

CATEGORY: Technology Transfer

Chapter 3

Assessing the *VCE Master Gardener Coordinator Manual*:

A Volunteer Management Reference

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SUMMARY

The *VCE Master Gardener Coordinator Manual*, a 14-chapter resource book, was developed cooperatively with teams of Master Gardeners (MG), coordinators, and agents to enhance coordinators' skills in managing the local VCE MG program. The manual includes chapters on VCE MG management components such as risk management; job descriptions; recruitment and screening; and volunteer review, recognition, and retention. Additional resources within the manual include a synopsis of educational program planning, implementation, and evaluation, as well as a copy of the current VCE Master Gardener Program Policies and the volunteer section of the *Virginia Master Gardener Handbook*, which serves as program orientation for new or prospective trainees. The *VCE Master Gardener Coordinator Manual* was the basis of four local MG coordinator training sessions in 1998.

Evaluation of the manual identified areas for enhancement prior to final publication. It showed that coordinators are using the manual. They are adapting the suggestions and samples to fit their local programs despite the fact that more planning time is often required. Use of the manual has

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also resulted in increased understanding of VCE goals and the role of the MG by MG volunteers, coordinators, and other paid VCE staff; a slight increase in leadership skills of MGs; and increasing interest and demand for information on training MG to design and implement strong educational horticulture programs for Virginia communities.

INTRODUCTION

A new management guide, the *VCE Master Gardener Coordinator Manual* (Dorn and Relf, 1998b), was developed cooperatively with teams of MG volunteers, local coordinators, agents, and VCE staff in response to state budgetary action (Dorn and Relf, 1999). The 1998 coordinator manual combined the existing Virginia management guide (Schwab and Relf, 1989) and MG program policies and guidelines developed in 1993 by a team of 12 agents, volunteers, and state-level staff. This group identified management topics ranging from predetermined job descriptions to recognition procedures for volunteers. Samples of letters, tests, training outlines, and procedures used to manage local MG programs were solicited for inclusion in the coordinator's manual. In addition, new sections were added to reflect the current management situation. The mission statement of VCE, the Environmental Horticulture Plan of Work, and the role of the Extension agent and the local MG coordinator were included to provide coordinators with a clear understanding of their relationship to VCE and with the information to train and manage MG volunteers. In addition, information was gathered from three sources, including review of existing MG management guides, literature review, and the Virginia Office of Volunteerism (VOV). As the manual was developed, sections were reviewed by the Master Gardener Team (a problem-solving team developed in 1997 to work with the state MG coordinator in addressing MG management) for application and relevance. A 14-chapter draft version was completed in March 1998 (see Table 2 for list of chapter titles).

MATERIAL USED IN PREPARING GUIDE

Guides from Other States

MG management guidelines were reviewed from Texas (Cotner and Welsh, 1989), Georgia (Wade, 1985; Ferree, 1993), Indiana (Lerner, ND), Pennsylvania (Morrone, 1994), Florida (Ruppert and Black, 1994), and Minnesota (Shrock, ND). Similar to the existing VCE guide (Schwab and Relf, 1989), manuals were usually brief, with 20 to 30 pages of explanation for MG program management from start-up to maintenance. A few samples were included, such as an application, certificate, exam, rejection letter, and acceptance letter.

The manuals reviewed demonstrate the evolution in MG management. The older editions were not elaborate about traditional volunteer management topics, other than training (Cotner and Welsh, 1989; Ferree, 1993; Lerner, ND; Schrock, ND; and Wade, 1985). These manuals contained a “management” section that included a mention of record keeping, a sample volunteer time sheet, and a brief discussion on recognizing MG volunteers with certificates, name tags, pins, and luncheons. The materials were very similar in nature, reflecting the degree of sharing that occurs between state MG programs. The more recent management guides (Morrone, 1994; Ruppert and Black, 1994) have begun to address additional topics not seen before in MG management manuals, such as targeted recruitment and volunteer ownership.

Given the shift in management policy at VT/VCE, the existing MG program management manuals did not meet Virginia program needs for a comprehensive MG management guide. The manuals were lacking in-depth discussion of key volunteer management topics that had become major issues for the VCE MG program, such as planning and preparing for volunteers, development and use of job descriptions, liability, volunteer protection, risk management, dismissal of volunteers, organizational structure, MG associations, delegation, middle management by volunteers, and program ownership (MG and educational). Additionally, manuals did not include discussion beyond the basic introductory explanation of Cooperative Extension’s goals, missions, or Plan of Work for Environmental Horticulture, and they did not discuss the varying management roles

experienced by local coordinators in Virginia. Beyond explaining initial MG training, there was little or no concept of basic volunteer management that would ensure healthy programs that motivated people to volunteer and remain an active part.

Literature Review

Review of the literature identified 54 articles with the key word “Master Gardener.” Of these, 20 described actual projects that involve MG volunteers, such as horticultural therapy (Flagler 1992), juvenile offender programs (Finch, 1995), MG phone response teams (Patterson, 1995), and project priorities (Relf and McDaniel, 1994). Nine articles described the MG experience (Keating, 1993; Kozlowski, 1979; and Otis, 1985). Fourteen articles were general overviews of an existing MG program (Deschner, 1981; Finch, 1997; Gray, 1980; and Kiang, 1989). Two articles discussed MGs as Extension research subjects (Boggs and Chatfield, 1995; Eckles and Miller, 1987). Nine of the 54 MG-related publications directly addressed MG management topics, such as training 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). Numerous articles, such as those by Henderson (1981), Gamon (1978), Bolton (1988), and Byrne and Caskey (1985), can be found discussing the management of 4-H or other Extension volunteers who are typically one-time volunteers. However, only a handful actually address the Extension master volunteer model, such as Feather’s article on master teachers (1990), and how to manage this unique group of specialized volunteers recruited to help educate local communities.

Virginia Office of Volunteerism (VOV)

A non-profit assistance group in Richmond, VOV, provided a list and copies of pertinent volunteer organization and management literature used in the development of the *VCE Master Gardener Coordinator Manual*. This recommended material and other Extension materials on volunteer management were cited in the *VCE Master Gardener Coordinator Manual* (Dorn and Relf, 1998b).

INTRODUCING MANUAL TO COORDINATORS

The *VCE Master Gardener Coordinator Manual* was introduced to local coordinators as a prototype during 1998 training. Fourteen locally paid and 19 volunteer coordinators who attended one of the four 1998 training sessions received a copy of the *VCE Master Gardener Coordinator Manual* for their use, reference, and evaluation. In addition, 9 coordinators not attending training were mailed a copy, and 10 copies have since been sent to other individuals, such as new local coordinators and the state MG association president. As a second means of introducing MG coordinators to the manual, coordinators were asked to evaluate the manual prior to its final revision and printing. Involving the coordinators in the manual's evaluation required them to read and use the manual, and, most important, established their ownership and involvement in the manual's creation.

The prototype manuals did not contain chapters 4, Designing and Implementing Educational Programs, or 5, VCE Publication 426-699 Welcome to Virginia Master Gardening! (Dorn and Relf, 1998a), the latter of which had been reviewed at a 1997 coordinator training. Chapters 13, Evaluating the MG program, and 14, Record Keeping and Reporting, lacked sample materials at the time of distribution for evaluation.

EVALUATION

Six months following 1998 coordinator training sessions, a four-part evaluation form including opinion and open-ended questions, was sent to the 52 individuals who had received a copy of the prototype manual to determine its effectiveness as a management tool for local MG program coordinators. The Dillman (1978) method for survey management was used. Of the 52 individuals queried, 41 (79%) responded. Nonrespondents included two position vacancies (one paid, one nonpaid), four coordinators who do not respond to any VCE correspondence, and four others who did not return the evaluation. Nine of the ten nonrespondents were nonpaid positions.

This complete-population survey was tallied and the results reported quantitatively and qualitatively.

RESULTS OF EVALUATION SURVEY

Results of the *VCE Master Gardener Coordinator Manual* evaluation have been presented quantitatively where appropriate. Percentages represent the portion of positive responses indicated per question, based on the number of individuals who selected to answer each question (N). N is variable because every evaluation respondent did not answer each question.

Twenty-three (56%) evaluation respondents were volunteer (non-paid) coordinators, while 16 (39%) indicated that they were paid coordinators, either agent or nonagent (technician or equivalent). The remaining two (5%) respondents fell in the “other” category, such as the VMGA president.

The majority of respondents found the manual’s components acceptable (Table 1); that is, font (100% relative satisfaction) and type size (89%) were adequate so that the book was readable, the topics and discussions were an appropriate length (71%), samples from other MG units were sufficient (77%), and recommended procedures were clear and understandable (83%). Additional training about each topic’s importance to volunteer management and careful review of materials for possible reduction will be implemented in response to the 30 percent of respondents who felt the manual contained too much discussion. Respondents (90%) indicated that the organization of the manual was effective (Table 1), although an index for quick and easy reference of topics will be developed to facilitate manual use, as requested by eight respondents in their comments throughout the evaluation.

EFFECTIVENESS AND IMPORTANCE OF CHAPTER CONTENT

Respondents were asked to indicate the effectiveness (Table 2) of each chapter's content on a scale of 1 (not at all effective) to 4 (very effective). The frequencies of scores 3 and 4 were combined as an "effectiveness" percentage. Respondents gave 10 of 14 chapters effectiveness scores of 92 percent or higher. Four chapters received scores between 68 and 89 percent. Chapters 4 and 5 received the lowest overall scores of 68 percent and 78 percent, respectively, most likely due to their absence in the prototype manual. Chapters 13 and 14 also received lower scores, 89 percent and 82 percent, due to the absence of samples, such as instructions for the in-progress state-wide record keeping system.

Respondents were also asked to indicate the importance (Table 2) of each chapter's topic on a scale of 1 (not at all important) to 4 (very important). The frequencies of scores 3 and 4 were combined as an "importance" percentage. Based on respondents' rating, all chapters included in the manual were perceived as important to MG management, receiving an importance score of 82 percent or greater.

A grouping of the chapters into high (94% or greater), medium (82 - 93.9%), or low (below 81.9%) effectiveness and importance indicated strong correlation between importance and effectiveness, with the exception of three chapters which were ranked less important than they were effective. Managing Resources (chapter 12), VT Affiliation (chapter 2), and Getting Started for the First Time (chapter 3) discuss areas of MG program management where coordinators do not anticipate problems. Getting started for the first time is not an important issue for the majority of coordinators as only three coordinators (6%) needed this information for its intended use. The comparatively low importance value for the VT Affiliation chapter (82%) indicates that coordinators still do not fully understand the concept of the MG program and its management, and should revisit the initial start-up chapter for organizational advice.

Respondents were asked to indicate what information was missing for those chapters that they rated 2 or lower on the four-point scale. The predominant comments indicated the missing materials in chapters 4 and 5, requested more information for defining outcomes and preparing impact statements (chapter 13), and pointed out the need for more information on the new state-level record keeping system that is currently under development (chapter 14). Other comments included reference to spelling errors; respondents' attitudes about bureaucracy, record keeping, and evaluation; and suggestions for enhancing various sections throughout the manual.

Respondents felt that the manual had included the major topics of MG program management. Six respondents (20%) suggested additional material to be included in the manual, such as more support for volunteer (nonpaid) coordinators and smaller MG programs that operate in VCE units where there is not an Environmental Horticulture agent. Elaboration on the function of and MG involvement with Extension Leadership Councils (ELC), 4-H horticulture materials, and first-time start-up materials was also requested. Two (6.7%) individuals responded that they had additional local materials that would be suitable examples for inclusion in the final manual and they submitted samples with their evaluation.

MANUAL USE

There were seven questions addressing the use of the *VCE Master Gardener Coordinator Manual* (Table 3). An open-ended question related to this 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 Master Gardeners (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 motivation and retention materials included in chapter 10.

Respondents (49%) indicated that the manual changed the way they manage the MG program. Comments associated with this question indicated changes in basic MG program organization;

recruitment; delegation and explanation of responsibilities; use of job descriptions, record keeping, renewal of MG volunteers, and developing the public education component of volunteer jobs (adhering to VCE's mission); recognition, development of program ownership by volunteers, and risk management.

A goal for the use of the *VCE Master Gardener Coordinator Manual* was to establish better understanding of VCE goals so that coordinators can give better leadership to MG volunteers. Results indicate 56% success (Table 3).

A second goal of the manual use was to reduce the ultimate amount of time required of the MG coordinator in managing an effective program. Thirty (86%) respondents indicated that the *VCE Master Gardener Coordinator Manual* has maintained (43%) or increased (43%) the time spent planning and structuring MG programs. Respondents attributed the increase in planning time to the realization of the scope of an effectively managed MG program, such as the development of more organization; use of job descriptions, team building, and delegation of responsibilities; increase in use of forms and paperwork; more attention to following recommended guidelines; and increased attention to public relations and promotions. Several respondents indicated a decrease in time spent planning MG programs due to a realization that some responsibilities are not theirs and can be delegated and to an increase in efficiency using model forms. The many samples included in the manual helped to avoid "reinventing the wheel" and respondents felt the manual will decrease planning time spent in the future.

A third goal of the manual was to develop leadership and responsibility among MG volunteers. Twenty-six (74%) respondents indicated that the *VCE Master Gardener Coordinator Manual* has maintained (37%) or increased (37%) volunteer leadership. One (3%) indicated that the manual decreased leadership development, but did not explain why. While some felt that 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 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%) development of community educational programs that MG implement in the community. Comments suggest that this is an area where coordinators “need to work” and they are “just starting” to place more emphasis on the public educational component of MG projects and programs. Coordinators will need additional training to work more closely with all VCE agents to identify educational programming needs that MG volunteers can assist in implementing.

The manual was found to be most useful in communicating MG program policies and responsibilities to MG volunteers, local MG associations, and association officers (Table 3). It has also been used to clarify the MG program with local VCE clerical staff, unit coordinators, Environmental Horticulture agents, Family and Consumer Science (FCS) and 4-H agents, ELCs, district directors, and local officials in instances where it is pertinent or useful.

COORDINATORS’ MOST IMPORTANT MANAGEMENT ISSUES

When asked to list their five most important MG management issues (Table 4), respondents listed 114 items. These items were categorized into 11 similar groups based on management topics presented in the manual which 10 percent or more of respondents indicated as one of their most important management issues.

Educational programs for the public (64% of respondents) was the most important MG program management issue for MG coordinators. Motivation and retention of volunteers (39% of respondents) followed closely as the second most important issue, and the initial training of volunteers (32% of respondents) was the third most important issue for MG coordinators. The types of educational programs appropriate for MG implementation and how to prepare MGs to execute these programs is clearly uppermost on coordinators’ minds. These major concerns

indicate that issues relating to MG programs before the transition to local coordinators are still very important, such as how to train MG, keep them busy, and keep them coming back. The role of the other issues has not made its value evident yet.

The comparatively low importance of Chapter 4, Designing and Implementing Educational Programs (Table 4), contrasts with the rank of educational programs for the public (Table 4) as the most important management issue for coordinators. The majority of coordinators are not responsible (73%, volunteer and nonagent coordinators) for designing horticulture educational programs (chapter 4), but they are concerned with placing MG volunteers in appropriate educational projects and programs and giving MGs the skills to implement these programs. Placement and skill development directly affect motivation and retention of volunteers, the second most important management issue to local coordinators (Table 4). State-level MG management must continue to work with VCE agents who are responsible for the design of educational programs that meet local needs and instruct them in ways to develop program ownership in coordinators and volunteers as well as utilize MG volunteer assistance in implementing those programs.

The four chapters that were missing or incomplete at the time of printing (4, 5, 13, and 14) were the lowest ranked in terms of content effectiveness and importance; however, the topics of these chapters (Designing and Implementing Educational Programs; VCE Publication 426-699, which addresses the role of the MG, job descriptions, and basic organization; Evaluating the MG Program; and Record Keeping and Reporting) were among the most important management topics listed by respondents (Table 4). These four chapters require completion and inclusion in the final version of the *VCE Master Gardener Coordinator Manual*.

CONCLUSIONS

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

Respondents found the manual usable. Several comments were made about the “intimidating” length of the manual (600+ pages); however, 75 percent 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.” The manual’s font and type size and organization of information will remain the same; however, it is clear an index will be added to facilitate finding information within the manual.

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

The benefits of the manual’s use and additional planning time are slowly becoming evident through increased understanding of VCE goals and the role of the MG by MG volunteers, coordinators, and other paid VCE staff; the slight increase in leadership skills of MGs, and the increasing interest and demand for information on training MG to design and implement strong educational horticulture programs for Virginia communities.

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Table 1. Respondents' evaluation scores of components of the *VCE Master Gardener Coordinator Manual*

COMPONENT	N	% SATISFACTION^z
Font	39	100.0
Type Size	37	89.2
Topic/Discussion length	34	70.5
Samples from other MG units	35	77.1
Recommended procedures	35	82.8
Organizational structure	39	94.9

^z Individuals 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.

Table 2. Effectiveness and Importance of *VCE Master Gardener Coordinator Manual* Chapter Content as Evaluated by Local Coordinators

CHAPTER	EFFECTIVENESS		IMPORTANCE	
	N ^z	% Effective ^y	N ^z	% Important ^y
1. The Local 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 Welcome to Virginia Master Gardening!	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 MG Program	37	89.1	38	89.4
14. Record Keeping and Reporting	34	82.4	37	89.2

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

^y Individuals 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.

Table 3. Use and Effect of the *VCE Master Gardener Coordinator Manual* on Local MG Program Management as Indicated by Responding Coordinators

QUESTION	N	# of POSITIVE RESPONSES	% of RESPONSES
Implemented ideas yet	34	23	68.0
Information changed the way manage the local MG program	33	16	49.0
Effect on understanding 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 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 MG	36		
Increased		7	19.0
Stayed the same		21	58.0
Decreased		1	3.0
Other		7	19.0
USEFUL FOR COMMUNICATING TO	N	# of POSITIVE RESPONSES	% of RESPONSES
Staff	25	15	60.0
Unit Coordinator	28	17	61.0
EH Agent	24	18	75.0
FCS Agent	13	8	42.0
4-H Agent	22	11	50.0
ELC	23	11	48.0
District Director	19	8	42.0
Local Officials	19	8	42.0
MG Association	28	26	93.0
MG Association Officers	28	23	82.0
MG participants	30	27	90.0
Other	7	4	57.0

Table 4. MG Management Issues of Most Importance to Responding Local MG Coordinators ^z

TOPIC (Related Chapter)	# of RESPONSES (N=114)	% of 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)	4	14.0
Delegation of management (1, 5)	3	11.0
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

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