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TIMELINE DETAILING THE RESTRUCTURING OF A DYSFUNCTIONAL MASTER GARDENER PROGRAM IN SALT LAKE COUNTY

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ABSTRACT

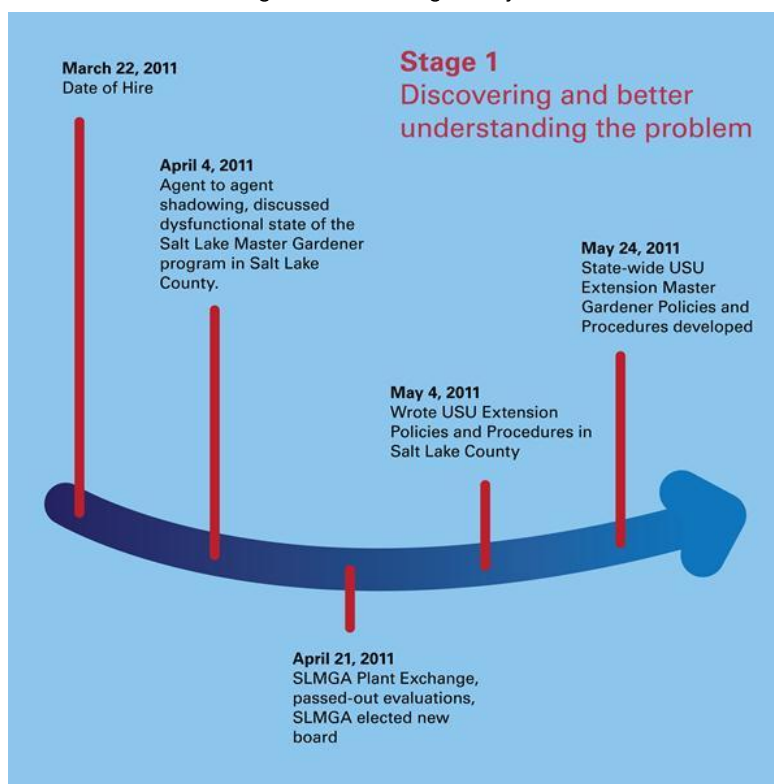
The Salt Lake County Master Gardener program was restructured in 2011 to meet Utah State University (USU) Extension policies and procedures. Prior to restructuring, most Master Gardener projects did not benefit Extension programming and demonstrated little educational outreach. A survey conducted in spring 2011 found 53% of Master Gardeners were very satisfied with Salt Lake Extension's role in the program. Several volunteers suggested more educational and diagnostic learning opportunities would increase their excitement to volunteer as well as discontinuation of high labor, low public outreach projects. A follow-up survey in spring 2012 found 73% of volunteers were very satisfied with the Master Gardener Program. It was critical for USU Extension administration to be aware and supportive of restructuring efforts by county faculty throughout the reshaping of the program.

Introduction

Current literature describes restructuring of Master Gardener programs to better motivate volunteers or address budgetary shortfalls (Moravec, 2006, Schrock, Meyer, Ascher, & Snyder, 2000, Lyons, O'Neill, Polanin, Mickel, & Hlubik, 2008), however, little existing literature discusses the restructuring of Master Gardener programs to better assist Extension faculty in achieving program goals. By training the trainer, Master Gardener programs extend the ability of horticulture faculty to serve new and diverse communities. Therefore, Master Gardeners are an extension of the Extension agent. Decline in the effectiveness of Master Gardener programs can result from time lapses between hired horticulture faculty, and ineffective Master Gardener coordinators. Newly hired faculty may experience resistance when trying to implement changes to an existing Master Gardener program. The following account describes the challenges met and solutions found when newly hired faculty restructured a dysfunctional Master Gardener program in Salt Lake County.

Methods

[Stage One: Discovering and Better Understanding the Problem](#)



Salt Lake County experienced a one year time lapse between the leaving and hiring of horticulture faculty. Newly hired faculty met with neighboring county Extension faculty with Master Gardener programs for agent-to-agent shadowing. Master Gardener volunteer projects in other Utah counties vary considerably, however many projects funnel individual faculty interests into the Master Gardener Program. For example, a new arboretum in Davis County (UT) and a new community garden in Cache County (UT) provide areas for public education, serve as Master Gardener projects and allow faculty to develop programming and/or research in their area of interest (woody plant selection and fruit production). The two mentioned counties are recent examples of cases where faculty experienced resistance from Master Gardener volunteers to retire previously supported projects and shift focus toward programming that included the interests of the faculty. Mentoring faculty expressed concern that the Salt Lake County program was not meeting USU Extension expectations and that the current program would be time consuming and not benefit Extension programming. This was evident in Salt Lake County as none of the established Master Gardener projects benefitted the broader programming interests of newly hired faculty (low pesticide input gardening education and pollinator promotion). Also, most previously supported projects were labor intensive and did not focus on dissemination of research-based gardening information to the public. Briefly, USU Extension expectations state volunteers assist and advise county Extension faculty on projects or Extension sponsored events. Master Gardener coordinator duties are the responsibility of county faculty and therefore they make a final decision on discussed issues. It was suggested that the program be restructured.

Surveys were passed out to volunteers who attended an annual social gathering and mailed-out to all Master Gardeners in a monthly newsletter. Volunteers were asked to provide feedback with their satisfaction/dissatisfaction of the program. Despite multiple attempts via email and verbal reminders, only 25 surveys were returned and many Master Gardeners did not respond to all questions. 53% of Master Gardener volunteers reported 'very satisfied' with Extension's role in the program. Questions 1, 2 and 4 were the only questions with prompted replies. The other questions requested write-in replies. The following table shows replies that were grouped based on similar responses. Of these responses, most volunteers indicated they enjoyed socializing with other Master Gardener volunteers. Several volunteers suggested that more educational and diagnostic learning opportunities might increase their excitement to volunteer and many volunteers were unhappy with high labor, low public outreach projects. 42 volunteers of 250+ Master Gardeners reported volunteer hours in 2011.

1) How satisfied are you with Salt Lake Extension's role in the Master Gardener Program?	Very (10)	Somewhat (5)	Not Very (3)	Disappointed (1)
Why? (write-in comments from Master Gardeners who replied somewhat, not very or disappointed)	Personality conflict with previous agent(s) (4) Lack of quality programming (1)	Lack of agent (4) Lack of new students (1)	Disappointment (1) Happy with projects and programming (2)	More educational programming needed (2) Inactive as member due to other reasons (2)
2) Are you satisfied with the volunteer activities available to Master Gardeners?	Yes (10)	No (3)		
Why?	Want to see more projects (2)	More evening or weekend activities for	Less laborious projects, more	

(write-in comments from Master Gardeners who replied no)		full time workers (1)	educational projects (2)	
3) What Master Gardener volunteer activities would you suggest might strengthen the program?	Content with program(1) Programming with schools or scouts (1)	More educational workshops/opportunities (4) Advanced Master Gardener Program (1) Field trips (1)	More detailed instruction, less cliff-notes lectures (1) Group Identity workshops (1)	Building energy among existing members (1) More public information (1)
4) Year after year do you continue to be excited to volunteer for the Master Gardener Program?	Yes (8)	No (0)		
Why? (additional write-in comments from question #4)	Education to public (3) Looking forward to future (2)	Being around Master Gardeners (2)	Physical and mental stimulation (2)	Love to garden (1) Love to volunteer (1)
5) What activity/educational opportunities might make you excited to volunteer more this year?	More educational /diagnostic learning opportunities (5)	More Farmer's Market dates (1)		
6) Currently, what are your favorite aspects of the Master Gardener Program?	Educational lectures (3) Diagnostic clinics (4)	Teaching opportunities (1) Fellow Master Gardeners (5)	Good monthly meetings (1) Good projects (3)	Plant swap (1) Garden tours (1) Volunteering (1)
7) What are your least favorite aspects of the Master Gardener Program?	Weeding (1) Rules (1) Less fun (1)	All unnecessary drama (1) Lack of Master Gardener class (1)	Lackluster fair/community appearances (1)	Previous horticulture agent(s) (1)

Table 1. Spring 2011 Master Gardener Survey Questions and Number () of Similar Responses.

Newly hired faculty received by-laws from the Salt Lake Master Gardener Association (SLMGA). Upon reviewing the by-laws, it became clear that the association was functioning as an independent 501(c)3 organization. Many of the due-paying SLMGA members were unaware that the association was functioning independently of USU Extension. The SLMGA consisted of individuals who had previously completed the Master Gardener training and 40 hour volunteer requirement. The SLMGA elected their own board who controlled the finances and direction over volunteer projects and events for the group. USU Extension faculty were allowed 15 minutes to speak at board meetings but held no voting power. These policies did not align with university standards because USU Extension identifies horticulture faculty as Master Gardener coordinators and therefore responsible for directing county Master Gardener programs. Because the by-laws of the SLMGA were far from the expectations of USU Extension, new policies and procedures were drafted by Salt Lake faculty. The new policies and procedures mirrored successful Master Gardener programs in surrounding counties that married the Master Gardener program with programming and research interests of Extension faculty.

A state-wide Master Gardener policies and procedures were developed to clarify the expectations of USU Extension with regard to Master Gardener programs throughout the state of Utah. All USU faculty with horticulture responsibilities were asked to review and offer feedback during the development of the document. All pertinent faculty members were asked to sign the document to show a collective agreement over the basic structure of Master Gardener programs in Utah. The northern and southern regional directors of Extension disseminated the state-wide policies and procedures to faculty and collected signed documents. This document was partially intended to help Master Gardener volunteers better understand that implementation of policies and procedures by county faculty had been reviewed and were supported by the broader USU Extension community as opposed a decision being made by a single faculty member.

Results and Discussion

Stage 2: Announcing the New Direction of the Program to SLMGA Members



SLMGA members were presented with a clarified direction of the Master Gardener Program. Because miscommunication is often the root of confusion, horticulture faculty decided to announce the new direction of the program to the Master Gardener volunteers as one group. Horticulture faculty asked a colleague to attend the meeting and document minutes. Master gardeners were presented the new policies and procedures document for Salt Lake County, the state-wide accepted policies and procedures and the first chapter of the Master Gardener manual which describes history, organization and purpose of the program. A confirmation of commitment document with signature page was included at the end of the Salt Lake County policies and procedures document. SLMGA members were asked to review the Salt Lake County policies and procedures and sign the confirmation of commitment if they wanted to be active with the USU Extension Salt Lake County Master Gardener program. Horticulture faculty answered questions and replied to concerns. Most SLMGA members wanted time to consider the new direction of the program before signing the confirmation of commitment. A few members were visibly upset throughout the meeting.

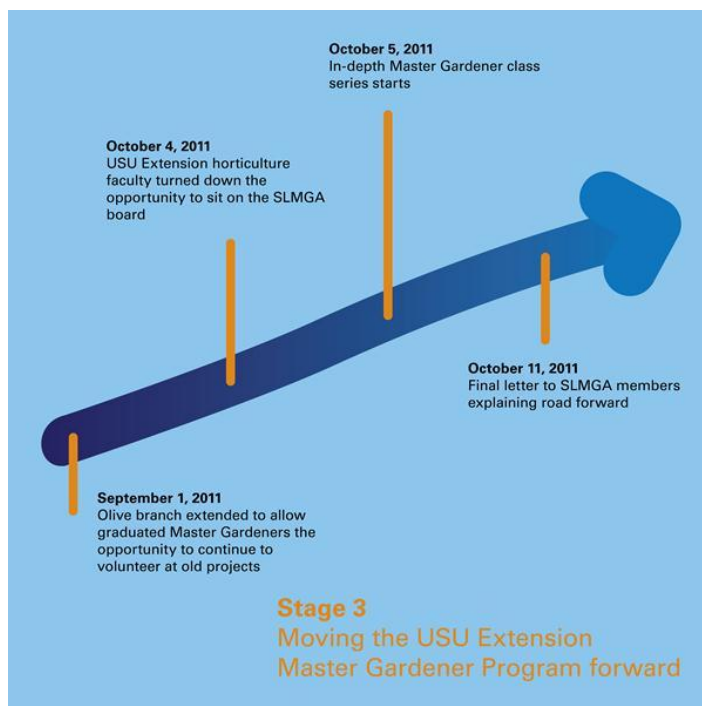
A disgruntled SLMGA member filed a complaint that USU Extension horticulture faculty were trying to dissolve the Master Gardener Program in Salt Lake County. The SLMGA member called a community partner, the Mayor's office and the Vice President of Extension but did not contact the Salt Lake County Extension office. Extension horticulture faculty addressed the complaint with the Mayor's office and the disgruntled SLMGA member. Because the Salt Lake County faculty member was in routine communication with the Northern Regional Director of Extension, the Vice President of Extension was not alarmed by the complaint.

Horticulture faculty met with project leaders to discuss individual projects. Many of the previous volunteer projects supported by SLMGA members were high-labor, low-educational outreach projects. USU horticulture faculty drafted guidelines for a successful Master Gardener project and presented the guidelines during discussion on projects. USU Extension horticulture faculty noticed that some volunteers had sentimental attachment to specific projects. Project leaders were asked to re-think current projects and come-up with ideas on how projects could be adapted to better fit the guidelines. This process was time consuming and largely unproductive.

It became obvious the public would be confused when trying to decipher between two independent groups that shared 'Master Gardener' in their names. USU Extension faculty asked if the SLMGA would rename their organization to a title without 'Master Gardener' but the association refused. The State Master Gardener Coordinator researched the trademark status of Master Gardener but found the name is too generic to trademark.

A handful of disgruntled SLMGA members, including some past members that had not been active for several years, called an 'emergency meeting' to discuss the new direction of the Master Gardener program in Salt Lake County and the future of the SLMGA. USU Extension was not informed or invited to the meeting but rather found out about the meeting indirectly.

Stage 3: Moving the USU Extension Master Gardener Program Forward



Several SLMGA members who also wanted to be a part of the USU Extension Master Gardener Program voiced that they would appreciate the opportunity to continue to volunteer at previously supported projects that did not fit the guidelines. USU Extension horticulture faculty met volunteers halfway by extending this opportunity. New students cannot volunteer at these projects but previously graduated Master Gardeners may volunteer and count their hours for grandfathered-in' projects. This compromise was well received by the group. SLMGA board members asked if USU Extension horticulture faculty were interested in joining their board. USU faculty turned down the opportunity because it was felt the objectives of the two groups were drastically different. This decision also made it clear that the USU Extension Master Gardener Program was moving forward without members of the SLMGA that did not want to be part of the USU Extension program.

Positive and educational opportunities were immediately offered to SLMGA and USU Extension Master Gardeners. It was hoped that SLMGA members would recognize the positive future direction of the program and choose to join. An in-depth series on home food production was well attended and clearly demonstrated what an Extension coordinated Master Gardener program had to offer active volunteers.

All SLMGA members were mailed a letter explaining Extension faculty would assume that they were uninterested in becoming active with the USU Extension Master Gardener program unless they had informed us otherwise. SLMGA members were also reminded that they were welcome to join the USU Extension Master Gardener program anytime in the future if they changed their minds. SLMGA members were encouraged to send immediate response if they planned to join the USU Extension Master Gardener Program in time to receive an invitation to an upcoming USU Extension Master Gardener Appreciation Dinner on November 16, 2011.

Stage 4: Launching a New Master Gardener Program



Extension faculty held orientations for the 2012 Master Gardener class. The Salt Lake Extension office notified over 300 individuals who had signed an interest list for more information on the 2012 class. 85 students signed-up for the 2012 class. Salt Lake County horticulture faculty hosted the Master Gardener appreciation dinner with over 100 Master Gardeners and guests in attendance. Horticulture faculty also hosted the first of several USU Extension Advisory Council meetings to facilitate constructive input from Master Gardener volunteers. The first day of class for the 2012 Master Gardener class was January 31st, 2012. It was helpful welcoming 85 new volunteers into the program since the new class outnumbered the 54 SLMGA members that chose to join the USU Extension Master Gardener Program. This ratio allowed horticulture faculty to steer the program toward its new direction with relative ease. Follow-up evaluations were sent to all SLMGA members that chose to join the USU Extension Master Gardener program. 73% of volunteers reported 'very satisfied' with the Master Gardener Program. Several evaluations mentioned appreciation for increased educational and diagnostic learning opportunities.

TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION

- Get entire Extension administration on board with your new direction and goals.
- Always remember your Master Gardener Program should benefit your programming efforts.
- Have new Policies and Procedures ready when changes (or clarifications) are announced and consider inviting a colleague to help moderate the discussion and document meeting minutes.
- Reassure volunteers nobody did anything wrong; the program is just turning a fresh corner. Accept that you will lose volunteers that do not share interest in your new direction.
- Expect an emotional response and always welcome feedback.
- Always keep your direct supervisor in the loop.
- Keep emotion out of your email responses.
- Offer positive educational opportunities immediately.
- Do not spend too much valuable time on the transition.
- Know it will be a draining experience and emotionally taxing on you.
- Try to keep finances out of the discussion.
- Update community partners on changes so they are aware of any negative fall-out.



In Conclusion

Restructuring a Master Gardener program can be a time consumptive and emotionally draining experience. It is vital to think through the process before implementing changes and to get the entire Extension administration on board with your new direction. For pre-tenured faculty, it is useful to update tenure advisory committee members on the progression so they are aware and supportive of the amount of time that will need to be devoted toward the transition. Although it is difficult, it is important to try not to spend too much time on the transition. It is also helpful to always welcome volunteer feedback. Most importantly it is critical to remember that the Master Gardener program should add to, not detract from, Extension programming.

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