Cooperative Extension contexts than the synonymous term "volunteer resource manager." The findings of this research are part of a broader study conducted that determined the benefits and limitations of having a volunteer Master Gardener

program. The study utilized 15 expert county Extension agent volunteer Master Gardener program administrators throughout Texas as an expert Delphi panel. These study participants were identified as expert volunteer Master Gardener program administrators by the Texas state Master Gardener Program coordinator and were confirmed by district Extension administrators.

The Delphi Procedure

The Delphi technique is a research strategy that was employed in this study to develop consensus in this descriptive research design. The Delphi's purpose is to solicit reliable responses from a panel of experts to develop consensus regarding the answer to a specific question or series of questions. (Stitt-Gohdes & Crews, 2004). The Delphi procedure is designed for the systematic solicitation of expert opinion and involves anonymous feedback made on two or more rounds by a panel of independent experts (Alder & Ziglio, 1996). The researcher gives these experts feedback between rounds. Responses made separately by panel members may highlight new ideas, which other participants had not previously considered. Participant responses are then collated and fed back to the panel in a synthesized form in the next Round. Participants are then asked for a further response, allowing them to revise their initial position if they so desire. This process is then repeated, with the aim of each Round being to produce a consensus among the panel which yields desired research results. The goal of the series of questionnaires is to achieve consensus by allowing members to contemplate and re-rate their opinions regarding items in the questionnaire. The Delphi approach accomplishes research objectives by allowing a group of individuals to reach consensus on a problem under consideration,

without actually meeting face-to-face (Feret & Marcinek, 1999). This facilitates the exchange of information and ideas by allowing each participant to have equal input, preventing bias caused by position, status or dominant personalities. Participants can respond individually and then reach consensus collectively. The Delphi method is reliable when an expert panel has at least 15 members and is a true representation of the expert community (Dalkey, Rourke, Lewis, & Snyder, 1972). Guidelines for conducting this Delphi study followed those proposed by Linstone and Turoff (1975) and Turoff and Hiltz (2006).

Data Collection

A sequential series of questionnaires was completed by the expert panel members. Responses from each round of questionnaires were collected and analyzed. Common and conflicting viewpoints were identified, and a new questionnaire was created based upon the responses and sent to panel members. Responses from Round 1 were used to create Round 2, and responses from Round 2 were used to create Round 3. Consensus among the Delphi panel members was set a priori and defined when two-thirds of the panel members rated a statement "agree" (5) or "strongly agree" (6) using a six-point Likert scale. In this study, 15 of the original 20 experts questioned completed the entire study, so consensus was achieved when 10 of the 15 panel members rated a statement "agree" (5) or "strongly agree" (6).

Round 1

In the first round, a questionnaire was sent to panel members to complete and return, and responses were analyzed. The initial round asked the panel of experts to respond to the open-ended question: "What competencies do you need to be an efficient and effective Master Gardener Coordinator?" The panel was encouraged to

respond to this question with as many statements as they desired. Round 1 questionnaire was sent twice electronically in following Dillman's Technique (Dillman, 2000). The panel responded with 95 statements that researchers condensed to 67 to account for commonalities among them and the combining of similar statements.

Round 2

The 67 competency statements generated from Round 1 were used to create the questionnaire for Round 2. In Round 2, the expert panel was asked to rate their strength of agreement with each competency statement on a six-point Liker-type scale where 6 was assigned to "Strongly Agree," 5 was assigned to "Agree," 4 was assigned to "Somewhat Agree," 3 was assigned to "Somewhat Disagree," 2 was assigned to "Disagree," and 1 was assigned to "Strongly Disagree." Round 2 data were analyzed using SPSS 12.0 for Windows software. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize data.

Round 3

The purpose of Round 3 was to develop consensus among panel members. The panel members were sent a third revised instrument and asked to re-evaluate each statement using the stated six-point Likert-type scale. This allowed panel members to either retain their initial score for each competency statement or revise it up or down. Participant's scores were not revealed to the entire group, only to the participant who owned the score. Participant's personal scores for competencies were sent along with additional information including: (a) the mean score that each competency statement received from the panel in Round 2, and (b) the percentage of the panel that gave that particular competency a 5 ("agree") or 6 ("strongly agree") rating.

Findings

The expert panel found consensus on 64 of the 67 competencies related to the question, "What Competencies Do You Need to Be an Efficient and Effective Master Gardener Coordinator?" These competencies are shown in Table 1, organized according to Safrit et al.'s (2005) seven factors comprising contemporary volunteer administration. The competencies were organized by the researchers to align the findings with contemporary research; however, the researchers understand that specific competencies could fit into more than one of the seven factor categories.

All 64 competencies the expert volunteer Master Gardener program administrators agreed are essential for effectively coordinating a group of Master Gardener volunteers are all competencies that coincide with historical volunteer management models (Boyce, 1971; Culp, Deppe, Castillo, & Wells, 1998; Penrod, 1991; Safrit & Schmiesing, 2004). Furthermore, many of the 64 competencies reaching consensus have been identified as essential competencies for managing volunteers in previous research studies (Boyd, 2004; Cooper & Graham, 2001; Safrit et al., 2005).

The two components of contemporary volunteer administration that contain the most competencies reaching consensus in this study are Volunteer Administrator Professional Development, and Volunteer Program Maintenance. This fact points to the panel's emphasis on the importance of competencies related to the personal development of the volunteer administrator and the skills needed to perpetuate a successful volunteer program over time. The specific competencies receiving the highest mean rating from the panel are Ability to articulate Extension's mission and goals to the Master Gardeners and Respect for the time and contributions of your

volunteers. Volunteers play a critical role within the Cooperative Extension system; therefore, it is imperative that Master Gardener volunteers truly understand Extension's mission and where they fit into the public education schema. Furthermore, genuine appreciation for the work these volunteers do needs to be evident to them to help ensure their satisfaction and long-term retention.

Snider (1985) noted the importance of a volunteer coordinator's confidence, attitude, and actions for the success of an Extension volunteer program. According to the expert panel in this study, an ideal Master Gardener Volunteer Administrator would have the following primary personality and administrative competencies: enjoys working with people; a positive attitude; displays patience and flexibility; communicates well; has notable leadership and management skills, and can facilitate policies and procedures; understands Extension's mission and strategic plan, and can articulate a shared vision and purpose; inspires and empowers volunteers to share in ownership and responsibilities of the program; trusts volunteers, does not micro-manage them, and is respectful of their time and contributions; knows volunteer needs, and addresses them through training, advocacy, and resource development; and, expresses gratitude to the volunteers often, and praises them to stakeholders.

These data support the conclusions of Boyd (2004), King and Safrit (1998), and Snider (1985) that Extension programs are strongest when Extension professionals and volunteers have a partnership and a balance of program ownership and responsibility. The expert panel placed high importance upon enlisting the help of Master Gardener volunteers and giving them freedom to carryout tasks, oftentimes in a manner in which the county Extension agent would not have completed them. A fundamental

concept related to volunteer management from this panel is one of avoiding micro-managing, yet being available to provide guidance and to assure accuracy of information and compliance with Extension requirements.

The importance of a volunteer administrator's being able to plan and implement effective volunteer training was highlighted in this study. The critical nature of these competencies are reinforced by Boyd (2004) who noted that a volunteer administrator must understand the needs and desires of volunteers to effectively identify, select, train, and retain those volunteers. It has also been noted that volunteers need the guidance of administrators who can focus their efforts toward productive outcomes (Boyd, 2004; King & Safrit, 1998; Wolford et al., 2001). The opinions of this expert panel coincide well with the perspective of the Master Gardener volunteers in the study completed by Schrock, Meyer, Ascher, and Snyder (2000), in which their two highest ranking benefits provided by the Master Gardener program were "opportunity to learn about plants, soil and horticulture," and "practical classroom instruction and hands-on experience."

"People" skills and communication skills were emphasized in this study, as they were in Boyd's (2004) and Safrit and Schmiesing's (2005). These studies indicate that the enjoyment of working alongside and partnering with people is fundamental to having a successful Master Gardener volunteer program.

Conclusions

Volunteering is an act of service engaged in by people throughout the world, and it is an important function within the Cooperative Extension system. The potential for volunteers to enhance and expand the efforts of organizations is enormous; however, for this potential to become reality,

volunteer administrators must be equipped with the competencies needed to successfully coordinate volunteers. The findings of this research coincide with results of other volunteerism studies and management models both within the arena of Cooperative Extension and in other contextual applications. The competencies identified in this study as essential for volunteer administration success are similar and transferable to competencies needed for leading any volunteer group.

A key factor in the success or failure of any volunteer program is the actions of the program's volunteer administrator. If volunteer administrators desire to be effective leaders of volunteers, it is imperative they understand the competencies needed to work effectively and efficiently as volunteer administrators. Competencies identified in this study should be incorporated into professional development training and resource materials. Oftentimes within organizations, the vast amounts of professional development opportunities are directed toward increasing subject matter knowledge. Although this is essential, the findings in this study suggest that increasing professional development opportunities related to gaining volunteer administration and "people" skills such as leadership, communication and conflict resolution skills would prove extremely beneficial for volunteer administrators and their volunteer programs.

The results of this study will provide volunteer administrators a list of competencies and successful practices needed for creating and maintaining productive and impactful volunteer programs. This list will help volunteer administrators most effectively utilize their time, energy, and resources for maximum efficacy and program success. Furthermore, these findings will aid hiring supervisors

when interviewing and hiring personnel to fulfill the role of a volunteer administrator.

References

- Alder, M. & Ziglio, E. (1996). *Gazing into the oracle: The Delphi method and its application to social policy and public health*. London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Boleman, C., & Burkham, A. (2005). *Volunteer administration in the 21st century: Roles volunteers play in Texas Extension*. College Station, TX: The Texas A&M University System.
- Boyce, M.V. (1971). *A systematic approach to leadership development*. Paper presented at the County and Area 4-H Youth Agents Conference in Pennsylvania and Missouri.
- Boyd, B.L. (2004). Extension agents as administrators of volunteers: Competencies needed for the future. *Journal of Extension*, 42(2). Retrieved from <http://www.joe.org/joe/2004april/a4.php>
- Cooper, A.W., & Graham, D. L. (2001). Competencies needed to be successful county agents and county supervisors. *Journal of Extension*, 39(1). Retrieved from <http://www.joe.org/joe/2001february/rb3.php>
- Culp, K., Deppe, C. A., Castillo, J.X., & Wells, B.J. (1998). The GEMS model of volunteer administration. *The Journal of Volunteer Administration*, 16(4), 36-41.
- Dalkey, N.C., Rourke, D.L., Lewis, R., & Snyder, D. (1972). *Studies in the quality of life*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.
- Dillman, D.A. (2000). *Mail and Internet surveys: The tailored design method* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

- Feret, B., & Marcinek, M. (1999). The future of the academic library and the academic librarian: A Delphi study. *Library Career Development, 7*(10), 91-107.
- King, J., & Safrit, R.D. (1998). Extension agents' perceptions of volunteer management. *Journal of Extension, 36*(3). Retrieved from <http://www.joe.org/joe/1998june/a2.php>
- Laughlin, K.M., & Schmidt, J.L. (1995). Maximizing program delivery in Extension: Lessons from leadership for transformation. *Journal of Extension, 33*(4). Retrieved from <http://www.joe.org/joe/1995august/a4.php>
- Linstone, H.A., & Turoff, M. (1975). *The Delphi method: Techniques and applications*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co.
- Penrod, K.M. (1991). Leadership involving volunteers: The L-O-O-P model. *Journal of Extension, 29*(4). Retrieved from <http://www.joe.org/joe/1991winter/a2.php>
- Safrit, R.D., & Schmiesing, R.J. (2004). A suggested model for contemporary volunteer management: Qualitative research bridging the professional literature with best practices. *The Journal of Volunteer Administration, 22*(4), 34-41.
- Safrit, R.D., Schmiesing, R.J., Gliem, J.A., & Gliem, R.R. (2005). Competencies for contemporary volunteer administration: An empirical model bridging theory with professional best practice. *The Journal of Volunteer Administration, 23*(3), 5-15.
- Schrock, D.S., Meyer, M., Ascher, P., & Snyder, M. (2000). Benefits and values of the Master Gardener program. *Journal of Extension, 38*(1). Retrieved from <http://www.joe.org/joe/2000february/rb2.php>
- Snider, A. (1985). The dynamic tension: Professionals and volunteers, the balance of sharing leadership. *Journal of Extension, 23*(3). Retrieved from <http://www.joe.org/joe/1985fall/sa2.php>
- Stitt-Gohdes, W.L., & Crews, T.B. (2004). The Delphi technique: A research strategy for career and technical education. *Journal of Career and Technical Education, 20*(2).
- Turoff, M., & Hiltz, S.R. (2006). *Computer based Delphi process*. Retrieved from <http://web.njit.edu/~turoff/Papers/delphi3.html>
- Welsh, D. (2004). *Become a Texas Master Gardener*. Retrieved from <http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/mastergd/becomingMG.html>
- Wolford, M., Cox, K., & Culp, K. (2001). Effective motivators for master volunteer program development. *Journal of Extension, 39*(2). Retrieved from <http://www.joe.org/joe/2001april/rb4.php>
-

About the Authors

Landry L. Lockett, Ed. D., is an Assistant Professor and Extension Specialist, working within Texas AgriLife Extension Service's Organizational Development unit. Lockett is a Certified Volunteer Administrator, and his emphasis within Texas Extension is in volunteerism, teaching effectiveness, and new employee onboarding.

Scott Cummings, Dr. P. H., is an Associate Department Head and Associate Professor. Dr. Cummings is also the Program Leader for Texas AgriLife Extension Service's Organizational Development Unit, and his area of responsibility is agency accountability.

Jeff Ripley, Ph. D., is an Assistant Professor and Extension Specialist, working within Texas AgriLife Extension Service's Organizational Development unit. Dr. Ripley's focus areas within Texas Extension include program development, strategic planning, and program outcome interpretation.

Table 1

Statements Reaching Consensus Related to Competencies Needed to be an Efficient and Effective Master Gardener Coordinator (Based Upon Safrit, Schmiesing, Gliem, and Gliem, 2005)

Statement	Panel Mean Rating*	SD	No. Rating 5 or 6	% Rating 5 or 6
Factor 1: Volunteer Recruitment and Selection				
Ability to identify volunteer's strengths and weaknesses and see where they would best function within the organization	5.20	.86	13	86.67
Factor 2: Volunteer Administrator Professional Development				
Positive attitude	5.80	.41	15	100
Leadership skills	5.73	.46	15	100
"People" skills	5.73	.46	15	100
Management skills	5.73	.46	15	100
Ability to facilitate	5.53	.52	15	100
Oral communication skills	5.47	.52	15	100
Motivational skills	5.60	.63	14	93.33
Patience	5.53	.64	14	93.33
Personal flexibility	5.47	.64	14	93.33
Written communication skills	5.40	.63	14	93.33
Listening skills	5.33	.62	14	93.33
Realization as an agent, you don't and can't possibly know everything	5.33	1.29	14	93.33
Ability to understand the true source of conflict	5.27	.59	14	93.33
Conflict resolution skills	5.33	.72	13	86.67
Organizational skills	5.33	.72	13	86.67
Goal orientation	5.33	.72	13	86.67
Ability to conduct a sound program development and structuring process	5.20	.86	13	86.67
Commitment to gaining knowledge of subject matter	5.20	1.01	13	86.67
Time management skills	5.40	.83	12	80
Strong consensus building skills	4.93	.59	12	80
Computer skills (word processing, internet usage, etc.)	4.87	.74	10	66.67
Factor 3: Volunteer Orientation and Training				
Ability to articulate Extension's mission and goals to the Master Gardeners	5.93	.26	15	100
Ability to inspire your volunteers to rise to the challenge	5.73	.46	15	100

Statement	Panel Mean Rating*	SD	No. Rating 5 or 6	% Rating 5 or 6
Plan and implement training for volunteers	5.57	.51	15	100
Patient steering of volunteers in the right direction	5.47	.64	14	93.33
Ability to communicate Extension policies and procedures effectively	5.27	.70	13	86.67
Factor 4: Volunteer Program Advocacy				
Willingness to let volunteers plan and implement programs, yet be involved enough to provide guidance, assure accuracy of information, and compliance with Texas AgriLife Extension requirements	5.73	.46	15	100
Ability to communicate what the MG organization is doing and where it is going	5.73	.46	15	100
Letting the volunteers know you are “going to bat” for them	5.67	.49	15	100
Ability to communicate a shared vision	5.67	.49	15	100
Commitment to the mission of the group	5.53	.52	15	100
Interest in helping the public	5.67	.62	14	93.33
Constantly communicating your messages, not just to Master Gardeners and not just at meetings	5.13	.83	13	86.67
Factor 5: Volunteer Program Maintenance				
Enjoy working with people	5.80	.41	15	100
Following through with what you say you will do	5.80	.41	15	100
Ability to effectively enlist the assistance of your Master Gardeners	5.67	.49	15	100
Trusting volunteers to complete tasks given to them	5.60	.51	15	100
Avoiding micro-managing the volunteers	5.60	.51	15	100
Willingness to take the time necessary to meet with MG program leaders to discuss objectives and answer questions	5.60	.51	15	100
Ability to identify and communicate the organization’s strengths and weaknesses	5.40	.51	15	100
Fairness with everyone	5.47	1.30	14	93.33
Willingness to do the very things you ask of your volunteers	5.53	.74	13	86.67
Willingness to stand firm on your policies	5.40	.74	13	86.67
Expecting volunteers to follow through with what they say they will do	5.33	.72	13	86.67
Availability to Master Gardeners if they need assistance or advice	5.20	.68	13	86.67

Statement	Panel Mean Rating*	SD	No. Rating 5 or 6	% Rating 5 or 6
Ability to offer guidance to autonomous association, yet maintain direction within Texas AgriLife Extension parameters	5.00	1.25	13	86.67
Ability to think big but start small by seeing the big picture while identifying the individual steps to accomplish your goals	5.47	.52	15	100
Ability to develop the proper balance of ownership of the Master Gardener program between the volunteers and the Extension Agent	5.40	.99	12	80
Ability to delegate work	5.27	.96	12	80
Ability to say "No"	5.13	.74	12	80
Committee work	5.20	.77	12	80
Willingness to be present at a majority of MG-related events (training sessions, monthly meetings, major planning sessions, MG-sponsored educational events)	5.07	1.03	12	80
Cautious understanding that decisions the Coordinator makes become policy	4.93	.88	11	73.33
Factor 6: Volunteer Recognition				
Respect for the time and contributions of your volunteers	5.93	.26	15	100
Leading with a shared vision and shared purpose	5.73	.46	15	100
Expressing gratitude to the Master Gardeners often	5.73	.46	15	100
Praising Master Gardeners to people outside of the organization	5.73	.46	15	100
Allowing tasks to be completed in ways that you would not have personally done them	5.60	.51	15	100
Ability to give the volunteers the proper amount of responsibility within the organization	5.53	.52	15	100
Crediting your program's successes on the hard work and determination of your volunteers	5.73	.59	14	93.33
Knowing your volunteers and their life experiences and respecting them as professionals	5.33	.72	13	86.67
Factor 7: Volunteer Program Resource Development				
Ability to identify and communicate the needs of the organization	5.47	.64	14	93.33
Finding ways to secure resources, training, etc.	5.33	.62	14	93.33

* Scale ratings are as follows: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Somewhat Disagree, 4 = Somewhat Agree, 5 = Agree, 6 = Strongly Agree