Assessing the Virginia Cooperative Extension Master Gardener Coordinator Manual

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ADDITIONAL INDEX WORDS. leadership development, extension, evaluation

SUMMARY. The Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Master Gardener (MG) Coordinator Manual, a 14-chapter resource book, was developed cooperatively with teams of VCE MGs, coordinators, and agents to enhance coordinators' skills. It includes chapters on risk management, volunteer management, the educational process, current policies, and the volunteer section of the VCE Master Gardener's Handbook. The VCE MG Coordinator Manual was the basis of four local VCE MG coordinator-training sessions in 1998. This evaluation showed that coordinators are using the manual and adapting the suggestions and samples to fit their local programs, despite the fact that more planning time is often required. Those using the manual increased their understanding of VCE goals and the role of the VCE MG and slightly increased their leadership skills. Reading the manual showed a need for information on training VCE MGs to work with agents to design and implement strong horticulture education programs for Virginia communities. Areas for improvement were identified before final publication.

A new management guide, the Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Master Gardener (MG) Coordinator Manual (Dorn and Relf, 1998a), was developed cooperatively with teams of VCE MG volunteers, local coordinators, agents, and VCE staff in response to state budgetary action (Dorn and Relf, 2000). The 1998 coordinator manual built on the existing Virginia management guide (Schwab and Relf, 1989) and VCE MG program policies and guidelines developed in 1993. The teams working on the new coordinator manual identified management topics ranging from predetermined job descriptions to recognition procedures for volunteers. Samples of letters, tests, training outlines, and management procedures were solicited for inclusion. New sections were added to reflect the current management situation. The mission statement of VCE, the Environmental Horticulture Plan of Work, and descriptions of the roles of the extension agent and the local VCE MG coordinator were included to provide coordinators with a clear understanding of their relationship to VCE.

Additional information was gathered from three differ-

ent sources. First, MG management guidelines were reviewed from Texas (Cotner and Welsh, 1989), Georgia (Wade, 1985; Ferree, 1993), Indiana (Lerner, n.d.), Pennsylvania (Morrone, 1994), Florida (Ruppert and Black, 1994), and Minnesota (Shrock, n.d.). A literature review included publications directly addressing MG management topics, such as cost and payback value (Meyer and Hanchek, 1997), influential factors in volunteering as a MG (Rohs and Westerfield, 1996; Simonson and Pals, 1990), perceived management roles of agents versus volunteers (Relf and McDaniel, 1994) and retention of MGs (Stouse and Marr, 1992). Finally, the Virginia Office of Volunteerism provided a list and copies of pertinent volunteer organization and management literature, which are cited in the *VCEMG Coordinator Manual* (Dorn and Relf, 1998a).

As the manual developed, sections were reviewed by the Master Gardener Team (a problem-solving team developed in 1997 to work with the state VCE MG coordinator in addressing management issues) for application and relevance. A 14-chapter draft version was completed in March 1998.

A prototype of the VCE MG Coordinator Manual was introduced to 14 paid and 19 volunteer local coordinators who attended one of four 1998 training sessions. Copies were also sent to 9 coordinators not attending training and to 10 other individuals. A total of 52 persons received the manual. Coordinators were asked to evaluate the manual with the intention, in part, of establishing their ownership and involvement in its creation.

Limitations

The prototype manuals did not contain Chapter 4, Designing and Implementing Educational Programs, which was discussed in training but not distributed, or Chapter 5, VCE Publication 426-699 Welcome to Virginia Master Gardenering! (Dorn and Relf, 1998b), the latter of which had previously been received at a 1997 coordinator training. Chapters 13, Evaluating the VCE MG program, and 14, Record Keeping and Reporting, were complete except for the examples and other sample materials at the time of distribution for evaluation.

Evaluation and discussion

Six months later, the 52 individuals who had received the prototype manual received a four-part evaluation form including opinion and open-ended questions. Using the Dillman (1978) method for survey management, 41 (79%) responses were received. This complete-population survey was tallied and the results reported quantitatively and qualitatively. Percentages represent the portion of positive responses indicated per question, based on the number of individuals who elected to answer each question. Twenty-three (56%) evaluation respondents were non-paid coordinators, while 16 (39%) indicated that they were paid coordinators, either extension agents or technicians. Two (5%) respondents were listed as "other."

Most respondents found the manual's format acceptable (Table 1), but 30% felt the manual contained too much discussion. Therefore, training about the importance of each component needs to be implemented and the materials reviewed for possible reduction. Respondents (95%) indicated that the organization of the manual was effective. An index was requested to be included in the final copy by eight respondents.

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Table 1. Respondents' evaluation scores of components of the Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Master Gardener (MG) Coordinator Manual.

Component	n	Satisfaction (%) ^z
Font	39	100.0
Type size	37	89.2
Topic/discussion length	34	70.5
Samples from other VCE MG units	35	77.1
Recommended procedures	35	82.8
Organizational structure	39	94.9

^zIndividuals responded to a scale of 1 to 4, with two answers representing acceptable levels and two not acceptable levels. Satisfaction percentage was determined by adding the frequency percentages of the two acceptable levels.

Respondents were asked to indicate the effectiveness of each chapter's content (Table 2). The low overall scores of Chapters 4 and 5 (68% and 78%, respectively) related to their absence in the prototype manual. However, the positive scores were attributed to inclusion in the training sessions. Chapters 13 and 14 also received lower scores, 89% and 82%, due to the absence of samples, such as instructions for the statewide record keeping system under development. The comparatively low importance value for the Virginia Tech Affiliation chapter (82%) could indicate that coordinators still do not fully understand the concept of the VCE MG program and its management, and should revisit the initial start-up chapter for organizational advice.

In a section for open-ended response, respondents indicated that the manual included the major topics of VCE MG program management. Six respondents (20%) suggested additional material, such as more support for volunteer coordinators and smaller VCE MG programs that

operate in VCE units lacking an environmental horticulture agent. Elaboration on the function of and VCE MG involvement in Extension Leadership Councils, 4-H horticulture materials, and first-time program start-up materials were also requested.

There were seven questions addressing the effect of the VCE MG Coordinator Manual on program management (i.e., how it was used, etc.) (Table 3). Respondents (49%) indicated that the manual changed the way they manage their programs. Comments indicated changes in basic organization, recruitment, delegation, use of job descriptions, record keeping, renewal of VCE MG volunteers, development of the public education (adhering to VCE's mission), volunteer recognition, development of program ownership by volunteers, and risk management. Fifty-six percent indicated that the manual increased understanding of VCE and its goals.

Thirty (86%) respondents indicated that the VCE MG Coordinator Manual has maintained (43%) or increased (43%) the time spent planning and structuring VCE MG programs. Respondents attributed the increase in planning time to the realization of the scope of an effectively managed program, including improved organization, use of job descriptions, team building and delegation of responsibilities, increase in use of forms and paperwork, and more attention to guidelines and public relations. Several respondents indicated a decrease in planning time once they realized that some responsibilities are not theirs and can be delegated and that using model forms increases efficiency. The many samples included in the manual helped to avoid "reinventing the wheel" and respondents felt the manual will decrease planning time required to conduct high quality programs.

Twenty-six (74%) respondents indicated that the manual has maintained (37%) or increased (37%) volunteer leader-

Table 2. Effectiveness and importance of Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Master Gardener (MG) Coordinator Manual chapter content as evaluated by local VCEMG coordinators.

Chapter	Effectiveness		Importance	
	n ^z	Effective (%) ^y	n	Important (%)
1 The Local VCE MG Coordinator	38	97.3	38	94.7
2 Virginia Tech Affiliation	38	94.8	39	82.1
3 Getting Started for the First Time	38	94.6	36	86.1
4 Designing and Implementing Educational Programs	28	67.9	20	83.3
5 VCE Publication 426-699 ^x	32	78.1	33	84.9
6 Establishing Responsibilities of Master Gardeners	38	94.7	38	94.8
7 Developing Skills and Knowledge	38	97.4	39	100.0
8 Recruiting and Selecting Prospective VCE Master Gardeners	38	92.1	38	92.1
9 Training: Preparing VCE MGs for Their Jobs	37	97.3	38	94.7
10 Ensuring Continued Growth	37	97.3	38	97.3
11 Promoting VCE MG Programs	37	97.3	39	94.9
12 Managing Resources	37	97.2	38	92.1
13 Evaluating the VCE MG Program	37	89.1	38	89.4
14 Record Keeping and Reporting	34	82.4	37	89.2

^zn represents the number of responses to the particular question. The changes in n reflect those respondents who selected not to answer the question.

^yIndividuals responded to a scale of 1 to 4, with two answers representing acceptable levels and two not acceptable levels. Percent effective or important was determined by adding the frequency percentages of the two acceptable levels.

^xDorn and Relf, 1998b.

Table 3. Effect of the Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Master Gardener (MG) Coordinator Manual on local VCEMG program management as indicated by responding coordinators.

Question	n	Responses (no.)	Positive responses (%)
Implemented ideas yet	34	23	68.0
Information changed the way manage the local VCE MG program	33	16	49.0
Effect on understanding of VCE and its goals	39		
Increased		22	56.0
Stayed the same		15	39.0
Decreased		1	3.0
Other		1	3.0
Effect on planning time	35		
Increased		15	43.0
Stayed the same		15	43.0
Decreased		4	11.0
Other		1	3.0
Effect on leadership among VCE MG	35		
Increased		13	37.0
Stayed the same		13	37.0
Decreased		1	3.0
Other		8	23.0
Effect on developing educational programs implemented by VCE MG	36		
Increased		7	19.0
Stayed the same		21	58.0
Decreased		1	3.0
Other		7	19.0

ship. One (3%) indicated that the manual decreased leadership development, but did not explain why. While some felt that VCE MGs “don’t want to be responsible for so much administration” and that the recommendations have “caused friction with those who want informal organization,” the manual has also given coordinators a tool “in black and white” to share with other volunteers. While most respondents indicated that this increase in VCE MG leadership and responsibility is “just starting” and is “unknown as yet,” they felt that “this will change as future leaders begin to implement ideas provided by the manual.”

Twenty-eight (78%) indicated the use of the manual has increased (19%) or maintained (58%) VCE MG role in working with agents to design, implement, and evaluate

educational programs for the public. Comments suggest that this is an area where coordinators “need to work” and they are “just starting” to place more emphasis on the public education. Coordinators will need additional training to work more closely with all VCE agents to identify educational programming needs.

An open-ended question (data not presented) indicated that the discussion of job descriptions in Chapter 6 was the most used section of the manual, followed by chapters on recruitment and selection of prospective VCE MG (Chapter 8), conducting initial training (Chapter 9), and information on basic organization (Chapters 1 and 2). Sample forms provided throughout the manual also were cited frequently as immediately used, as well as the motiva-

Table 4. Use of the Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Master Gardener (MG) Coordinator Manual on local VCEMG program management as indicated by responding coordinators.

Useful for communicating to	n	Responses (no.)	Positive responses (%)
VCE MG participants	30	27	90.0
VCE MG Association	28	27	93.0
VCE MG Association officers	28	26	82.0
Environmental horticulture agent	24	23	75.0
Unit coordinator	28	18	61.0
Staff	25	15	60.0
4-H agent	22	11	50.0
Extension Leadership Council	23	11	48.0
Family consumer science agent	13	8	42.0
District director	19	8	42.0
Local officials	19	8	42.0
Other	7	4	57.0

Table 5. Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Master Gardener (MG) management issues of most importance to responding local VCEMG coordinators.^z

Topic (related chapter)^y	Responses (no.) (n = 114)	Respondents (%) (n = 28)
Educational programs for the public (4)	18	64.0
Motivation and retention of volunteers (10)	11	39.0
Initial training (9)	9	32.0
Record keeping and reporting (13)	8	29.0
Job descriptions (6)	8	29.0
Organization (3, 5)	8	29.0
Recertification training (7)	5	18.0
Resource development and management (12)	5	18.0
Recruitment (8)	4	14.0
Getting started (3)	4	14.0
Associations versus local coordinators (1, 5)	3	11.0
Delegation of management (1, 5)	3	11.0
VCE MG, volunteer coordinator relationships to local unit director, unit planning, establishment of goals and objectives (1, 2, 3, 4, 5)	3	11.0
Conflict resolution (10)	3	11.0
Other (less than 3 responses per comment)	23	82.0

^zImportant issues that were each indicated by at least 10 percent of respondents.

^yRelated chapter numbers are included in parentheses after each topic.

tion and retention materials included in Chapter 10.

The manual was found to be most useful in communicating program policies and responsibilities to volunteers, local associations, and association officers (Table 4). It has also been used to clarify the VCE MG program with local VCE clerical staff, unit coordinators, environmental horticulture agents, family and consumer science and 4-H agents, Extension Leadership Councils, district directors, and local officials.

When asked to list their five most important VCE MG management issues (Table 5), respondents listed 114 items. These items were categorized into 14 similar groups based on management topics that 10% or more of respondents indicated as one of their most important issues. The management of educational programming for the public is clearly uppermost on coordinators' minds.

However, Chapter 4, Designing and Implementing Educational Programs, was ranked comparatively low in importance (Table 2). This may have resulted from the fact that the majority of coordinators are not responsible (73%, volunteer and nonagent coordinators) for designing horticulture education programs, but they are concerned about placing volunteers appropriately and giving them the skills necessary to enhance motivation and retention. State-level management must instruct VCE agents who design local educational programs in ways to develop program ownership in coordinators and volunteers.

Conclusions

Respondents indicated that the VCE MG Coordinator Manual is a valuable tool for managing local programs. None indicated that they needed additional management resources. They felt that the topics included in the manual were those important to VCE MG program management, and that the majority of topics had been effectively explained.

Respondents found the manual usable. Several comments were made about the intimidating length of the manual (600+ pages); however, 75% of the manual is sample

materials rather than lengthy discussions and procedures. Repeatedly, respondents remarked that the forms and samples helped them to save time and avoid reinventing the wheel.

Coordinators are using the manual and adapting the suggestions and samples to fit their local programs. Implementing the recommendations often requires more planning time than coordinators are accustomed to, but the fact that 11% of respondents indicated that they saved time in the first six months with use of the manual is a strong indication of future value and use in reducing time commitments.

The benefits of using the manual and spending the additional planning time are becoming evident as coordinators understand the role of the VCE MG in relation to VCE's goals. Increasing leadership skills and demand for information on training should yield strong educational horticulture programs for Virginia's communities.

For information on receiving a copy of the Virginia Cooperative Extension Master Gardener Coordinator Manual, please contact Dr. Diane Relf, Extension Specialist, Environmental Horticulture, at tvag@vt.edu, or Sarah Lineberger, Virginia State Master Gardener Coordinator, at slineber@vt.edu. Requests can also be sent to the Office of Environmental Horticulture, Virginia Tech, 407 Saunders Hall, Blacksburg, VA 24061-0327.

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