Continuing Extension Programming During a Pandemic: University of Maryland Extension Adapts to Dynamic Learning

During spring 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic caused multiple countries to institute nationwide lockdowns. In Maryland, the Governor issued a stay-at-home order that led to closing University of Maryland Extension offices to the public and Extension employees began telework status.

Extension administration established a short-term task force to address the needs of faculty and staff across the state so programming could continue. Even though office doors were locked, Extension was still open. The team worked quickly to establish a website for supportive software along with directions for use and instructional videos to assist with technology. The task force conducted a state-wide survey to assess the learning needs of Extension faculty regarding distance teaching and the use of virtual teaching options. Based on results, a 12- week series of instructional webinars were offered.

In early fall 2020, Extension began to reopen offices that met safety metrics established by the state government and University protocols. At the time, faculty and staff received a follow-up survey to assess their level of confidence in continuing hybrid technology-delivered programming, their perceptions of clientele readiness to continue to receive virtual programs, and any personal challenges they may have experienced. The survey was submitted to the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and approved for release. IRB # 1644829
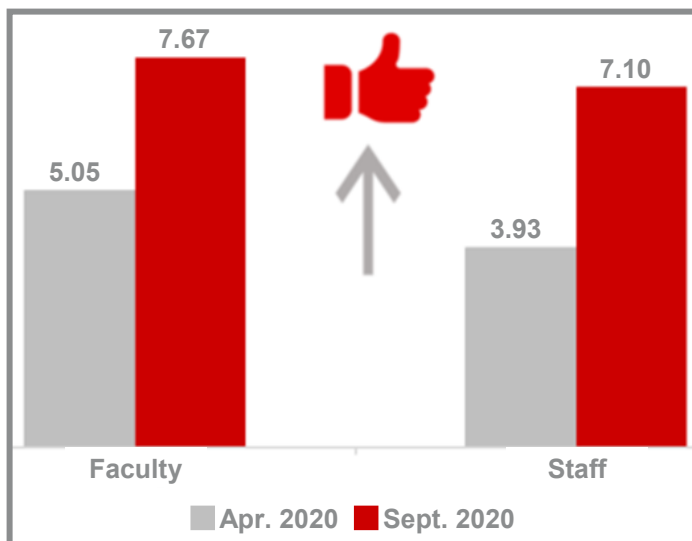

Figure 1: Using a scale of 0-10, with 0 being not confident at all, and 10 being extremely confident, all faculty groups moved from 5.05 in April 2020 to 7.67 in Sept. 2020 and all staff groups moved from 3.93 to 7.10. The results indicate an increase in confidence level in virtual teaching and technology use after mandatory telework. There was a 73% increase in confidence level in virtual teaching for all faculty groups and an 80% increase of technology use for all staff groups after mandatory telework compared to before.

The survey questions concentrated on personal and professional experiences as well as observations of constituents in communities. The total number of

Table 1. Faculty and staff reported challenges and benefits of technology-delivered programming

Working From Home	
Challenges	**Benefits**
Lack of interaction with co-workers	Flexibility in schedule
Lack of adequate equipment	Improved work/life balance
Availability of internet	Less stress due to no commute
Lack of adequate home office space	Increase in knowledge related to technology
Distractions at home/caring for children	Expanded concepts for communication
Approximately 30% reported no concerns	

respondents was 179 faculty and staff. This post-survey recognizes the factors, challenges, and outcomes of the faculty and staff during the quarantine (Table 1).

Comfort and Adaptability of a Telework Environment

- Increased proficiency in the use of virtual meeting platforms
- Increased on-line teaching to reach clientele
- Sought on-line learning webinars
- Learned new equipment skills
- Learned new software

Comparative Confidence Levels of Virtual Teaching

Overall, there was an observable increase in confidence level in virtual teaching and technology use for all faculty and staff groups after mandatory telework (Figure 1).

Clientele Limitations and Readiness Related to Virtual Participation

The majority of responding groups reported observing a statistically significant increase in readiness of clientele to continue participating in virtual programs after mandatory telework (Figure 2).

Responses of UME Staff and Faculty will Influence Plans and Priorities

1. Expanding a clientele-friendly learning management system so faculty can continue to offer educational programming via technology-delivered approaches. A training plan will enhance UME faculty's use of the system.
2. Developing a training series focused on the principles of virtual teaching, program design, and delivery.
3. Establishing a web-based support site focused on creating effective home office space, telework/telecommute tips and avoiding virtual office fatigue.
4. Evolving the Extension culture to accept telework and virtual program delivery as a component of work-life balance.
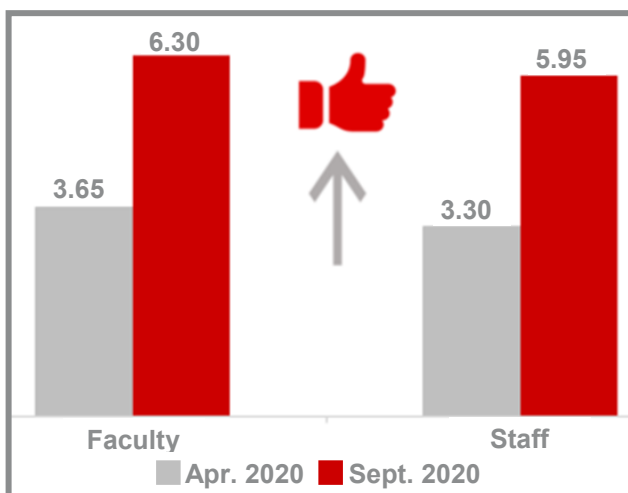

Figure 2: Using a scale of 0-10, with 0 being not ready at all, and 10 being extremely ready, all faculty groups moved from 3.65 in April 2020 to 6.30 in Sept. 2020 and the majority of staff groups moved from 3.30 to 5.95, which indicate an increase in observed readiness of clientele to continue participating in virtual programs after mandatory telework based on faculty and staff's experience. There was a 52% increase in clientele's readiness from the responses of all faculty groups and an 81% increase from the responses of the majority of staff groups after mandatory telework compared to before.

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