

BOLSTERING A COLLECTIVE LEGACY: A CASE STUDY OF NEW MEXICO EXTENSION MASTER GARDENERS

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INTRODUCTION

- Through Land-grant Universities, the Extension Master Gardeners (EMG) to **communicate research-based horticultural knowledge** where EMG volunteers are key to disseminate this information to the public in their local communities (Bauske et al., 2011; Navaratnam, 1986).
- The EMG National Committee (Extension Master Gardener, n.d.) - 2025 report estimated at least 76,292 EMG volunteers contributed around 5.1 million hours toward education and outreach in which these efforts contribute an estimated \$175.4 million dollars in value to the public.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

- Social identity theory (SIT) & Role Theory**
 - To frame and contextualize the understanding of the NM EMG volunteer motivations where the statewide program is viewed as an organization and as a social group,
- SIT** distinguishes between personal and collective self-esteem (also referred to as self and group-self) and other levels as a function of different levels of self-categorization (Turner, 1999).
- Role Theory** provides a conceptual explanation of the social behavior an individual assumes by the social position they occupy in a relationship with others 2022).

PURPOSE & OBJECTIVES

- Our study sought to explore the NM Master Gardeners statewide program as a case study to see why NM EMG volunteers are motivated to participate and retain membership in the program and explore how their role impacts the Land-grant mission.
 - RO1:** Describe the relationship between motivational factors influencing Extension Master Gardener volunteers and their motivations within the program.
 - RO2:** Describe the role of Extension Master Gardener volunteers in social contexts.

RESULTS & FINDINGS - VISUALIZATIONS

Figure 1. Likert–scale Survey Results for All 6 VFI Functions Displayed as a 100% Stacked Bar Charts.



Note. n=56. Responses recorded on a 7-point Likert scale as 1 = *not important at all* to 7 = *extremely important*. Scan QR code for details of statements for each VFI function.

Figure 2. Quote highlights from qualitative (phase 2) interviews.

“The big key to the training in Master Gardening is how to appropriately get the information to help others. Looking at publications, looking at scientific documents, looking at things that end in .edu or extension, so that we're providing not random, you know, Bob's blog on what he thinks is the best tomato.” - Susan, EMG Veteran

“[EMG status] definitely doesn't hinder [communicating] at all. I mean that's in our mission statement and I totally embrace that. So as an EMG, I think that's my responsibility, to be communicating that sort of information, both to my peers and communicating the importance of that kind of information to my peers, and then especially to the public as well.” - Lisa, EMG Veteran

Abstract & Resources

Scan the QR code for full abstract, data details, & other resources used!



METHOD

- Quantitative (Phase 1)** - NM EMG participants completed an online Qualtrics survey questionnaire (n = 56). Volunteer Functions Inventory 30-item instrument using the 7-point Likert scale ($\alpha = .931$).
- Qualitative (Phase 2)** - 17 of the survey participants completed the follow-up one-on-one semi-structured interviews via Zoom.
- Data Analysis** - SPSS 29 & NVivo 15.

RESULTS & FINDINGS

Quantitative Findings

- Highest to lowest group means for VFI (by importance), the order is as follows:
 - Values (M = 5.91, SD = 1.19) - Moderate**
 - Understanding (M = 5.22, SD = .96) - Moderate**
 - Enhancement (M = 4.20, SD = 1.55) - Neutral
 - Social (M = 3.80, SD = 1.45) - Slightly
 - Protective (M = 3.10, SD = 1.56) - Slightly
 - Career (M = 1.99, SD = 1.57) - Little to No**

Qualitative Findings

- Deductive Themes (DT) - 2 Themes, 4 Subthemes - (DT1) Identity attachment and program alignment, with subthemes of sense of belonging and organizational pride and challenges with identity misfit or disconnection, (DT2) Role and perception, with subthemes of professional mastery and navigating the role strain and inter-role conflict, and (DT3) External identity verification.
- Inductive themes (ET) - 2 Themes, 5 Subthemes - (ET1) Science communication practices, with subthemes of credibility of the “Extension Master Gardener” label, strategies for research-based information delivery, and navigating accessibility and situational barriers and (ET2) Volunteer pathways and future engagement, with subthemes of recruitment, initiation, and state-to-state transfers and collaborative partnerships and educational growth.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- VFI social function, as the fourth highest group mean, stood out among the rest of the volunteer functions because the qualitative findings of this study illustrated that the social component to the NM program had a greater impact as to why EMGs are motivated to continue in the program.
- Through the storytelling of the EMGs' lived experiences, there is a high likelihood that the social function is multi-faceted and dependent on the context given that can be studied in future research.
- Values are the primary motivation for EMG volunteers as supported by the quantitative and qualitative findings of this study.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The integration of the phases transcends both the quantitative and qualitative data to gain a deeper understanding of the [State] EMGs' motivations and role within social contexts (Younas et al., 2025).
- We recommend for other EMG state programs to conduct their own case study to understand the motivation and engagement of their EMG volunteer groups more in-depth.