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MASTER GARDENER PREFERENCES FOR TRAINING PROGRAM DELIVERY

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ABSTRACT

The onset of the pandemic shifted in-person Extension programs to virtual delivery across the country. To assess program delivery and design preferences, 154 Extension Master Gardeners in Salt Lake County Utah shared their views on various program delivery methods. Participants ranked four methods from most to least preferred. In-person group learning with in-person presentations ranked highest with 70% of respondents selecting this method as a 1st or 2nd choice. In-person group learning with virtual presentations was least preferred. While respondents enjoyed the flexibility of virtual learning, lack of social interaction was a top concern.

INTRODUCTION

The initial or core course training for Extension Master Gardeners has changed since the program began in Washington State in 1972. Nationwide, the traditional lecture in a classroom setting merged to distance education via Interactive Television and later to the internet (Meyer, 2007). The Covid-19 pandemic caused many Extension programs traditionally taught in-person to adapt to online delivery (Emm et al., 2020). Prior to 2019, the Utah Master Gardener program was taught in-person with instructors present in the classroom, rotating instructors based on expertise in subject matter. This rotation, referred to the 'teaching circuit' in Utah, extended a depth of expertise and variety of teaching styles to Master Gardener trainees. In-person educational delivery helps foster a sense of community, collaboration, and human connection (Stokes et al., 202). However, as Master Gardener programs grew throughout Utah counties, the traditional in-person teaching circuit overwhelmed instructors' schedules, which generated a need for virtual delivery of classes. Idaho has experienced a similar strain on instructor capacity and rapidly shifted to online instruction as the onset of the pandemic imposed restrictions on in-person programming (Werlin et al., 2020).

METHODS

In Salt Lake County, the Extension Master Gardener Volunteer Training program was delivered three different ways in three consecutive years:

Class prior to 2020 took place in-person, in a group setting, with in-person presentations. Active status Master Gardeners from the 2013 to 2019 classes (350 individuals) were asked to provide feedback via the evaluation discussed below. Forty-seven individuals responded.

The 2020 class experienced two different training styles, starting with an in-person group learning setting with in-person presentations. Due to pandemic, the 2020 class finished the course at home (individual learning) with virtual presentations. One hundred people participated in the 2020 program. Twenty-two individuals provided program feedback via the evaluation discussed below.

The 2021 class viewed pre-recorded presentations, at their convenience, and had the option to participate in a virtual Q&A session. Due to presenter preference, there was one class during 2021 that was virtually presented vs. pre-recorded. One hundred people participated in the 2021 program. Eighty-five individuals provided program feedback via the evaluation discussed below.

Delivery of training by multiple methods provided an opportunity to gather feedback and assess training preference of participants. Participants from these three groups were sent a link to an evaluation that was created via Qualtrics. Participants were asked to rank four training delivery preferences. The evaluation prompted participants to select their first, second, third and fourth ranked preferences for training delivery. The purpose of the evaluation was not to statistically analyze participant responses, but rather to gather feedback of preferences for training program delivery.

Participants were asked, if the pandemic was not a factor, how they would rank the following program delivery methods:

1. In person classes (trainees gather at venue) with instructors present at the venue. Trainees meet in person once a week for 2.5 hours at scheduled time and location. (Group Learning/In-Person Presentation)

2. In person classes (trainees gather at venue) with instructors present via Zoom™. Trainees meet in person once a week for 2.5 hours at scheduled time and location. (Group Learning/Virtual Presentation)
3. Virtual classes with virtual instruction (meet virtually once a week for 2.5-hour class at scheduled time). (Individual Learning/Virtual Presentation)
4. Flexibility to view 1 to 2.5-hour pre-recorded presentation anytime during week of the assigned topic with optional question and answer (Q&A) session with instructors held periodically throughout the training period. (Individual Learning/Pre-recorded Presentation w/ Virtual Q&A)

Survey respondents ranked the 4 options with 1 being their 1st choice or most preferred and 4 being the least preferred choice. Choices were then weighted to provide an overall score out of a possible 4 points. Respondents were also given the opportunity to provide additional feedback.

Choices were weighted as follows:

1st choice = 4 points

2nd choice = 3 points

3rd choice = 2 points

4th choice = 1 point

Ranked scores were calculated using an arithmetic average that adds together all ratings and divides by the total quantity of ratings. The USU Institution Review Board (IRB) determined the survey to be exempt so no IRB review was required.

RESULTS

GROUP LEARNING/IN-PERSON PRESENTATION CHOICE

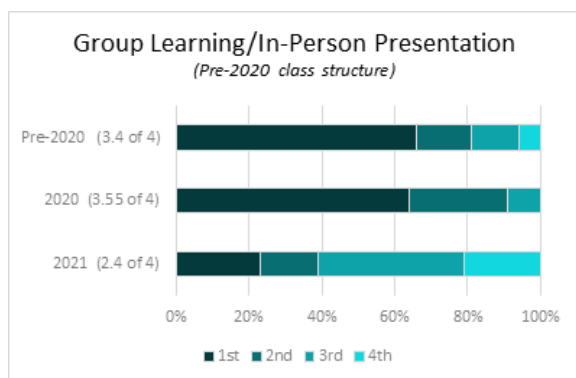


Figure 1. Preference for group learning with in-person presentations.

All survey participants that took the class prior to 2020 (n=47) experienced an in-person group learning setting with in-person presentations. These participants did not experience the other options included in the survey. When comparing all options, this method was the preferred choice among those taking the class prior to 2020 (3.4 of 4) with 66% of respondents selecting it as their first choice and 15% selecting as their second (Figure 1). This option was also the preferred choice of those taking the class in 2020 (3.55 of 4) with 64% selecting it as their first choice and 27% selecting as their second. Those that took the class in 2021 gave it an overall score of 2.4 of 4 with only 23% selecting it as their first choice. When looking at scores across all groups, this method was the preferred choice with an overall score of 3.12 of 4.

Respondents were also encouraged to provide feedback on their preferences. Comments from those taking the class prior to 2020 stressed the social and interactive aspect of in-person attendance. Several participants commented on the need for in-person instruction due to personal learning styles. Although most respondents in this group preferred in-person instruction, several comments addressed the benefit of increased flexibility with online delivery.

Group Learning/Virtual Presentation Choice

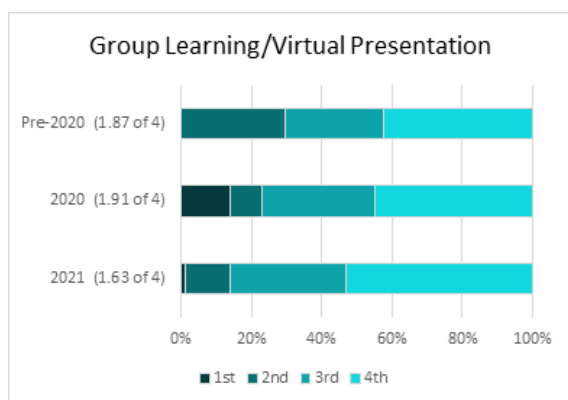


Figure 2. Preference for group learning with virtual presentations.

Even though none of the classes completed the training program by group learning and virtual presentation, it was included as a choice since this option would both provide social interaction and virtual instruction. However, this method scored the lowest among all groups (1.80 of 4). Of the three groups, those taking the class in 2020 scored this method the highest (1.91 of 4) with 14% selecting it as their first choice and 9% selecting as their second (Figure 2). No one in the pre-2020 group selected this as their first choice and only 1% of those taking the class in 2021 chose it as their first choice. Results are summarized in Figure 2.

Individual Learning/Virtual Presentation Choice

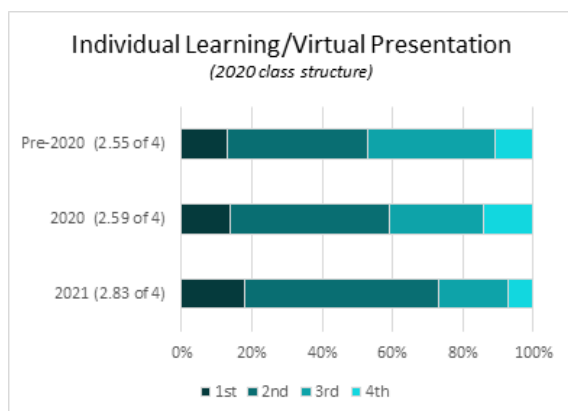


Figure 3. Preference for individual learning with virtual presentations.

Survey participants that took the class in 2020 (n=22) started with the in-person group learning setting with in-person presentations but completed classes remotely with virtual instruction due to the onset of the pandemic. This method ranked second overall among all participants (2.66 of 4). Survey participants taking the class in 2021 scored this method the highest (2.83 of 4) with 18% selecting it as their first choice and 55% selecting it as their second (Figure 3). Fourteen percent of the survey participants from the 2020 class selected this method as their first choice with 45% selecting as their second. Of the three groups, those that took the class prior to 2020 scored this option the lowest (2.55 of 4) with 13% selecting it as their first choice and 40% selecting it as their second.

Comments from the 2020 survey respondents mentioned a desire for a hybrid structure of both in-person and virtual instruction. Many respondents commented that they found value in the flexibility of online classes but missed the social interaction with fellow trainees. This group also desired hands-on training during volunteer workdays.

Individual Learning/Pre-recorded Presentation w/ Virtual Question and Answer (Q&A) Choice

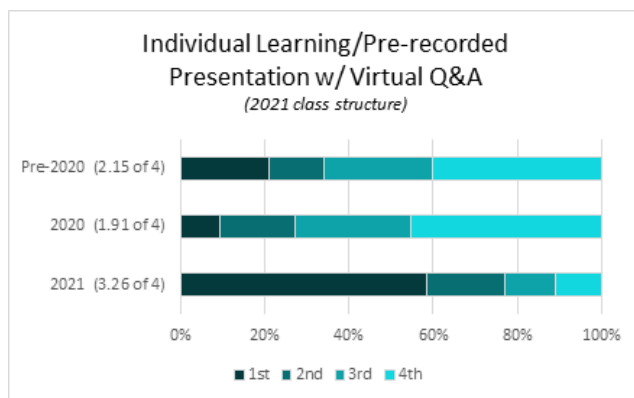


Figure 4. Preference for individual learning with pre-recorded presentation and an optional virtual Q&A session.

Survey participants that took the class in 2021 (n=85) were the only group to view pre-recorded presentations, at their convenience, and had the option to participate in a virtual Q&A session. Due to the preference of the presenter, there was one class during 2021 that was virtually presented vs. pre-recorded. When comparing all options, this method was the preferred choice among survey participants that took the class in 2021 (3.26 of 4) with 59% of respondents selecting it as their first choice and 19% selecting it as their second. Survey participants from the 2020 class scored this option lowest among the three choices with only 9% of respondents selecting it as their first choice and 18% selecting it as their second. Survey participants who took the class prior to 2020 had an average score of 2.15 of 4 with 21% selecting it as their first choice and 13% selecting it as their second. Results are summarized in Figure 4.

Comments from the 2021 group of respondents focused on the benefit of flexibility with virtual options. A common critique was the need for frequent Q&A with instructors. Some participants who only watched the pre-recorded presentations mentioned they were left with unanswered questions if they did not participate in Q&A sessions. Multiple participants expressed the advantage of being able to re-watch and pause videos as desired.

DISCUSSION

The overall course delivery preference was the group learning setting with in-person presentation, but it's interesting to note that the 2021 participants expressed a preference for what they experienced. For example, the 2021 class was the only group offered the flexibility to view pre-recorded lectures at their leisure and the option to participate in a live Q&A session with instructors. Survey participants in the 2021 class ranked this option higher than any other group (3.26 of 4) and higher than the other options presented to them. It's also worth noting that all groups ranked the group learning setting with virtual presentation low, which is interesting considering the comments related to the social aspect of the class and desire for interaction.

At this time Salt Lake County Extension is unable to accommodate in-person instruction due to the growing demands of Extension Master Gardener programs across the state. Comments from trainees underscore the importance to include opportunities for social engagement, both among trainees and between trainees and instructors. One solution would be to host in-person classes and/or workshops after the conclusion of the regular training program. Furthermore, many respondents mentioned that they would prefer a hybrid approach of both in-person classes and virtual classes. It's worth mentioning that Werlin et al. (2020) found a hybrid learning approach to be successful for improved efficiency of the Idaho Master Gardener program. Although a hybrid option is not achievable for the Salt Lake training program at this time, it could be considered in the future. Certainly, each training delivery option had identifiable advantages and disadvantages. As Utah continues to develop their virtual programming, it will be important to continue gathering feedback and adjust programming to meet the preferences and needs of its clientele.

CONCLUSIONS

Although the scope of this needs assessment was limited to Salt Lake County, results have relevance on a state-wide and possibly national scale. Other studies have found that lack of face-to-face interaction does not impede learning, overall program satisfaction or success (Jeannette & Meyer, 2002; Langellotto-Rhodaback, 2010). Counties throughout Utah plan to shift Master Gardener instruction to online or hybrid (split in-person/virtual) program delivery starting in 2022. This change will continue to provide quality programming to trainees while easing the travel burden on instructors. Utah Master Gardener programs will look toward Zoom™ Q&A sessions and hands-on workshops to build social engagement within individual county programs.

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