

ABOUT AMERICAN PUBLIC GARDENS ASSOCIATION

Founded in 1940 as the American Association of Botanical Gardens and Arboreta, the American Public Gardens Association (APGA) has emerged as the premiere association for public gardens in North America. Today, APGA's 500 member institutions are located in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Canada and seven other countries. The Association's individual members live in every state, the District of Columbia, Canada, and 24 other countries. The APGA is committed to increasing the knowledge of public garden professionals throughout North America through information sharing, professional development, networking, public awareness, and research so they have the tools to effectively serve visitors and members.

The APGA chose Dynamic Benchmarking to build a financial and operational study for its membership in 2015. Having been referred by previous Dynamic Benchmarking users, they understood and appreciated the value and opportunity that an interactive study tool would provide for their membership. Their previous experience in surveys had created several stand-alone studies, but Dynamic Benchmarking's customizable platform offered a chance to combine those efforts under one platform for better data collection and user engagement.

Public gardens are so much more than beautiful places to visit. These amazing spaces serve a variety of functions for their communities and the American Public Gardens Association (APGA) wants the world to know that.

"Public gardens are a combination of museum, business, hospitality, performing arts and so much more making our sector the beautiful, growing hybrid that it is," explains Casey Sclar, APGA Executive Director. "Our member organizations operate like true businesses, with earned revenue accounting for approximately two-thirds of their operating budgets. Like any business, they want more information on which to base their plans for strategic development and growth."

Founded in 1940, the American Public Gardens Association is committed to increasing the knowledge of public garden professionals throughout North America and internationally through information sharing, professional development, networking, public awareness, and research. In support of these efforts, the Association has conducted benchmarking studies for years. However, collected data was not always representative of all gardens and a vast majority of the studies were conducted using spreadsheets with data manually compiled into static reports, making for a long and tedious process.

"Many of our members have annual operating budgets that are less than \$150,000, but they still want to, and do, make an impact on their communities," continues Sclar. "We wanted to create a study that presented a better, comprehensive sector-wide picture representative of all of our members."



In 2014, APGA convened a benchmarking committee and distributed a request for proposal (RFP) to create a better benchmarking study and process. The purpose of the RFP was to discover a solution that combined the many different surveys into a single study that would provide a sector-wide overview. The committee also wanted an interactive tool that would simplify data collection and analysis, as well as provide members with self-serve, customizable reports. In March 2015, APGA selected Dynamic Benchmarking to build their new solution.

“The Dynamic Benchmarking platform enables us to satisfy several directives and goals that are a part of our 5 year strategic plan,” states Sclar. “Plus, the interactive nature of their reporting solutions allows our members to conduct data queries that we couldn’t even imagine before.”

The new survey platform is managing data sourced from several previous surveys; and new data collected relative to garden operations, size, plant holdings, educational and outreach programs and visitor and donor information. It also includes staffing and salary data for key garden positions. The interactive data collection, analysis and reporting tool is providing new insights into the impact of public gardens on their local economies, as well as more accurate measures of their operational and fiscal performance.

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APGA Member response to the new platform has also been overwhelmingly positive, with a marked increase in survey participation and in the quality of the data.

“We’ve literally been told that the new survey is ‘better than sliced bread,’” Sclar says about member feedback to the platform. “They have found it easy to use and easy to navigate. The number of help requests from our members has been minimal.”

Survey participation has more than doubled since the last benchmarking study they conducted in 2008 and the data collected now offers a comprehensive look at the entire sector, offering a true understanding of the impact public gardens are making on their communities.

“Through this study, we are able to see that responding gardens inject well over \$1 million each year into their local economies through jobs and other capital projects,” continues Sclar. “For example, 113 responding gardens collectively totaled \$556 million for their combined annual operating expenses. Given that the median value reported was \$1.9 million, this local economic impact is why the Association’s vision - a world where public gardens are indispensable - is exemplified by its members. Considering that the Association has over 585 member gardens located in 14 countries, the economic impact of its member institutions is likely well over \$1B per year.”

Due to the overwhelming positive response, especially to the ease of use of the platform, APGA plans to roll out additional segments and questions to the study later this year.

“We want to provide our membership with the most comprehensive, state of the industry survey that will allow our members to advocate for themselves by having access to public garden data on a regional, local and global basis,” comments Association Executive Director, Casey Sclar. “Dynamic Benchmarking allows our members to query data in an interactive fashion to achieve just that.”

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*Abigail Spencer, Director of Marketing
and Outreach for the Association*

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