

STERLING COLLEGE: Environmental and Community Stewardship

Understanding environmental stewardship and community living, and how hands-on work supports both these tenets, form the cornerstone of a Sterling education.

Story and photos by Maria Buteux Reade

AT STERLING COLLEGE IN Craftsbury, sleek solar trackers blend into the landscape as naturally as the draft horses working the fields. Students shrug at the absence of cell service yet eagerly report on the status of the newest lambs and piglets. In fact, the most effective communication occurs at community meeting held after lunch every Wednesday. That is when people gather to share announcements, observations, issues, and appreciations in an open forum facilitated by a different student each

week. Most everyone on campus shows up, from maintenance workers to office staff to Matthew Derr, president of the College. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” he said. “That’s a vital part of the fabric of our community.” This mini town meeting is but one aspect that distinguishes Sterling from other institutions, along with its work program and enrollment of 125 students.

Nestled in the heart of the Northeast Kingdom, the campus may be remote but not isolated, thanks to a vibrant global

field studies program, required internships off campus, and a commitment to bring in guest lecturers who speak about environmental stewardship and sustainable agriculture and food systems.

Food, water, soil, health, energy, community living. Matthew Derr is proud that the College’s curriculum revolves around these critical 21st-century issues. Sterling depends as much on its high-tech solar trackers as its four draft horses. Both represent the ethos of environmental stewardship that permeates the community.

“We examine everything we do in terms of how it might affect the environment: from how we heat and light our campus to the coffee we serve in the dining hall,” said Gwyneth Harris, Sterling’s farm manager. “We don’t have a Director of Sustainability because we all are responsible to serve in that capacity.”

Values in Action

In 2013, Sterling was the first college in Vermont and third in the nation to divest its endowment of the fossil fuel sector and to move to all-renewable clean energy. Green Mountain College and Goddard College followed soon after. “Our investment strategy is now fully informed by our core values,” Matthew said.

Three years earlier, the College installed a pair of solar trackers from All Earth Renewables based in Williston, and 11 more will be in place by January 2016. The solar panels follow the sun from dawn to



Thanks to on-site solar power installations, Sterling College will soon be one of the few campuses in the U.S. that generates 100 percent of its own electricity using a renewable resource.

dusk, much like a sunflower, moving up and down as well as side-to-side. The solar trackers will make Sterling one of the few campuses in the U.S. that generates 100 percent of its own electricity using a renewable resource, an impressive accomplishment considering its location in northern Vermont.

The driving force behind much of Sterling's recent evolution is Matthew Derr, who arrived in 2012. He served for three years as interim president at Antioch College in Ohio. In 2011, the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) named him Chief Executive of the Year for leading the alumni effort to revitalize and reopen Antioch College. At Antioch, Matthew also developed a new undergraduate curriculum focused on issues related to sustainable agriculture and food systems, ideal experience for his work at Sterling.

Earlier in his career, Matthew served in leadership positions in fundraising and enrollment in both secondary and higher education institutions. He holds a BA in History from Antioch College, an MSW in Community Organizing from the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, and has further graduate studies at the George Heyman Center for Philanthropy at New York University.

Philanthropy has more than tripled in the past five years thanks to tremendous leadership from the Board of Trustees. Matthew explained, "As we've articulated our mission of environmental stewardship, we've expanded the circle of people who recognize Sterling as a cause worth caring about. We are in the midst of our most ambitious fundraising effort, a \$9 million capital campaign called Nourish the Roots. The goal is to enhance campus-sustainability practices, provide endowed support for faculty, and increase scholarship funding for students."

A Sense of Place

Every student new to Sterling starts the year with a two-week intensive seminar called A Sense of Place. The course reflects Sterling's commitment to place-based education, focusing on the history, environment, traditions, and economy of Craftsbury as well as the landscape and neighboring towns of the Northeast Kingdom. According to the College website, "Being rooted in place allows us to work with both our hands and our minds



Students at work building a blacksmith shop using timber from the 400-acre college woodlot. The credo "Working hands, working minds" is not a mere tagline here.





Time to plant! A student works with Gwyneth Harris (right), farm manager; nearly every campus job involves some aspect of the farm, which has 5 acres of gardens and 130 acres of pasture for livestock.

and lets Sterling students have a foundation in community living and work to build upon after graduation.”

Sterling began as a boys’ preparatory school in 1958. It is difficult to envision lads in coats and ties scurrying among the white clapboard buildings just off the Common when today’s college students dress like, well, college students. The Sterling School lasted until 1978 when it morphed into the Sterling Institute, offering a two-year associate’s degree. In 1997, Sterling received accreditation as a four-year college through the New England Association of Schools and Colleges.

Even though the enrollment increased by 25 percent since 2013, from 96 to 125, with 15 faculty members, Sterling remains one of the smallest private colleges in the United States. That ratio allows for close relationships among faculty and students and small-scale programs that have lasting impact. Students choose from four academic majors: sustainable agriculture, ecology, outdoor education, and environmental humanities, and three minors: draft horse management, climate justice,

and sustainable food systems. Students also may create a self-designed major.

Matthew Derr is adamant that access and affordability remain priorities for the College. Tuition and room and board stand just shy of \$44,000. He believes that qualified students who want to attend Sterling should be able to do just that. However, the key word is “qualified.” According to Director of Admission Tim Patterson, Sterling remains a test-blind college that focuses primarily on a prospective applicant’s work ethic, passion for environmental stewardship, and desire to contribute to an interdependent community. Standardized test scores are not required for the application. As enrollment has grown in recent years, so has access to financial aid, good news for the more than 50 percent of students who qualify for Pell grants.

Working Hands, Working Minds

Sterling controls expenses and keeps tuition low compared to other private colleges through its work program that has been in place for more than 50 years. Sterling is one of seven federally recognized work colleges in the U.S. and the only one in the Northeast. Each student has a job on campus that keeps the College functioning, from farm work to food prepara-

tion to buildings and grounds maintenance. Students serve as admissions associates, dorm advisors, office interns, and lab assistants.

“Working hands, working minds” is not a mere tagline. Students understand they will contribute in a meaningful way when they matriculate at Sterling. Over four years, a student can gain practical experience in a different area of responsibility. However, some choose to keep the same job each year, developing deep exposure and leadership. And nearly every campus job involves some aspect of the College’s farm.

The Rian Fried Center for Sustainable Agriculture & Sustainable Food Systems

Rian Fried co-founded Clean Yield Asset Management based in Norwich and served as a trustee of Sterling. He died unexpectedly in July 2013. To commemorate his leadership and environmental dedication, the College established the Rian Fried Center for Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems in October 2013. The Center now offers improved space and updated farm facilities, including the Alford Draft Horse Barn and the blacksmith shop, both built in the summer of 2014. Rian was devoted to connecting socially responsible investors with



A Wednesday community meeting, one part of the overall approach of sharing resources and working toward a common goal.

sustainable food enterprises, sharing his expertise with many of Vermont's food entrepreneurs.

Sterling embraces its rural heritage and was among the first colleges to incorporate a working farm as an integral component of the curriculum. The farm encompasses 130 acres of pasture for livestock, 5 acres of gardens, and nearly 400 acres of managed woodlot. Timber harvested from the woodlot is removed by draft horsepower and milled for building projects on the farm. The livestock includes 4 draft horses, 11 steers, 8 pigs, a herd of sheep and goats, 400 laying hens and meat chickens, and 100 turkeys.

Every Sterling student participates in farm work at some point in their four years, tending animals, growing crops, working with draft horses, and using the woodlot. All gardens are planted and cultivated by hand and horse-drawn implements, with minimal tractor work. The gardens provide much of the produce and fruit served in the dining hall, along with eggs and meat raised on the farm and maple syrup from 200 taps in the sugarbush.

The Real Food Challenge ranked Sterling #1 in the nation for serving local, sustainable, humane, and fair-trade food. The campaign encourages colleges to serve 20 percent real food by 2020. Ster-

ling blasted past that target, already serving 76 percent real food; 20 percent comes from the college farm and the remaining 56 percent comes from farms within 200 miles. Milk is delivered from Sweet Rowen Farmstead in nearby West Glover, owned by Paul Lisai, a Sterling alumnus.

Collaboration and Camaraderie

The Fried Center also spurred the creation of a continuing education program. Two- and four-week intensives tap into the entrepreneurs, scholars, and artists who live in the Northeast Kingdom and offer courses in food systems, ecology, environmental humanities, and the arts. The courses run from late May to late July and are available to Sterling students and the general public. Summer 2015 courses included small-scale artisanal cheesemaking taught in partnership with the Cellars at Jasper Hill and charcuterie production with expert butcher Cole Ward and Pete Colman of Vermont Salumi. Doug and Barbara Flack instructed in the art and science of plant-based fermentation while Vermont author John Elder guided the Writing in Place workshop along with Lynne Anderson and Jane Brox. Tara Goreau, renowned muralist of northern Vermont, led a course on creating mandala murals.

Last summer, a group of students collaborated with faculty members from Yestermorrow Design/Build School in a course entitled From Forest to Forge, building a blacksmith and farrier shop that houses the forges, anvils, and work stations essential to farm blacksmithing, equipment fabrication, and tool making. All the wood for the structure came from timber harvested and milled at the College's woodlot.

This approach of sharing resources and working toward a common goal is steeped in Vermont rural tradition. Sterling also collaborates with other educational institutions. Beginning this fall, graduate students from New York University's Food Studies Program will come north to teach in Sterling's Sustainable Food Systems track. The smallest private college in the U.S. will partner with the largest private university to examine issues of food justice, with each entity offering a unique perspective on urban and rural food systems. NYU has donated more than 300 books from its Food Studies program to enhance Sterling's own collection.

Another standout program is the Vermont's Table Speaker Series that began in 2013. Thanks to the tireless effort of Marian Burros (trustee, seasonal resident of Craftsbury, and prolific *New York Times*



The driving force behind much of the college's recent evolution is its president, Matthew Derr.



Sterling College produces farmers who are ecologists and outdoor educators who understand art; all have a strong work ethic and are stewards of the environment.

writer), luminaries in the food world spend several days on campus working with the students and immersing themselves in the local community. They give a lecture that is free and open to the public. “Our visitors are blown away by their interactions with our students and the community. The lecture is actually the smallest part of their visit!” Matthew said. The eye-popping guest list includes Alice Waters, Marion Nestle, Gary Nabhan, Sandor Katz, and Fred Kirschenmann. The lineup for 2015–2016 will be announced this fall.

On a statewide level, Sterling is one of the seven charter members of the Vermont Higher Education Food Systems Consortium, coordinated by the Vermont Council on Rural Development in 2015. Other schools include the University of Vermont, Vermont Tech, Green Mountain College, Middlebury College, Vermont Law School, and New England Culinary Institute. These institutions are all strong proponents of agriculture, food systems, and the working landscape. The Consortium allows each school to harness its unique strengths in these areas and to collaborate rather than compete. “There’s a genuine spirit of camaraderie unique among the colleges in Vermont. We can share students and expand access to the resources for community-based food systems education,” Matthew said.

Those resources also apply to veterans. The Veteran College-to-Farm program began in September 2015, with grants

offered to veterans interested in starting a farm or a food business. Veterans who earn a Sterling degree in Sustainable Agriculture or Food Systems will receive a \$10,000 grant to launch their food-related business. Veterans will also have access to technical and business support from the Center for an Agricultural Economy based in Hardwick. Qualified participants may also be eligible for up to \$50,000 from the FarmStart program offered by Yankee Farm Credit.

Innovations such as these have placed Sterling at the forefront of environmental stewardship and sustainable agriculture and food systems education.

Travel Near and Far

2014 marked the 50th anniversary of Sterling’s hallmark experience known simply as Expedition. This four-day, three-night wilderness camping excursion, required for every new student, involves a 25-mile trek while carrying a backpack loaded with sufficient gear and food. Bookend to the Sense of Place seminar that initiated the school year, Expedition closes the semester in mid-December.

Expedition exemplifies Sterling’s commitment to experiential education, emphasizing both self-sufficiency and interdependence. Participants must overcome challenges and deal with adversity. The program began when Sterling was a boys’ preparatory school in the 1960s. First-year students must complete a required course, Experiential Education, during

the fall term in which they gain advanced wilderness skills and study botany, land-use practices, and history. The course instills a sense of teamwork and community values that endures beyond the winter excursion.

“Many colleges try to eliminate or reduce the obstacles that kids face. We teach our students to embrace and manage the challenges they encounter. That’s true preparation for life beyond college. It’s empowering,” said Matthew. True to form, he completed Expedition in December 2014.

Global Field Studies, launched in 1992, broadens students’ global perspective by exposing them to environmental issues across the world. Students travel and work with Sterling faculty members on target projects. Recent groups have ventured to Arctic and Maritime Canada, Mexico, Bahamas, Belize, Scandinavia, Sierra Nevada, and the Hudson River watershed. These two- to four-week intensives are offered throughout the year including summer. The program is included in the overall tuition, not an added expense, so every interested student has access to the opportunities.

Stewards of Land and Community

Two years ago, six students in a fiber arts course created a tartan unique to Sterling College. The group collaborated on a pattern and chose symbolic colors: two shades of green for the verdant landscape, white for snow and the College’s ubiqui-



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tous clapboard buildings, blue for the sky, and brown for the earth. The students gathered the botanicals to make the dyes, then set up the loom and wove the wool tartan.

“These are the students we educate: people who understand environmental stewardship and community living and how hands-on work supports both these tenets. That’s the cornerstone of a Sterling education,” Matthew concluded.

Sterling College produces farmers who are ecologists and outdoor educators who understand art. No matter what career one pursues after Sterling, that graduate will have a strong work ethic and be a steward of the environment. And know that he or she can tackle today’s global challenges and survive a winter wilderness expedition. 🦋

Maria Buteux Reade has a home along the Bat-tenkill River in Arlington, VT. After 27 years teaching English, she now balances freelance writing with work at Someday Farm in East Dorset.



The draft horse barn provides housing for the four horses that are used in programs. The college also has 11 steers, 8 pigs, herds of sheep and goats, and some 500 birds.



An intern brushes one of the college’s draft horses in the barn. Every student participates in farm work during their four years, including tending animals.

JUST THE FACTS

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