

**Extension Master Gardeners and Watershed Stewards'  
Motivation Amidst COVID-19.**

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### **Introduction**

Amidst the global crisis, understanding what drives individuals to donate their time and resources has become more critical than ever. Research indicates that volunteers' underlying motives and values are key determinants of their behavior, engagement, and dedication to service (Clary et al., 1996; Windon et al., 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the critical role of volunteers in addressing emerging challenges and supporting communities. Various studies have explored the motivation factors of driving volunteers across different contexts, shedding light on their contributions and experiences during these unprecedented times. Understanding these motivation factors in Extension programs is key to aligning initiatives with volunteer interests, fostering participation, and ensuring long-term engagement (Windon et al., 2020, 2023)

### **Purpose and Research Objective**

This qualitative study explored the common motivational factors of [State] Extension Master Gardeners (MGs) and Master Watershed Stewards (MWSs) based on educational levels, categorizing volunteers as either holding graduate degrees or not.

### **Conceptual/Theoretical Framework**

Master Gardening and Watershed Stewards Extension programs represent the extension's commitment to community service and environmental stewardship, relying on the passion and dedication of volunteers to carry out their mission (Osafo, 2021; Strong & Harder, 2011). Even in times of crisis, this enduring commitment to volunteerism, Dorn et al. (2021) explored the motivation of Extension Master Gardener (MG) volunteers and their connection to program tenure. He found that "learning" was the primary motivator, while "social" and "career" motivations also played significant roles, highlighting the need for Extension programs to tailor engagement strategies for diverse volunteers. Motivation factors range widely from personal enjoyment and community contribution to the pursuit of knowledge, social connection, career advancement, and the expression of altruistic values (Clary et al., 1998). Altruistic and prosocial values drive individuals of all ages to engage in volunteer activities, aiming to ameliorate societal challenges and contribute positively to the global community (Bruyere & Rappe, 2007), including the pandemic time (Principi et al., 2022; Windon et al., 2023). Clary et al. (1996) functional motivation framework identifies six key drivers of volunteerism: Enhancement (personal growth), Protective (reducing guilt or stress), Social (building relationships), Understanding (gaining knowledge), Career (professional development), and Helping/Educating (making a difference). These motivation factors align with Davidov et al. (2008) values, where altruism and universalism emphasize concern for others and societal well-being, self-direction reflects personal autonomy and intellectual curiosity, and other values shape volunteers' engagement. These frameworks highlight the diverse psychological and value-based reasons individuals commit to volunteer work.

### **Method**

This study emerged from a larger research project and utilized an online survey to collect data from 3,000 MGs and MWSs, yielding a final dataset of 1,196 responses (39.9% response rate). Of these, 351 participants (29.3%) answered an open-ended question about their experiences that derive motivation during the pandemic. We applied qualitative content analysis using Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) to identify latent themes (Blei et al., 2003). After that we used

principal component analysis (PCA) to visualize topic interrelationships (Hotelling, 1933). Inductive and deductive coding aligned emerging themes with established motivational and values frameworks (Saldana, 2015). To ensure trustworthiness, we incorporated peer debriefing, coder triangulation, and thick description (Creswell, 1998). Themes were analyzed based on MG and MWS participants' graduate and non-graduate educational levels to determine overlapping and discrete themes.

### **Results/Findings**

The LDA analysis revealed four common themes: enhancement and personal growth, protective coping with challenges, helping and educating others, and expressing values. Several topics overlapped around volunteers' desire to gain new skills, reinforce altruistic or environmental values, and adapt to pandemic-related disruptions—indicating that es to gain new skills, reinforce altruistic or environmental values, and adapt to pandemic-related disruptions—indicating that both intrinsic (e.g., self-directed learning) and extrinsic (e.g., community engagement) drivers coexist. Comparatively, participants with graduate degrees emphasized leadership or advanced knowledge-building slightly more. Furthermore, those without graduate degrees highlighted hands-on community activities and localized challenges more often.

### **Discussion**

Despite these distinctions, both groups demonstrated resilience by maintaining volunteer service amid COVID-19 constraints, aligning with prior research on volunteer motivation (Clary et al., 1998; Davidov et al., 2008). The pandemic context intensified “protective” motives, as individuals sought ways to cope with uncertainty and remain socially connected (Miao et al., 2021; Susanti et al., 2023), yet volunteers collectively exhibited a blend of personal growth, communal contribution, and deeply held values. These findings reinforce Extension programs' potential to foster individual fulfillment and collective resilience (Osafo, 2021; Strong & Harder, 2011).

### **Implications and Recommendations**

Extension volunteer coordinators should utilize evidence from volunteers' functional and value-based motivation to match volunteers' tasks with personal interests that can help enhance program effectiveness (Clary et al., 1998; Strong & Harder, 2011). Additionally, flexible, virtual, or modified volunteer roles can support those motivated by protective and social functions, ensuring sustained engagement during crises and beyond (Osafo, 2021; Sulandjari et al., 2022). Structured leadership pathways should also be developed to attract volunteers with career-driven or advanced skill motivation, strengthening program capacity and providing clear advancement opportunities (Dorn et al., 2021). Programs should highlight environmental stewardship and altruistic impacts through regular community impact reports and volunteer recognition, which align with volunteers' universalism values (Davidov et al., 2008; Principi et al., 2022). Finally, implementing robust feedback systems and promoting cross-program collaboration will improve learning opportunities and satisfaction, fostering a culture of continuous improvement and community building.

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