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DEVELOPING AN ONLINE ENVIRONMENTAL LANDSCAPE CONTRACTOR CERTIFICATION PROGRAM



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ABSTRACT

Landscape maintenance is a large, rapidly growing, and unregulated small business sector SC. Beyond a pesticides applicators license, no experience or training is currently required in SC to install and maintain urban landscapes. A Lever-Initiative grant was awarded to develop an online Environmental Landscape Certification Program to help landscape professionals meet client expectations and protect SC natural resources. A survey was conducted to identify stakeholder buy-in including content, cost, and preference on learning style. In order to increase adoption by contractors and technicians, specific strategic areas throughout SC were selected to spearhead the program. Stakeholder meetings were held in March to identify barriers to success, fine-tune logistics and develop critical program content. Modules in development give detailed information on pertinent landscaping practices. This certification should help to increase the economic viability of the SC landscape industry while helping to protect natural resources.

INTRODUCTION

2014 marks the 100th anniversary for the Smith-Lever Act. In honor of the centennial, Clemson University Extension Services awarded a series of grants to support new programming to the South Carolina that support PSA missions. A grant was awarded to create a web based Environmental Landscape Contractor (ELC) Certification Program.

Goal: To promote environmentally sound lawn and landscape management.

Objectives:

- (a) increase the number of professionals that are implementing science-based lawn and landscape best management practices,
- (b) conserve and protect South Carolina's natural resources, and
- (c) increase marketability of lawn and landscape professionals.

METHODS

Needs Assessment and Framework Development

- Undergraduate students performed a comparison study for five similar programs throughout the region.
- Undergraduate students conducted a survey at the SCNLA Annual Educational Conference and Trade Show in February 2014.
- In order to increase adoption by contractors and technicians, specific strategic areas (Greenville, Spartanburg, North Charleston, and Florence) throughout South Carolina were selected to spearhead the program. Meetings were held in late March at each location as means to increase stakeholder input.

Module Development:

- Modules will be primarily video content of a lecture style setting. Participants will have to answer review questions in order to progress through the module. At the end of each module there will be a test as well as a final test when all modules are completed.
- Modules are being translated into Spanish. However the review and exam questions will be only available in English.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Needs Assessment and Framework Development

- Comparison of five similar programs documented a range of costs, time frames and topics covered (Tab. 1a and b).
- Select results from the survey can be found in Fig. 1.
- Topics identified were organized into the following modules:
 1. General Information
 2. Turfgrass
 3. Ornamentals
 4. Trees
 5. Water Management
 6. Low Impact Development Strategies
 7. Plant Identification
 8. Pest Management
 9. Soil Management
 10. Equipment Safety and Maintenance

Module Development:

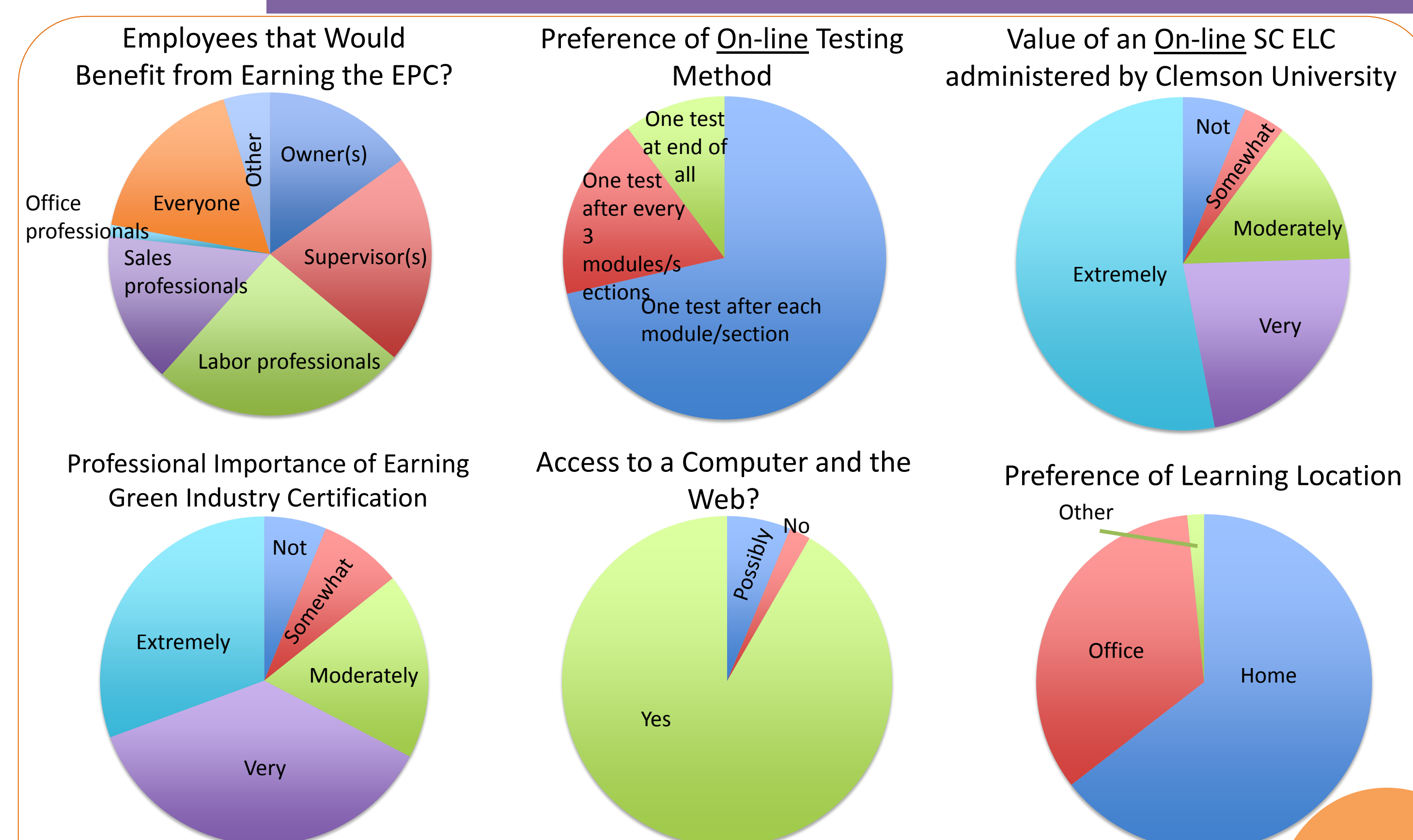
- Modules are currently being assembled by undergraduate students, faculty and extension agents.
- Modules are being translated into Spanish. However the review and exam questions will be only available in English.

Certification Acknowledgement

- Upon completion of the program, participants will receive the following:
 - A Certificate of Completion
 - A wallet-size license with certification number
 - A magnetic decal with logo and certification number
 - A logo patch for clothes
 - A "D-ring" reference booklet of important information

(a) Framework Characteristics	ELC*	GGIA	PLANET	UGA	NCNLA
Participant Cost		\$165	\$700	\$379	\$225
How Long to Complete		2 yrs	3 yrs	1 yr	
Written Exam	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Hands-on Exam	yes	yes	yes	no	yes
CEUs		15		12	PLANET
Retest Fee (hands-on/written)		\$45	\$50	\$30	\$25
Online Testing			yes	no	no

(b) Topics Covered	ELC	GGIA	PLANET	UGA	NCNLA
Pruning/Planting a Tree	x	x	x		x
Pesticide Usage	x	x			
Soil Management Practices	x			x	
Fertilizer Application	x	x	x	x	x
Plant Selection/Placement/ID	x	x	x	x	x
Water Application	x				x
Sprayer/Spreader Calibration	x	x			
Irrigation Testing/Maintenance	x	x			x
Turfgrass Maintenance	x		x		
Rain Garden/Bioretenion Area	x				
Power Equipment (Gas/Oil Trt)	x	x	x		x
Sod Installation	x	x	x		x
LID Practices (Hardscape)			x		x
Mulch					
Soil Loss/Erosion Control					



Select questions and results from the stakeholder survey given to landscape contractors at the SCLTA Annual Education Conference and Trade Show.

Figure 1

Comparison of (a) framework characteristics and (b) topics covered of five regionally offered landscape certification programs.

Tables 1a & b

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

- SC citizens and tourists will benefit as natural resources will be preserved,
- Economic bottom lines enhanced for landscape contractors
- Less plant replacement and long-term investments for landscape owners