Extension Education Methods

Why Master Gardeners Stop Volunteering: Lack of Time

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SUMMARY. Nearly 300 Master Gardeners (MGs) who stopped volunteering were surveyed as to why they did not continue in the program. The five-question survey was mailed to people who had not turned in volunteer hours for the previous two years. Forty-seven percent or 131 useable surveys were returned and tabulated. A majority of the respondents, 73 (56%), indicated "no time" as the primary reason for not volunteering. Illness or personal reasons accounted for 30 responses (23%), and 20 people (15%) indicated they were disappointed in the program. Eighty-one percent rated the program as excellent or good; 79% indicated they would recommend the program to others.

Master Gardeners have been trained by most land-grant universities to teach horticulture as community volunteers (Guest, 1997). Since most, if not all, of these MG programs are substantially underwritten by university funding (Meyer

and Hanchek, 1997) understanding the reasons people volunteer and why they leave the program is important. Several reports have documented why people volunteer as MGs, including their needs and experiences in the program (Kirsch and VanDerZanden, 2002; Relf and McDaniel, 1994; Rohs and Westerfield, 1996; Rohs et al., 2002; Schrock et al., 2000a, 2000b; Stouse and Marr, 1992). Exit interviews are recommended to determine why people leave a position and to gather information about existing problems (Stepputat, 1995) and may be useful to determine why people no longer volunteer as a MG. White and Arnold (2003) surveyed 4-H leaders who no longer volunteered and found the main reasons they left the program were their child was no longer involved, followed by lack of time. Determining why individuals stop volunteering may be beneficial in improving the MG program.

Materials and Methods

MGs volunteering with the University of Minnesota Extension Service are required to document a minimum of 25 volunteer hours annually after their initial year of 50 volunteer hours. The state MG office keeps a database of all volunteers. MGs from throughout the state who had not volunteered in 1999 and 2000 ($n = 295$) but had previously turned in at least 1 year of volunteer hours were sent a brief letter and survey asking why they no longer participated in the program. Fifteen surveys were returned with no forwarding address, leaving 280 possible responses. The five questions in the survey (Table 1) were brief and yet allowed for feedback if the participant chose to comment further. Due to a

high initial response [$n = 131$ (47%)], no follow-up letter was sent to non-respondents.

Results and discussion

The responses were tabulated and are shown in Table 1. Lack of time and personal reasons accounted for 79% of the participants who left the program. Listed as "other reasons" for not continuing were: lack of confidence in teaching horticulture,

Table 1. Survey questions and responses from 131 Master Gardeners (MGs) who had not turned in volunteer hours for the previous 2 years in Minnesota.

Q1. Why are you no longer volunteering in the MG program? Check the top three reasons, 1 being the most important:^a

	No.	%
No time to volunteer	73	56
Tired of the program	8	6
Illness, personal reasons	30	23
Dislike the program	5	4
Disappointed with the program	20	15
Did not learn enough horticulture	7	5
Other reasons: moved	3	2

Q2. Is there anything we could have done (at the state or county extension level) to have kept you in the program?

	No.	%
Yes	23	18
if so, what?		
No	67	51

Q3. Based on your experience, how would you rate the MG program?

	No.	%
Excellent	60	46
Good	46	35
Fair	7	5
Poor	2	2

Q4. Would you recommend this program to others?

	No.	%
Yes	104	79
No	1	<1
Maybe	13	10

Q5. Other comments about the MG program:

^aTwelve respondents indicated more than one reason for not volunteering; however, only three people ranked their responses. Thus, all responses are totaled here.

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becoming involved in other commitments, and job changes. Respondents cited a full-time job, other volunteer programs, children, and the many choices and demands on their time in the space provided for comments on this question.

Twenty-six percent indicated dislike, disappointment, and not learning enough as reasons they stopped volunteering. Although in the minority, these responses merit further investigation.

It is important to clearly outline the expectations for volunteers at the beginning of the program to avoid disappointment. A few commented on the large amount of material they were expected to learn and that they felt inadequately prepared. "I did not learn enough" was the comment of one participant although this person also stated, "too much information was presented, I was overwhelmed." Another commented, "I did not have enough background in horticulture to do this program." The MG program requires a steep learning curve from training to answering questions within a few months and this can overwhelm volunteers if they are not familiar with horticulture.

Eighteen percent felt there could have been improvement at the state or county level to help them from leaving the program. Specific responses included: change program meeting time and location; change in county educator (agent); call me more; more communication back-up; and do not charge for continuing classes for MGs. Forty-one people (31%) did not answer this question. The majority of respondents however, felt there was nothing extension could have done to change

their leaving the program. If lack of time is the main reason people leave the MG program, it is unrealistic that extension can change this fact of life.

A large majority, 81%, of the participants rated the program as excellent or good and almost an identical amount would recommend the program to others.

In this survey, most participants felt that program management by Extension was not the reason they left, leaving one to infer that extension management of the MG program is adequate. No effort was made to contact nonrespondents, and in exit surveys these may be the people most dissatisfied with a program. Reports show the highest initial motivation for people who volunteer as a MG is to learn horticulture and help others (Rohs and Westerfield, 1996; Schrock et al., 2000b). Haynes and Trexler (2003) found public garden volunteer motives shifted over time from mission-related to social benefits. A lack of time might be interpreted in this survey as a change in priorities. These results indicate that most people are leaving the Minnesota MG program for reasons that extension may not be able to control. Volunteer retention appears to be a complex issue involving many factors as volunteer priorities and lifestyles change.

Literature cited

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