



Re-imagining & Sustaining Sterling

A proposal for a mission-aligned and legacy-extending next iteration
of Sterling College in Craftsbury Common, Vermont

*If we surrendered
to earth's intelligence
we could rise up rooted, like trees*
Rainer Maria Rilke



Spring 2023

The Need & The Niche for Sterling College

The systems built by modern humans are failing to meet basic human needs, degrading the natural world, and imperiling the prospects for future generations. They are also beginning to crumble around us. Dominant cultural myths about independence, boot straps, competition, and the sources of worthiness are making us profoundly lonely. This sense of isolation and unease has been exacerbated by a global pandemic. As a result, young people are hungry for true and liberatory community in which all beings can collectively thrive.

The Sterling curriculum fosters a deep understanding and respect of and for the natural world, examines the human experience as part of nature instead of separate from it, and builds capacity for creating true community and shaping change. Together, these types of learning – the characteristic components of the environmental liberal arts – also inspire grounded hope. The education that Sterling provides to its students – be it in the foundations of ecology, the use of hand tools, critical thinking, problem-solving, or the exploration of ethics – lends itself to a reclaimed or enhanced sense of wholeness and value, leading to right livelihoods that respect the self, each other, and the Earth.

By offering students a sense of place, a sense of belonging, and a sense of purpose, Sterling provides an antidote for the feelings of the present and competencies needed for what lies ahead. Our graduates, past and future, leave Sterling with the habits of lifelong learners, varied literacies (classical, ecological, social, information, and media) and a suite of intangible-yet-transferable life skills. The education we provide integrates the timeless benefits of a liberal arts education with the ecological knowledge and relational worldview necessary to counter extractivism and address the intersecting crises that threaten the prospects of a vibrant collective future for humanity and the natural world.

Program Redevelopment Process

The Sustaining Sterling Committee got to work on crafting a new model for the College that would uphold the College's mission, core values, and unique pedagogical framework. That Committee, chaired by Sterling Trustee and champion of the liberal arts, Rick Detweiler, identified what we believe are the distinctly valuable, most transformative aspects of a Sterling education:

1. Learning that not only centers around doing, but goes even deeper into experientiality by being less tied to traditional course structures and modalities;
2. Developing career-relevant skills through the rigors and responsibilities of regular work;
3. Preparing learners for land-based lives and livelihoods by having significant portions of the education take place outdoors; and
4. Having the opportunity to learn in and make use of our recently improved infrastructure and teaching spaces that, in combination, are distinctive among small colleges (e.g., Farm & Forest, Draft Animal Infrastructure, Production & Teaching Kitchens, Woodworking Studio, Fiber Arts Studio, Natural Science laboratory, etc.).

With these in mind, we pulled the College's content areas together in a way that hones in on Sterling's strengths and proven learning outcomes, meets the mission, and can advance key values expressed in the 2019 strategic initiative. We were intentional about maintaining our commitments to use education as a force to address critical problems caused by unlimited growth and consumption, as well as to promote equity and justice. We are confident that this approach will also continue to inspire donors, alumna, and other stakeholders.

Program Overview & Model

Sterling College will continue to inspire and train leaders ready to courageously face the eco-social crises of the 21st century and guide students toward a more balanced and just way of living as part of—not separate from—the natural world. Such an education is of value to the students who participate in it, their contemporaries who will

benefit from having Sterling alumna as leaders in their communities, and to future generations. It is critical that future generations inherit a planet that can support lives of meaning, sufficiency, and joy. Sterling-educated adults will be positioned to serve as thought leaders and change-makers in their communities.

From our 2019 Alumna Survey, we know that Sterling graduates learn to chart their course in life and thrive in community through meaningful work – a combination of knowledge acquisition, practice, and application across different contexts. Even as it adapts for survival, Sterling will retain its most cherished and distinguishing features: it will remain small, deeply personalized, intentionally outdoor-oriented, residential, community-centered, and rooted in lived experience. Going forward, students will earn credit through impactful work and experiential, project-based endeavors – reinforced by hands-on academic courses. This approach to education is distinctive in higher education, shifting the emphasis from the long-held model that classes inform work and instead reestablishing “doing” as central to a Sterling education.

They will also be supported on their learning journeys via a series of scaffolding seminars designed to develop academic, personal, and professional skills, guide students in reflection, place structure around degree and career planning, and offer group advising. All such learning happens with the close mentorship of dedicated educators who build relationships with students that endure.

Going forward, Sterling proposes to implement a curriculum and instructional model that bridges humans, their places, and their more-than-human kin to the kind of future we want for our descendants. It retains, and in some cases revives, cherished and distinctive components of a Sterling education while also deepening our commitments to equity and justice and our embrace of competency-oriented education. In this manner, Sterling will offer an [associates of arts degree and a bachelor of arts degree](#), both interdisciplinary. Our updated [academic calendar](#) will allow for a series of [six 4-week intensive blocks across two semesters \(Fall and Spring\)](#). A week in between each block provides space for catch up, rest, and reset. One day of this gap week is dedicated to an All College Work Day or an All College Service Day.

Consideration of the daily schedule offers a glimpse into student experience. Most weekdays begin with coursework across the three domains in the morning. In the afternoon, students will engage in semester-long experiential endeavors that put academic learning into practice via place-based, real-world efforts such as riparian restoration, environmental education, agroforestry, and field-based research. Some days, afternoons will instead feature a small group Scaffolding Seminar session. A position in Sterling’s Work Program will complement academics and endeavors. The Work Program cultivates good work habits, provides the additional opportunity for practice, refinement of skills, and reflection. This also embeds students deeply in the operations of the College. By putting students in real world situations where their energy, focus, and attention matter, students develop a strong sense of self-worth and confidence from which they can construct lives of meaning, purpose, and belonging.

Students will leave Sterling with a [passion that burns](#), life skills, confidence, real work experience, a commitment to lifelong learning, and friendships cultivated over early morning farm chores, being held personally accountable, engaging conversation, skilled adventure, and a shared sense of purpose. In this more than anything, lies the hope and promise of a better future.

Experiential Education for Humans In The Environment

Graduation Requirements – Sample Pathways - Academic Progression - Semester & Day Schedule

A Bridging Curriculum across 3 Domains & 15 Areas of Competence

Sterling students will take courses from a rotating selection within Areas of 15 Competency (“Subject Areas”) across 3 Domains. All students are required to take Ecology, Boulder & Community Care (*Foundations, 200-level*) in their first year. All courses offered within Subject Areas #5, #10 and #15 are upper-level courses taken by BA candidates.

Understanding the Natural World	Humans in the Environment	Creating New Communities
1. <i>Ecology & Natural History</i> 2. Earth systems: Geology, Water & Climate 3. Biodiversity: Soils, Plants, Fungi, Animals 4. Research Methods 5. <i>Data & Storytelling</i>	6. <i>Boulder</i> 7. Environmental History 8. Living Within Limits 9. Literature & Writing of Humans & Nature 10. <i>Environmental Philosophy & Ethics</i>	11. <i>Community Care</i> 12. Learning How to Learn 13. Economics & Wellbeing 14. Policy: Power & Participation 15. <i>Systems Thinking in Practice</i>

Experiential Endeavors

Competency Assessed Project-Based & Enterprise Learning Opportunities

A rotating selection that could include: draft-animal logging; blacksmithing; lambing; maple syrup production; grant writing; weaving; value-added food production; agroforestry; bird-banding; wetland delineation; invasive species management; gear repair; adventure coordination; environmental education; community advising; among others.

Scaffolding Seminars

Most students will also enroll in a 1 or 2 credit developmental seminar each semester. These support academic, personal, and professional skill development, reflection and transference, degree and career planning, etc.

Possible foci include: First Year Seminar, Information Literacy, Attention Economy in a Digital Age, Reading Scientific Literature, Showing up for Change, Capstone Proposal, Career Planning, Further Learning / Graduate or Professional School, Portfolio Development, Financial Literacy, and Empathy & Depolarization.

Students who have gaps in fundamentals (quantitative skills, composition, presentation) can develop readiness to succeed in our classes through competency based online courses built by experts in developing these fundamentals, with in-person support from the Director of Advising and Learning Support. This may sometimes be done in place of a scaffolding seminar.

Capstone Research

All students pursuing a BA degree would complete a culminating Capstone Project, through which they level-up, hone, and demonstrate their ability to independently inquire, research, analyze, create, engage, and communicate. Capstone work will typically occur in the final three semesters of College, often beginning with enrollment in Capstone Proposal Scaffolding Seminar. It provides students with a substantial opportunity to tie together their prior learning and further specialize in their area of interest.

Senior Portfolio

In addition, all students would take a Senior Portfolio seminar. In this culminating Scaffolding Seminar, they would collate evidence of their competencies (knowledge, skills, abilities and behaviors) and create a polished and professional portfolio that will support them in pursuing their desired career pathways upon graduation.

Work Program

Student labor in the federal work program will be used to add capacity to the operations of the College while also offering opportunities for competency development and building work ethic. Each student would continue to perform 80 hours of work per semester or 5 hours per week (reducing their tuition costs), on one of the following 6 crews: Farm Crew; Kitchen Crew; Community Crew (CA/Residential Upkeep); Buildings & Grounds Crew; Admissions Crew; and Administrative Crew

Graduation Requirements

Bachelor of Arts degree:

- Foundational courses: Foundations of Ecology; Boulder; Communities of Care (12 cr)
- Competencies: 1 course in each of the remaining 12 areas (48 cr)
- Experiential endeavors: At least 4 completed satisfactorily (16-24 cr)
- Scaffolding seminars: At least 2 taken (2-3 cr)
- Capstone project (8-12 cr) and a Senior Portfolio (2 cr)
- Further 19-32 cr in electives (could be courses, scaffolding seminars, internships or further experiential endeavors)
- Distribution requirements: At least 12 credits of 300- or 400- level courses

Associates of Arts degree

- Foundational courses: Foundations of Ecology; Boulder; Communities of Care (12 cr)
- Competencies: 2 further courses in each of the three domains (24 cr)
- Experiential endeavors: At least 2 completed satisfactorily (8-12 cr)
- Scaffolding seminars: First Year Seminar, Career Planning, Portfolio Development (4 cr)
- Further 8-12 cr in electives (could be courses, scaffolding seminars, internships or further experiential endeavors)

Students gaining their AA at Sterling would readily be able to continue on to complete a BA either immediately or following a hiatus from their studies. The AA requirements nest within those for the BA.

Anticipated Outcomes: Preparation for Meaningful Livelihoods

Students who graduate from Sterling leave with a strong understanding of the natural world and their place in it, as well as a robust set of critical and transferrable “21st century skills” – a set of subtle, complex capabilities that will prepare them to navigate the changed and changing world. These include: cognitive and metacognitive skills, personal qualities, interpersonal skills, critical and global awareness, perseverance and self-direction. These skills – longstanding beneficial outcomes of a liberal arts education – are developed most readily by designing an interdisciplinary learning experience rather than emphasizing discipline-based academics only.

These outcomes are as important as ever both because of deficits in prior learning among the traditional college-age population (a well-documented outcome of pandemic isolation) and because they will prepare students for jobs that do not yet exist. Indeed, it was asserted that the development of such transferable skills and competencies is, in many cases, more important than preparation for employment in a specific sector.

Sterling has an advantage having long attracted college bound students and students who have a desire to learn and do, as well as to contribute to their communities, but are not necessarily interested in the traditional collegiate pathway. By selecting Sterling for post-secondary experience, such learners benefit by accessing Title IV funds and leaving with an accredited credential and transferrable 21st century skills. In between, they gain a practical education, find belonging in community, and come to understand humans as part of nature. The proposed model reflects our long-standing traditions – with a contemporary approach – and the very best aspects of the Sterling experience.

Additional Details About the Various Program Components

Competencies vs. Courses

The Sterling curriculum covers fifteen areas of competence (called subject areas) within three domains – Understanding the Natural World, Humans in the Environment, and Creating New Communities. Every Sterling student will take one required core course in each of the three domains: Ecology, Bounder, and Community Care. All other subject areas will feature a rotating selection of specific courses that cover that subject area's sub-competencies. For example, the subject area of Research Methods could be met by taking either Field Ecology, Oral History, or Social Science Methods; while the subject area of Systems Thinking & Practice could be met by taking either Agroecology, Conservation Biology, or Controversial Issues in Outdoor Education.

Having rotating classes grouped within subject areas rather than offering just one set course advances the following aims:

- Students can add depth and focus to their studies in certain areas, developing particular 'pathways' through their degree.
- Faculty can teach to the breadth of their expertise and explore relevant emergent topics.
- Visiting faculty members to teach one-off courses, diversifying perspectives.
- The curriculum will not become stale quickly.

Faculty will soon articulate competency statements and sub-competencies for each of the 15 subject areas of the curriculum. They will draw upon the training and resources provided through the generous support of The Endeavor Foundation to do so.

Note also that we intend for the experiential endeavors to be competency oriented and assessed. There would be two sets of competencies associated with the endeavors: general competencies that students work towards in all endeavors (e.g. timeliness, collegiality, creative problem solving, and communication), and specific competencies defined for each endeavor and appropriate to its focus.

Academic Progression

Progression of students from introductory college-level learning skills and building basic competencies in our three domains through to practicing higher order thinking, more sophisticated skills development and the adoption of leadership roles is achieved in this curriculum in the following ways:

- Some of the 15 subject areas will include only 300- or 400-level courses, and have concomitant upper-level sub-competencies associated with them. These would typically be taken towards the end of a student's BA degree.
- Others of the 15 subject areas will include lower- and upper-level courses, with the latter having prerequisites.
- Students will be able to serve as Teaching Assistants.
- Students can repeat particular experiential endeavors by serving in a student facilitator role. In this role, they take on more responsibility for coordinating and teaching in that endeavor, as well as working towards a more advanced level of competency.
- Capstone Projects would be completed in the final three semesters and the proposal process would require evidence for the ways in which the proposed projects builds upon and applies the skills already developed.

Experiential Endeavors

Endeavors are largely experiential enterprises or project-based learning opportunities that involve roughly 150 hours of combined hybrid instruction, practice, and reflection and are assessed via demonstration of competency. Students at different levels might participate in the same endeavor at the same time, working from and advancing their individual levels of competency over the course of a semester. Credit would be awarded based on a combination of hours engaged in an Endeavor and demonstration of competency at a higher level than at the start of the semester.

In addition to earning credit reflected on their transcript, students might get a competency passport and/or 'badges,' which reflect and differentiate their level of achievement. Examples of skills on a competency passport could include: tractor safety, blade sharpening, food hygiene, wilderness first aid.

Example endeavors:

A) Agroforestry - Integrating agriculture and forestry land uses, students will produce food and fiber by combining agronomic cropping, animal management, and perennial tree and shrub crops into a unified and diversified production system that puts ecological principles into practice. Students will have online access to foundational materials that define these practices and management strategies (e.g., reviving ancient food production practices, agroecological research, and case studies) while being actively engaged in developing and implementing agroforestry management plans, conducting seasonally appropriate management tasks, and generating value-added agroforestry products.

B) Forge Operations - Students would be taught how to safely operate a forge and make and mend basic forged items. Once safe practices and habits are known and established as norms, students will create objects to be used in Sterling buildings, made available for sale, and hold open forge hours for community members at a nominal cost.

Work Program & Crews

Student labor in the federal Work Program will be used to add real capacity to the operations of the College while also offering opportunities for competency development and building work ethic. Each student would continue to perform 80 hours of work per semester or 5 hours per week (reducing their tuition costs), on one of the following 6 crews:

1. Farm Crew
2. Kitchen Crew
3. Community Crew (CA/Residential Upkeep)
4. Buildings & Grounds Crew
5. Admissions Crew
6. Administrative Crew

Every 8 students on a crew would provide the equivalent of 1.0 FTE additional workers (albeit trainees) in the relevant area. In most cases, students would remain on the same work crew for at least a full academic year to reduce re-training, allow longitudinal skill development, and meaningful contributions.

Internships

As before, students will have the opportunity to participate in internal and external internships for credit. Internal internships will enable students to earn credit outside of the Fall and Spring semester schedule. In particular, there would be at least two opportunities for students to do an on-farm internship at Sterling College: Livestock or Garden planning internships running through the winter break and Livestock, Draft, and CSA operations internships in the summer. Such internships have the dual purpose of providing regular chores coverage through the Sterling breaks while also giving students an immersive experience of running a farm in a guided and reflective way. External internships for credit provide opportunities for students to gain additional relevant experience in their fields of interest (e.g., outdoor education, field ecology, etc.)

Academic Calendar

The academic calendar consists of two 15-week semesters named Fall and Spring, with internal and external internship opportunities outside of those regular sessions. As we make the pivot to this new model, we will likely maintain fairly traditional start/end timing for the semesters.

Thereafter, we will consider shifting the timing of the semesters to better align with seasonal learning opportunities and the agricultural calendar. For example, a hybrid Summer-Fall semester might begin in high summer (4th week of July), and run into stick season (1st week of November). A more aptly named Spring semester might begin just after Town Meeting Day (2nd Week of March) and end at midsummer (3rd week of June). This timing would allow the College to take full advantage of the farm as an educational laboratory while generating income and offsetting costs in the kitchen. This generates two breaks: a long Winter Break running from mid-November to early March (18 weeks long), and a short Summer Break (4 weeks long). Such a calendar would be optimal for aligning prime instructional periods with seasonal learning opportunities. At the same time, we recognize that having something of an outlier calendar could suppress enrollment prospects. Thus, we would not make this shift right away; instead, we would thoroughly investigate it with faculty and admissions and market test it first.

Semester & Day Schedule

Fall and Spring Semesters						
	Block 1	Intermission 1	Block 2	Intermission 2	Block 3	Intermission 3
	Weeks 1-4	Week 5	Week 6-9	Week 10	Week 11-14	Week 15
7:45-8:45	Work Block (Option A)					
9-12	Five course options available (each 4 cr, taught M-Th)	Includes All College Workday	Five course options	Includes All College Service Day	Five course options	Fall: Includes Winter Expedition; Spring: Includes Graduation
1-3:45	Experiential Endeavors T-F; Scaffolding Seminars and/or Advising Meetings on M					
4-5	Work Block (Option B)					

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Sample Pathways

The following two sample pathways demonstrate how a student with particular interests and career aspirations could, in the presence of good advising, move through their undergraduate experience with ample opportunities for specialization, progression, and growth.

	Ecology and Education pathway	Sustainable Agriculture pathway
Required course distribution across 15 competency areas includes:	Foundations of Ecology	Foundations of Ecology
	Water & Watersheds	Water & Watersheds
	Soil, Plants & Microbes I	Soil, Plants & Microbes I
	Field Ecology	Introduction to GIS
	Introduction to GIS	Agricultural History
	Environmental History	Food & Farm Policy
	Environmental Policy & Law	Social Economy
	Economics and the Environment	Environmental Ethics
	Environmental Ethics	Agroecology
	Experiential Curriculum Design	
	Controversial Issues in Outdoor Ed	
Further Electives	Geology	Intro. to Climate Science
	Soil, Plants, Microbes II	Soil, Plants, Microbes II
	Experiential Learning Theory	
Experiential Endeavors	Plant Identification and Vegetation Mapping	Seeds & Seed Saving
	Wildlife Tracking, Bird-banding & Education	Agroforestry Practices
	Wetland Delineation	Garden Planning
	Lead Crew: Plant Identification and Vegetation Mapping	Lead Crew: Agroforestry Practices
	Environmental Education: Coyote Kids	Logging with Draft Animals
Scaffolding Seminars	Reading Scientific Literature	Financial Literacy
Capstone Project	Nature-based Curriculum Development for Hosmer Point	Developing business plan for diversifying vegetable CSA w/ perennial agriculture,
Senior Portfolio	<i>Ties together all prior learning & provides the student with an opportunity to articulate the narrative of their education and provide evidence of their competencies.</i>	