Report to the
Faculty, Administration, Trustees, Students

of

STERLING COLLEGE
Craftsbury Common, VT

by

An Evaluation Team representing the
Commission on Institutions of Higher Education
of the
New England Association of Schools and Colleges

Prepared after study of the institution's
self-evaluation report and a visit
April 10-13, 2016

The members of the team:

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COMMISSION ON INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION
New England Association of Schools and College
Preface Page to the Team Report
Please complete **during the team visit** and include with the report prepared by the visiting team

Date form completed: _____ April 12, 2016 _____

Name of Institution _____ Sterling College _____

1. **History**   Year chartered or authorized <u>1958</u>   Year first degrees awarded __1982_

2. **Type of control:** ☐ State   ☐ City   ☐ Other; specify:
   ☒ Private, not-for-profit   ☐ Religious Group; specify:
   ☐ Proprietary   ☐ Other; specify:

3. **Degree level:**
   ☐ Associate   ☒ Baccalaureate   ☐ Masters   ☐ Professional   ☐
   Doctorate

4. **Enrollment in Degree Programs** (Use figures from fall semester of most recent year):

	Full-time	Part-time	FTE	Retention[a]	Graduation[b]	# Degrees[c]
Associate						
Baccalaureate	110	6	113.2	57%	36%	19
Graduate						

   (a) full-time 1st to 2nd year (b) 3 or 6 year graduation rate (c) no. of degrees awarded most recent year

5. **Number of current faculty:**   Full time _13_ Part-time __15_ FTE: _19.5_

6. **Current fund data for most recently completed fiscal year:** (Specify year: _6/30/15_)
   (Double click in any cell to enter spreadsheet. Enter dollars in millions; e.g., $1,456,200 = $1.456)

Revenues		**Expenditures**	
Tuition	$2.402	Instruction	$2.874
Gov't Appropriations	$0.014	Research	
Gifts/Grants/Endowment	$1.887	General	$1.154
Auxiliary Enterprises	$0.230	Auxiliary Enterprises	$0.523
Other	$1.330	Other	
Total	$5.863	Total	$4.551

7. **Number of off-campus locations:**
   In-state __1__   Other U.S. _____   International _____   Total _1__

8. **Number of degrees and certificates offered electronically:**
   Programs offered entirely on-line _0_   Programs offered 50-99% on-line _0__

9. **Is instruction offered through a contractual relationship?**
   ☒ No   ☐ Yes; specify program(s):

10. **Other characteristics:**

Introduction

This visit was a regular decennial comprehensive evaluation, in fact Sterling College's first such since its initial CIHE accreditation in 2006. The Commission had highlighted two additional emphases for the self-study, in 2013 and 2015: success in developing and implementing its three-year strategic plan, and success in achieving its enrollment goals and a positive change in net assets.

Sterling used the opportunity of the self-study as a three-year community-wide process of data-gathering and assessment. Led by a steering committee that included staff, faculty, and students, the process included participation in NEASC workshops by faculty who would play leadership roles in the self-study. Seven community-wide committees focused on assigned standards, and reviewed data via a virtual workroom, conducted interviews, and drafted sections of the report. The chair of the steering committee kept the campus fully informed with regular reports to the governing Academic, Work, and Community Councils, and reported progress at quarterly Board meetings. A number of Board members who are familiar with accreditation also served as readers of early drafts.

Because of this collaborative process, the visiting team found the self-study to be a comprehensive and accurate representation of Sterling College. From the entire community, from the president to students with whom we spoke, we encountered a thorough understanding of what we were there to do, as well as an eagerness both for the visit itself as the culmination of their years of preparation and for genuine feedback and assessment of their progress. This broad-based awareness and openness made for easy and substantial engagement in the issues.

The entire college community made itself available for the visit, and through a comprehensive and constantly but willingly shifting schedule of interviews, the team was afforded all the necessary opportunities for both initial meetings and follow-up clarification.

A review of the self-study and materials provided in the electronic workroom, the team chair's preliminary visit four weeks before the team visit, and the full team's observations from their site visit on April 10-13 together comprise the basis for the information and evaluative judgments contained in the eleven sections of this report addressing the Standards for Accreditation of the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges.

1. Mission and Purposes

Sterling College is tightly and dramatically focused around its core mission. The mission is simply stated: *Sterling College combines structured academic study with experiential challenges and plain hard work to build responsible problem solvers who become stewards of the environment as they pursue productive lives.* It is a mission that is clearly expressed through five majors: Ecology, Environmental Humanities, Sustainable Agriculture, Sustainable Food Systems, and Outdoor Education. It echoes clearly in the way that both students and faculty talk about their work, and it is reflected in the college's commitment to

the federal Work College program. It is explicitly recited by the President at each term's All-College meeting, and has pride of place in the College's print and electronic presence.

The mission is consistent with Sterling's earliest history, when it opened in 1958 as a boys' boarding school with a focus on experiential education and the natural world, inspired by the philosophy of Kurt Hahn, founder of Outward Bound. In the 1970's it became one of the earliest American colleges to offer an interdisciplinary focus on sustainability, and the 21st century brings only greater urgency to the mission.

Institutional Effectiveness
Sterling's mission is so pervasive and omni-present in every aspect of both campus life and the college's outward-facing media that it is constantly being evaluated when any part of the college's life is examined. The mission, and its related vision statement, are periodically reaffirmed (most recently in 2013) by the faculty and by the Board of Trustees.

 2. Planning and Evaluation

Sterling College's mission is central to its planning efforts, while evaluation and institutional research are developing areas, as might be expected at a very small institution. Sterling is beginning a journey away from ad hoc and anecdotal evaluation toward a more data-driven approach that will support its planning process.

Sterling approaches institutional research in a distributed way, with many individuals contributing to this nascent effort. The Director of Communication is the point person for these efforts and the Registrar, Admissions and Financial Aid Office, and Director of Marketing all contribute. This approach is sufficient to complete very basic institutional research requirements, such as completion of federal IPEDS reports and providing data to guidebooks, but does not allow for the types of advanced analysis that might allow Sterling to investigate and improve key drivers such as Admissions applications and yield or to identify patterns of retention and graduation. Sterling will benefit from increasingly professionalizing this approach in the future and taking advantage of professional development in institutional research through the Association for Institutional Research or similar entities, which the Director of Communication has requested in her budget for next year. Sterling staff may also want to reach out to other colleges in Vermont to learn more about their approaches to institutional research in order to identify solutions that may work on their own campus. The college is considering participation in the National Student Clearinghouse, which could be a significant source of support for institutional research efforts around admission, retention and graduation, and post-graduate enrollment.

The college began implementing the Blackbaud Student Information System (SIS) in 2014, which is expected to advance institutional research considerably. The system is not yet fully implemented, however, and some key data are missing, hindering its functionality. Many members of the community expressed a desire to explore the full capacities of the SIS to create workload efficiencies. This level of implementation will create opportunities for institutional research studies that integrate data broadly, including admission, financial aid, registration, and business records. The next major milestone, expected by the end of the current academic year, will complete the integration of the Registrar's data, increasing the ability of all users to extract information necessary to their work. Sterling is already making use of the capabilities that are enabled in the SIS; the Associate Dean of Academics, for example, already uses its new capabilities to identify troubling attendance

patterns that allow for early intervention with students in order to promote student success. Significant training for staff and faculty is still necessary, however, to achieve full usage of the SIS.

Planning

Sterling College has a clear history of strategic and other planning initiatives. The current *Nourish the Roots* strategic plan was implemented in 2013 and runs through 2018. The Sterling community developed the plan through a broad-based, inclusive process that was initiated shortly after the arrival of President Derr in 2012. Two members of the Board of Trustees, including the current chair, co-chaired the Strategic Planning Committee, which also included faculty, administrators, students and alumni. Subcommittees on People & Program, Resources, and Facilities & Infrastructure were convened to investigate specific aspects of planning, along with smaller working teams, which ultimately resulted in the direct involvement of a significant portion of the Sterling community. A strategic planning consultant was retained to help gather data to aid the process. The comprehensive plan that resulted from this process is rooted in Sterling's mission and was formally reviewed and adopted by the Faculty and the Board of Trustees. It is focused on affirming the mission and vision, reinforcing the curriculum, improving the college's long-term financial health, improving the college's ecological sustainability, and improving the facilities to better support the community. It includes specific goals and objectives that are illuminated through measurable implementation steps.

The impact of the plan is readily apparently, as many of the initiatives that staff and faculty discussed as part of their ongoing work were clearly rooted in the plan, such as the aforementioned SIS, the ongoing analysis of faculty workload, and Sterling's enrollment management achievements. Progress on the plan has been formally reviewed at the semiannual All College Meetings and as an annual agenda item for the Board of Trustees. The college has since engaged in an "Invent-A-College" workshop to provide professional development on future strategic planning efforts, which are expected to begin in 2017.

The effects of the plan are evident in its relationship to other planning efforts. The college's $9 million comprehensive campaign currently in progress is a direct extension of the strategic plan; fundraising is the primary source of funds for implementing many of the plan's steps. A thorough campus master plan was also completed in 2013 and provided a frank and thorough assessment of the college's facilities. The master plan clearly ties to the strategic plan's goals around resources and infrastructure. The college continues to complete numerous large and small-scale facilities projects based on the master plan's priorities combined with the campus's current contextual needs and available funding. The campus's multi-year financial model integrates the objectives of the strategic plan and allows the college proactively to model various scenarios to understand the effects of different decisions and enrollment patterns.

Enrollment is collaboratively projected by the responsible community members and informs financial planning. The college's small size is clearly both an asset and challenge in enrollment planning, as it is relatively easy to understand and project the persistence of current students, but the college's small numbers make it vulnerable to the large financial effects that can result from small variations in the number of students. All of Sterling's planning efforts are clearly intertwined to ensure that they create a realistic vision for the community's immediate and future needs.

Evaluation
There are demonstrable pockets of evaluation occurring throughout the Sterling College community, but the college has yet to realize a regular and systemic approach to assessment in both the academic and functional areas. While regular progress updates are communicated on the strategic plan, for example, assessment of the college's twelve College-wide Competencies is not well integrated into evaluation efforts. The college has begun utilizing internally developed surveys to gain better understanding of targeted issues, such as alumni success, and the work, community and advising experiences. With the number of such surveys the college has begun to administer on important issues, Sterling may want to consider providing professional development in effective survey development and analysis to the relevant faculty and staff to ensure they are getting high quality, actionable data from these efforts. The Admission Office and the Director of Marketing are beginning to study data contained in the SIS and web usage data gathered through Google Analytics in order to better target the college's student recruitment efforts. Staff reported that annual employee evaluations are generally useful to them and provide feedback that helps them improve in their work.

While all assessment efforts at the college need to be strengthened and coordinated, assessment of student learning outcomes and the curriculum as a whole is a particular concern. The College-wide Competencies are currently not formally integrated at the course-level, although the small nature of the college means that the faculty are able to understand student learning at a practical level through their course assignments and extensive personal interaction with students. The college has launched pilot efforts in the academic and work programs that assess Competency progress; it is too early, however, to determine if either of these approaches will yield useful assessment data or will be integrated and systematized. This area is discussed more fully in Standard 4.

While internal processes are not formalized, Sterling has made progress through the periodic use of external tools. Membership in the Work Colleges Consortium has afforded Sterling the opportunity to participate in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory (SSI). Reporting on both these tools has included comparative data that allows Sterling to see its position relative to the other work colleges and, in some cases, larger comparison groups. Sterling also participates in the AASHE Sustainability Tracking, Assessment and Rating System (STARS) survey, which provides an opportunity to reflect on the various areas of the college that contribute to this rating annually. Survey results are discussed in the College's various councils and committees. For example, based on recent NSSE results, the campus identified the need to improve students' sense of belonging through initiating new community events.

Similar to developing its institutional research capacity as earlier discussed, Sterling College may also want to consider how it can introduce professional development and leadership to staff and faculty around evaluation and assessment.

Institutional Effectiveness
Sterling College's active and collaborative process to plan for its future is a clear asset to the college. Efficacy of planning efforts is demonstrated by the college's consistent ability to make reasonable progress on and achieve the goals set through the planning process. Systematic and integrated evaluation efforts still need to be developed, though there are

some existing models in the college that may help this effort. With planning well established, the evaluation area is ripe for the college's future efforts.

3. *Organization and Governance*

Sterling College's organizational structure and decision-making processes are clear and work well in support of the mission and current period of growth. All constituencies embrace the shared, community decision-making structures as well aligned with the spirit of the Sterling mission, and appear deeply committed to the model and its prospects for continuous improvement and growth.

The Board of Trustees meets three times per year, although this passionate and mission-committed group is actively involved in planning activities, subcommittee work, and advising the president on an ongoing basis. The Board is comprised of 23 members including 22 voting members and the President, who is a non-voting, ex-officio trustee, a change made five years ago at the President's request. Conflict of interest forms are in place: the majority of the members have no individual financial interest in the institution, and any potential conflicts of interest that do exist appear to be fully disclosed. Members of the Board with whom the visiting team met displayed a deep and consistent understanding of the mission, expressing passion for the College's environmental stewardship focus, the high energy of students, and the community spirit that pervades the institution.

The Board has made a concerted and successful effort to broaden its membership to a regional and national level, as well as broadening the representation of non-alums. This change has allowed the group to enhance the represented professional skills, as well as to engage in more successful fundraising. The Board conducts an annual assessment of its bylaws, and regularly assesses its own processes through individual, post-meeting evaluations. The Board appears to function at a high strategic level, with a consistent understanding of Sterling's mission, and to work cooperatively with the President in sustaining the forward movement of the College. Members of Administrative Council routinely attend Board meetings. The Board is receptive to advocacy from staff and others, as illustrated by recent decisions around investment in technology as well as divestment from fossil fuel investments.

In order to foster transparency in communication and broad inclusiveness, President Derr has led the way in moving the College away from what are described in the self-study as previously ad hoc processes toward more formal mechanisms for community participation in decision-making. These new structures include Administrative Council (an advisory group to the President, which also serves to facilitate communication among different functional areas), Academic Council (formerly Curriculum Committee – dealing with all curricular and academic policy matters, as well as approval of self-designed degree proposals), Community Council (dealing with matters pertaining to student life), and Work Council (dealing with policies around the Work program). Each entity interacts with the entire community in the interest of open communication as well as educational and organizational improvement. These new entities create a more inclusive decision-making environment, in which the President has essentially delegated decision-making to those whose roles include the execution of those decisions. He maintains oversight, always assessing the impact of decisions on the health and welfare of the College. This new

structure has also enabled the President to become more involved in fundraising away from campus. Challenges of this new system are the additional pressures on faculty and staff members' workload and time, already stressed given the size of the College.

The faculty governance system was reported to be well-functioning and representative of the faculty, with the Academic Council bringing matters before the full Faculty, always working toward consensus-based decisions. The faculty meet weekly, and they report feeling fully involved in as well as exercising control over all academic matters. They celebrate the shared governance and transparency instituted by President Derr. They work well with the current academic dean, though some noted that they would welcome the opportunity to sometimes meet solely amongst themselves as a group to voice concerns or discuss community issues.

Students report that they have a full voice in College decision-making, with the ability to address issues and be heard by faculty, staff, and the President. They are members of most existing committees and subcommittees, including Academic Council, Community Council, and Work Council. Like faculty and staff representatives, students self-identify their interest to join Academic Council and are vetted for their commitment to regularly attend meetings.

Community Council is chaired by the Dean of Community; in addition to faculty and staff representatives, student leaders are invited to serve as representatives. Weekly meetings of the Council are open and typically draw between 10-20 students, depending upon issues being addressed.

The Work Council has relatively low attendance and is working to establish its role within the current governance structure.

The 45-minute to one-hour weekly Community Meeting is run by students, which helps to facilitate student participation and advocacy during the portion of each meeting devoted to what is called "issues and awareness."

There are weekly student activities meetings that are routinely well-attended by students, where attendees vote on proposals for access to the student activities funds, which total approximately $16,000 in the current year.

The College's Dean of Academics is the Chief Academic Officer of the institution, and, in cooperation with Academic Council and the faculty, is responsible for the quality and integrity of academic programs.

Institutional Effectiveness
The institution of formal communication and governance processes is relatively new; the College is committed to continual assessment and adjustments, and this will continue to be a major focus in community discussions as well as a focus of the next strategic planning effort.

4. The Academic Program

The Sterling College mission statement, summarized in the Sterling College motto, "Working Hands. Working Minds," is foundational to understanding all that Sterling does, especially the Academic Program and the inclusion of the Work Program as part of the graduation requirements.

The mission statement defines a clear and appropriate purpose for the College. The one degree (B.A.) and five defined majors and one "self-designed" major are consistent with the College's mission; each major is focused on environment and stewardship in some way, and reflect a logical and coherent structure. Self-designed majors are appropriately vetted through individual faculty, instructional areas, and then the Academic Council. The first B.A. degree was awarded in 2000. In recent years there have been about 110 full time students enrolled each year, with a goal to increase to 120 students in the next few years.

As described on the College website, Sterling College is a federally recognized "Work College." Discussions with the Dean of Community, Director of Work, and Dean of Academics and Associate Dean of Academics support the fact that the Work Program underlies some of the unique aspects of Sterling College. Each matriculated student is required to work at least 80 hours each semester in the Work Program. The work involves a defined position that supports the Sterling community or the surrounding community, such as office work, forestry, farming, cooking, leading adventure trips, or working in Admissions. Students apply for different positions each semester and are expected to progress in terms of responsibilities and skills during their time at Sterling. Students do not receive academic credit in the Work Program and it is not supervised by the Dean of Academics, but successful completion of the Work Program is a graduation requirement and is viewed as essential to the Sterling education and experience. Students are required to develop personal goals for their Work Program job each semester, and following an evaluation of the semester's outcome (Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory), they can be dismissed from the College for unsatisfactory participation in the Work Program. Though the program is not technically part of the Academic program, it is integral to achieving the College's mission, as is clear from the College website, Self-study, and on-campus interviews with students, faculty, and staff. Many staff, faculty, and Deans supervise work students. At the end of the semester students reflect in writing on their experience, their progress on their personal goals, and how their participation in the Work Program relates to the 12 college-wide competencies (discussed below). In the team's open meeting with students, many spoke very highly of the Work Program and how it served to develop their personal and professional lives. Survey results from alumni found that out of sixty-two alumni who were asked if they feel that the Work Program prepared them for life after Sterling, sixty-one percent (61%) said that they strongly agree and another twenty percent (20%) said they agreed. E-series Work Program Surveys results also support the student-perceived value of the Work Program in the overall Sterling educational experience.

The Sterling College mission of building environmental stewards is further defined by twelve competencies each student is expected to achieve throughout their degree program. The competencies are both specific to the Sterling mission (e.g., #1. Live satisfying and productive lives as environmental stewards) and more broadly defined (e.g., #3. Understand the historical and global cultural contexts of social dynamics), following a more traditional liberal arts context. At Sterling College the Academic program combined with the Work Program is designed to ensure that students are able to "gain the skills, knowledge and experiences" to meet these competencies. The visiting team was impressed with the degree

to which the whole Sterling experience--Academics, Work Program and Community living--is designed to support student achievement of these 12 competencies.

Through meetings with faculty, the Academic Council, and the Dean of Academics, the team confirmed that oversight of the entire Academic Program rests ultimately with the Academic Dean, with intermediate review and recommendations from individual faculty and the Academic Council. The culture of shared governance is embraced by all as they seek consensus in decision making and, in practice, exercise an effective system of shared oversight of the academic program by the Dean of Academics and faculty.

Although much of the academic program at Sterling is not dependent on modern, electronic technology, such technology is integrated into the curriculum in several ways. Students typically (100% in the most recent year) bring laptops to campus and use them for academic assignments, as evidenced by a sample of course syllabi. At least one course in Geographic Information Systems relies heavily on use of particular advanced software and hardware. The campus maintains computers for students to use. All students are familiarized with the library and information resources during their first semester core class, "A Sense of Place." To graduate students must complete a capstone Senior Project (SP or SARP, detailed below), which requires extensive use of library resources, according to the handbook for senior projects.

Sterling College implements "Writing Across the Curriculum" where students must take at least four courses with a significant writing component. The capstone senior project (SP or SARP) requires a final product comprised of a written document.

There is a dual-enrollment program with a local high school. Currently only one course is offered in this program, although the College reports in their Self-study that other dual-enrollment options are being considered. The Dean of Academics oversees the dual-enrollment course in order to ensure the Academic quality of the program.

In 2014 Sterling College initiated a continuing education program called the "School of the New American Farmstead." The President and the directors of the Rian Fried Center confirmed that, while the program is completely mission-relevant, revenue creation was a major motivation for its creation. Primarily a short-course summer program for full-pay artisanal food professionals and aspirants, most of whom are not enrolled for academic credit, the continuing education program is also expected to create new opportunities for Sterling students. Degree-seeking Sterling students can access these continuing education courses by working with full-time faculty to create an Independent Study course that integrates a continuing education course with additional academic components. The Dean reviews and approves Independent Study proposals.

Undergraduate Degree Program
Sterling operates on a semester system. Each fall and spring semester begins with a 2-week intensive session followed by a 10 week "long block" session. During the intensive session students typically take one course. The intensive session provides opportunities to engage in extended field trips and other courses of an intensive nature. Courses are also offered during a summer semester, although not all students enroll in the summer courses. No courses are offered online.

Courses are defined by credits, and students need 120 credits to graduate.   The academic program is designed to be progressive within the core and each major. Students must complete Core Requirements (30-39 credits), general education requirements (19 credits), and major requirements (40-45 credits) and a "Senior Seminar" (3 credits). In the typical case this leaves about 14 credits of unrestricted electives in order to reach the 120 credit graduation requirement. Major checklists posted online and available from faculty advisors detail the major and College requirements. Students who pursue a "Self-designed major" still have to meet all the Core and General Education requirements. Their major requirements are devised in consultation with the instructor of the "Self-Designed Major" workshop and at least one other faculty member. The full "Self-designed" major proposal is reviewed and approved by Academic Council in order to ensure academic rigor and appropriateness to the College. The Registrar is responsible for degree audits to ensure completion of major and College requirements (including satisfactory completion of the Work Program). Overall, the undergraduate degree program is true to the environmental mission of the College.

Core Requirements and General Education
The core is comprised of eight specific courses (24 credits) all students must take, typically in the first and second years. These courses are focused on environmental awareness, stewardship, and professional development/career preparation. To complete the core requirements students must complete "capstone work" in their senior year.   There are three options for the capstone work: 6 credits of a Senior Project; 15 credits of a Senior Applied Research Project, or an list of courses approximating a capstone experience approved by the Dean of Academics. Most students (13/17 in a sample of 2015 graduates based on survey results provided in the workroom documents) choose the 6-credit Senior Project option.

The general education requirements give students an introduction to broad areas of human knowledge. Subject areas cover Applied Sciences, Humanities, Natural Sciences, and Social Science. All courses appear to carry an environmental theme. For example, a review of the course catalog reveals the following art courses: Forgotten Arts: bows and basketry, Adventure Literature, Fiber Arts 1, and Studio Art: Natural History Illustration, among others. A humanities course titled "Animation That Matters" has the following description: "In this course, students will create short original animated videos that address critical environmental issues of particular concern to them, for example, GMO seeds, industrial wind power, conservation." The only math requirement is that students must be able to pass the Mathematics Competency Requirement before graduation. Coursework is offered to help students pass the math requirement.

Major or Concentration
Sterling College offers majors in Ecology, Environmental Humanities, Outdoor Education, Sustainable Agriculture, and Sustainable Food Systems, each clearly defined with required course lists compiled into a checklist. Checklists are available on the College website and from academic advisors. In prior communication with NEASC Sterling College had described an evolving relationship with the Center for Northern Studies, a program that merged with Sterling in 2003. Since the last comprehensive visit, however, Sterling has cut this program due to lack of student interest and enrollment. (The buildings from this campus were sold and the property was retained as a research forest, according to the Associate Dean of Academics.)

Students also have the option to design their own major in the "Self-Designed Major" option. The Self-Designed major is one of the most popular majors with 34 of the 116 students pursuing this option in FY 2016, according to the self-study. In the 2015-2016 academic year, Academic Council had received 13 proposals as of the April 2016 NEASC team visit, according to minutes from the Academic Council meetings. In this option students can "major" in Agroforestry, Ecotourism, Handcrafts and Folklore, Human Ecology and virtually any other environmentally connected major. Students work with a faculty member to devise a course list from existing College offerings, supplemented with independent studies and a capstone Senior Project in order to create their major. The major is identified on their transcript as a Self-designed major with the approved title.

Overall the administration of the Self-designed majors is thorough and appropriate. Faculty work with students at various points of the process, from an initial major development workshop (a 1 credit course), through submission, feedback, revision and approval by Academic Council. The process of developing a Self-Design major forces thoughtful consideration by the student of the purposes and desired learning through that major (Self-Design Major Handbook and Self-Design Major Proposal Guidelines).

The team was impressed with the Field Semester and the Global Field Studies component of the curriculum. These courses provide extended opportunities of 2 or more weeks in intensive field situations where students can earn 3 or more credits. These opportunities occur away from campus in various parts of the world (Arizona, Belize, Great Britain and others). Students are not required to take these courses although they can take them to satisfy major requirements or electives. Further, there is no additional charge for students to take two of these courses; the costs are bundled into existing tuition and fees.

Integrity in the Award of Academic Credit
In order to earn Sterling's bachelor of arts degree, students must complete the graduation requirements published on the degree checklists made available online and in print for each major, which include completion of 120 credits comprised of core, general education, and major requirements. Students must additionally earn a minimum cumulative GPA of 2.0 and successfully complete their participation in the Work program. The college is considering designing a work transcript to complement the academic transcript that will make the details of a student's completion of the Work program clear. Students who elect to design their own major must propose their program of study to the Academic Council, which consists of the Dean and Associate Dean of Academics, a faculty member from each instruction team, and student representatives, and receive approval, ensuring that it creates a coherent experience within Sterling's curriculum and that it does not duplicate an existing major. For all students, the Registrar completes degree audits in the senior year to ensure that all required courses have been completed; the new student information system is expected to help improve the accuracy and timeliness of this process.

The scheduling of courses is done to ensure that students have access to completing core, general education and major requirements, and, in the event that a course is not offered due to under-enrollment, students may work with the appropriate faculty members to develop independent studies to serve as substitutes. Independent studies are reviewed by the Dean of Academics and the relevant instructional team to ensure that they meet the college's criteria for academic credit. There are generally a large number of independent studies being conducted at any one time, which can create additional pressure on faculty workload. The college may benefit from extending its course planning beyond the next semester so that

students can plan their schedules in advance and ensure that they match with planned course offerings. This may alleviate the existing need to offer some independent studies as alternatives to low-enrollment courses, although many independent study proposals reflect student enthusiasm for a particular specialty not included in the normal curriculum, which faculty are eager to support.

The college publishes criteria for evaluation of student achievement and the award of academic credit in the Community Guidebook. Grades are awarded on the standard A-F scale. All grades and credit awarded are overseen by faculty members and the Dean of Academics.

Sterling's definition of a credit hour reflects US Department of Education and NEASC guidelines. Generally, Sterling defines a single credit hour as equivalent to 15 contact hours and 30 hours of out-of-class work or the appropriate equivalent of engaged time. This definition guides the college's assignment of course credit within its somewhat unusual academic calendar. Each semester is made up of a two-week Intensive period, a "Long Block" that comprises the majority of the semester, and an Exam and Final Projects Block. Courses are scheduled for appropriate meeting times and faculty design assignments to ensure that the credit hour definition is met regardless of whether a course runs during the Intensive or the Long Block. Appropriate expectations for engaged time are also applied to alternative course formats, such as independent studies. Administrators, faculty and students all demonstrated clear knowledge of credit hour expectations.

Students generally earn course credits through satisfactory completion of courses, but credits may also be awarded through successful completion of AP and CLEP exams and transfer of credit from other institutions. Sterling also considers other types of prior learning, such as military training, as appropriate. Sterling accepts all credits for courses completed with a C or better at regionally accredited institutions, though students are still expected to complete all required core and major coursework unless an appropriate substitute has transferred. Courses with no direct equivalent become electives or may be used as part of a self-designed major if appropriate. The Registrar and Dean of Academics review all transfer credits to ensure that they are applied consistently and appropriately. Students who transfer a large number of credits are expected to complete appropriate upper-level courses at Sterling in order to earn a degree, but may have some introductory courses waived. Regardless of how many credits are transferred, Sterling requires all students to earn a minimum of 30 of their 120 credits from the college in order to earn a Sterling degree. Embedded in the description of the transfer process, the college's website lists several articulation agreements to facilitate students' entry into Sterling.

Sterling's satisfactory academic progress policy establishes appropriate thresholds for both GPA and credit completion. Students who fail to make satisfactory academic progress are placed on academic review and failure to improve may result in dismissal from the college. Students who demonstrate a successful semester at another institution may apply to be readmitted. Academic review may also be triggered by earning less than a C grade in Sterling's introductory course, A Sense of Place. Failure to provide satisfactory performance in the Work program may also lead to review and/or dismissal.

Sterling does not currently offer any online, distance or correspondence courses. The college has suggested that it may explore online or low residency course models in the future if they fit with the college's mission and academic program. There is also a desire to

explore whether the move to a competency-based model of academic achievement instead of the current credit hour approach would be appropriate for Sterling at some point in the future. These ideas currently remain on the horizon, however, and are not planned for implementation in the immediate future.

Assessment of Student Learning
Sterling has articulated twelve College-wide Competencies that reflect the skills, knowledge, and experiences students are expected to develop throughout their education. The competencies are aligned with the college's mission and include diverse areas, such as "Live satisfying and productive lives as environmental stewards," "Practice both critical and systems thinking," and "Develop and appreciate creativity in expression, work and problem-solving." Domains such as written and oral communication, leadership, and information literacy are also included. For the most part, these competencies are currently treated as implicit in the curriculum rather than explicitly joined to coursework and evaluated directly. Sterling has not engaged in a systematic, documented assessment of them that gives a clear understanding of individual achievement in relation to the competencies or the success of the curriculum as a whole in teaching the competencies.

The Dean of Academics recently initiated a reflective portfolio process for students enrolled in a senior-level course aimed at understanding how these students perceive their growth along the twelve axes of the Competencies. There is a writing assessment conducted in the first year course "A Sense of Place" that is used to help identify students who need additional writing support that could also become a component of a larger assessment system. A recent reorganization of the Work program, which is considered to be an integral part of the academic experience, has included a focus on how the Competencies relate to students' Work experiences. In the current academic year, consideration of the Competencies has been added to the evaluation process for the Work program as part of summative assessments. The Work program also conducts formative goal-setting exercises between supervisors and students intended to help guide students' growth and development in Work. These pilot processes have the potential to inform a larger-scale, integrated assessment initiative, but there are currently no concrete plans or timeline to do so. Faculty have reportedly begun an activity to map the Competencies throughout the curriculum, but the initiative remains incomplete at this time. A similar effort is reported to be underway among the instructional teams to develop and map major-specific learning outcomes, but little progress is evident at this time.

Faculty at Sterling are expected to establish expectations for student learning that are communicated to students. A survey of sample syllabi shows that most courses do list learning outcomes. The way in which learning outcomes are written, however, varies widely. Faculty might benefit from professional development in how to write learning outcomes in a consistent manner in order to communicate their expectations to students more clearly. This type of professional development may also help faculty demonstrate explicit connections between their course-level outcomes, the College-wide Competencies, and the major-specific learning outcomes that are under development. Students and faculty both made clear that faculty use the review of course assignments as an opportunity not just to offer a grade, but also to offer feedback that assists in students' academic development.

Faculty regularly initiate changes to the academic program that are reviewed by instructional teams, the Academic Council, and the faculty as a whole, if appropriate. The need for change, however, appears to be based more on anecdotal evidence at present rather

than a rigorous assessment approach that provides data to drive the decisions. In Sterling's small community, an argument can be made that this approach may work to some degree, but it misses the opportunity to look for the larger patterns and connections that a holistic and systematic approach would be able to demonstrate. Implementing a more rigorous approach to assessment will greatly facilitate the program review process at Sterling by providing data that the instructional teams, Academic Council, and Faculty Meeting can use to make key decisions about curriculum.

Participation in the National Survey of Student Engagement and the Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory has provided some broad data that can be used to understand the student academic experience. Because participation in these surveys comes through the Work Colleges Consortium, the results provide Sterling with the opportunity to benchmark their data against both the Consortium group as well as the larger pools of data collected by the survey organizations. These data add an external perspective to Sterling's assessment processes, as discussed under Standard 2. But the college may want to find other methods of external review that have a more direct relationship to the majors and College-wide Competencies.

Sterling College may want to consider strategically how to increase leadership and professional development for its academic assessment efforts, especially in the context of the development of the college's overall evaluation and institutional research program, as discussed under Standard 2. This will provide the college the opportunity to leverage its existing resources such as the alumni survey to support the assessment of student learning while building out a formalized assessment program.

Institutional Effectiveness
The commitment to student success at Sterling is clear. The effectiveness of the Sterling experiences is defined by three intertwined, necessary areas: Academics, the Work Program, and Community. Sterling is in the early stages of developing a formalized program to assess the effectiveness of the Sterling experience in helping students achieve the twelve competencies. When fully implemented, an assessment program will provide valuable data to enrich the student experience and support continuous curricular development. The percent of student employment in mission-related jobs after graduation provides one metric of effectiveness of the "Sterling experience." According to graduate surveys (E-series data), 90% of graduates are employed in jobs related to Sterling's mission.

    5. *Faculty*

Sterling College currently has 13 full-time faculty, compared to 10 three years ago, and 14 part-time or adjunct faculty serving a student body of about 110. Faculty expertise is spread among five instructional areas that well match the mission and academic needs of the College. Full-time faculty officially have a work load comprised of 75% teaching, corresponding to 21 credits/calendar year. The full-time faculty work load also includes committee work, advising students, supervising Senior Projects, supervising Work Program students, and other activities. Three full-time faculty have PhDs (one also has a JD), 9 have M.S. degrees, and one has a Bachelor's degree. Faculty members combine their academic expertise and credentials with particular skills and experiences that contribute to Sterling's focused experiential program. Faculty have skills, for example, in farrier work, use of tools

and machinery, farm and forest management, Nordic skiing, rock climbing, or other unique skills that align with their programmatic goals. Many faculty teach courses seldom found elsewhere. Examples include courses such as a "Desert Field Semester" where students backpack through Arizona for 10 weeks, or a suite of courses on the use and care of draft horses. The part-time faculty is comprised of campus staff who also teach courses, typically one a semester or year, and may supervise Independent Studies and Senior Projects. Part-time faculty include the Dean of Academics, Dean of Community, President, and Farm manager who all teach one or more classes per year. Adjunct faculty, on whom the Sterling program relies heavily, are hired as professional experts to teach particular courses.

Faculty members in all categories appear to be extremely dedicated to their roles and the mission of Sterling College. Academic freedom, both among faculty and students, is part of the Sterling culture. Faculty passion for their students, the rural location, the close-knit community, and the experiential college experience is very evident through conversations with the faculty and students. Most faculty engage with their students in a variety of ways beyond courses. Faculty members serve as advisers, supervisors in the Work Program, and supervisors of Independent studies and senior projects. Students indicated that faculty display an extremely high level of care and concern for students outside of the classroom as well. Opportunities for informal encounters are numerous on this small campus, where as many as three meals a day are shared in common. In many respects faculty work with students as friends, colleagues, peers, almost as family. One faculty member, for example, described the experience of learning along with students during independent studies. A student described an instance of being involved as a teaching assistant in evaluating and adjusting a course. Another faculty member described an upcoming event where faculty members would visit a student dorm to make donuts while discussing the content area of their instructional unit.

There is no tenure or rank at Sterling, an "at-will" employment institution. The faculty hiring policy, confirmed by the Dean's description of actual practice, states that three or four of a six or seven-member faculty search committee would typically be faculty members. All faculty are on annual contracts. Each year the Dean of Academics reviews faculty performance and faculty are notified with a "reappointment letter" in May if they will be retained for the following academic year. The faculty is comprised of recent, mid-term and long-term faculty, suggesting a long-term commitment to the faculty despite the annual contracts. The primary categories of work for faculty are listed in the Community Guidebook. The annual contract lists specific responsibilities for each faculty member, although the culture is one of workloads growing during the year.

Adjunct faculty are hired by the Dean of Academics to teach a particular course, often relating to practical skills and expertise. Sterling relies heavily on adjunct faculty, but adjuncts are not typically scheduled to teach Core classes. This relationship seems to work given the size of the College and the rural location and the scheduling of courses. The Dean reported that there is a number of local experts in areas, particularly agriculture and forestry, that coincide with the Sterling Academic Program. Further, the Dean has the flexibility to schedule a course for one or two days per week during the "long block" in order to accommodate someone who might be driving from Burlington (~1.75 hours away) to teach a course.

While the faculty are executing the academic program in an very dedicated and capable manner, there are several areas of particular concern to the team. The 2011 five year interim

report noted the issues of faculty workload and salaries, and NEASC asked Sterling to report on its progress on these concerns. Based on conversations with the Dean of Academics and with full-time faculty it is clear to the team that these remain ongoing issues, with little progress in addressing them. Conversations with the President indicate that these are issues recognized by him as well.

Over the past four years, for their typical 21-credit contract, faculty have seen mean salaries increase by about $8000, from $39,818 to $48,099. Sterling reports that these salaries are consistent with peer institutions. During this same time period, however, the college ceased providing a health insurance plan to employees. According to faculty conversations, all employees were provided a $6000 salary increase when the health insurance benefit was withdrawn. The expectation was that faculty would purchase their own health insurance through the Vermont model of the federal Affordable Care Art. Many have low enough incomes to qualify for a state subsidy, providing them with better coverage at lower cost than the previous college-sponsored plan. Individual faculty situations differ, however, in terms of life stage, family status, medical needs, and some faculty members reported that the loss of health insurance nearly eliminated the benefit of a salary increase and for some effectively resulted in a decrease in total compensation.

Full-time faculty are allowed $275 annually for professional development. Faculty reported to the team that they must make a specific request to the Dean of Academics for use of those funds and the Dean must approve the request. In practice faculty report that the distribution of those funds is not necessarily consistent over time, and there was disagreement among faculty about the possibility of getting support beyond the designated amount for a specific activity. Besides the funding issue faculty seldom feel they have the time to engage in professional development. In addition, the Dean's office, Faculty Meeting, or Academic Council do not appear to organize group professional development opportunities.

The main duties required of individual faculty are listed in their annual contract. The primary activities are teaching and advising. The Dean also assigns faculty to committee work. Faculty are also expected to supervise Independent Study students and most (10 of 13 based on a Faculty Workload Survey) supervise one or more Work Program Students and many supervise Senior Projects or Senior Advanced Research Projects. Faculty are also expected to attend Community Meeting (once per week), Faculty Meeting (once per week), and have lunches each day at the Campus Dining Hall. Many faculty members also have various other roles in leading their instructional area, working in student athletics, and many other activities that may not be specifically listed in their contract. Faculty report that the culture creates expectations that they are on campus every day, all day, including weekends and evenings for many. While on campus, faculty are expected to be always available to students. They note that Sterling has a culture of saying "yes" when asked to do something. The Community Handbook states, "Please note that no list of responsibilities can foresee all institutional needs. The College relies upon individual faculty participation in a broad range of curricular and extra-curricular events and initiatives, not all of which can be anticipated or fully outlined in any contract or agreement." It is perhaps not surprising that faculty feel compelled to accept any task offered to them, though most of those interviewed also said that they are their own worst enemies in this regard, because they are so committed to the students, the college, and the mission that they don't want to say "no."

Because of their heavy involvement in non-teaching activities, the ideal of full-time faculty spending 75% of their time teaching does not align with the results of the Faculty Workload Survey from December 2015. Based on that survey of full-time faculty, the average amount of time spent on teaching was 50% of total time committed. Total time committed was not identified or estimated. While faculty workload issues do not appear to have been mitigated, both the Dean of Academics and the President acknowledged that this remains an issue that requires further attention.

Teaching and Advising
Sterling College prides itself on its low student to faculty ratio (currently reported as 7:1). This allows for small class sizes and intensive advising as it fulfills its mission as a teaching college. The minimum class size is 4. When fewer than four students enroll the course is either canceled or converted to an Independent Studies course with 1-3 students. It is clear that small classes are the norm here. Achieving the mission of "environmental stewardship" is appropriately balanced, with experiential, out-of-doors academic work and traditional "bookwork" in each of the established and self-designed majors, but a hands-on, experiential educational philosophy underpins the curriculum. A review of some syllabi shows a variety of academic, experiential, and field work coupled with assignments that are used to engage and evaluate students within courses.

Advising and faculty contact is considered a critical part of the Sterling experience and it contributes to student success. Advisors are initially assigned to students and engage with students even before the students arrive on campus. Advisors meet with students during "A Sense of Place," the first intensive term on campus, and up to weekly thereafter. Students are initially assigned to a faculty advisor, but can freely shift advisors based on faculty and student interests and personal connections. Faculty advisors can have advisees in any of the campus's majors. Faculty are intentionally appraised of curricular changes during the weekly, mandatory Faculty Meeting, helping to ensure consistent advising.

It is important to note that the faculty adviser at Sterling is not just an Academic Advisor. The Sterling culture of advising is that all faculty cultivate and maintain an intimate and holistic relationship with students, involving life coaching and personal development.

Sterling is intentional about exposing students to the breadth of the full-time faculty on campus. The introductory "A Sense of Place" incorporates as many faculty as possible, for example, so that students meet and start to get to know each faculty member. Core classes and general education requirements are taught by a variety of faculty. The major checklists show the variety of courses, taught by a variety of faculty.

Scholarship, Research and Creative Activity
Scholarship, research and creative activity and professional development are encouraged, but this is not an area of evaluation, as explained by the Dean of Academics and corroborated in the Community Handbook. Faculty are only evaluated on the specific criteria (primarily teaching, advising, supervision of the work program, committee work) listed in their appointment letters. The capacity for faculty to engage in scholarship, research and creative activity is limited due to the intense workload of teaching, advising, and other duties.

Research is typically confined to projects related to coursework or student projects like the Senior Advanced Research Project. Otherwise faculty are "given full freedom in research

and publication of results as long as such research or publication does not interfere with adequate performance of assigned duties." A review of faculty CVs demonstrates that some full-time faculty do attend conferences and continue to publish scholarly works.

Institutional Effectiveness
Evaluation of the sufficiency and effectiveness of the faculty lies primarily with the Dean of Academics and Associate Dean, but there is no formal process for an evaluation of the faculty as a whole. The Dean appears to be regularly assessing the match of faculty to the shifting focus of the Academic Program. The Dean of Academics and Associate Dean provided several examples of how they maintain a match between the faculty and the needs of the Academic Program. The Deans can choose not to reappoint a faculty (although this rarely happens) or they can ask that the faculty shift their focal area to something more in line with the current needs of the curriculum. Because faculty are appointed on a yearly basis and there is no tenure system, the Deans have this flexibility in annual personnel decisions. The use of adjuncts provides further flexibility in matching faculty to the curricular needs.

The Dean of Academics identified four pieces of evidence used to evaluate faculty effectiveness in teaching and advising: course surveys completed by students for each course, narrative self-evaluations provided by faculty each year, informal student feedback directed to the Dean, and interviews and conversations with the faculty member. Since course evaluations have moved online, response rates have been low; the Deans are considering ways to increase participation. The Dean described a voluntary system of peer course observations and evaluations so faculty could receive feedback from other faculty, but this system is essentially unutilized. The Dean is reluctant to require peer-evaluations because of the heavy workload that faculty already experience. Service, scholarship and creative activities are encouraged at Sterling, but they are not required faculty activities and are not specifically evaluated.

Sterling uses the NSSE survey to gauge overall student satisfaction with the faculty and advisors. Per conversations with the Dean, Sterling is mostly satisfied with the results of these surveys. NSSE results reveal that 86 % of students are satisfied (with a 5 or above on a 1-7 scale) with the quality of their academic advisors and 92% ranked the quality of their interactions with faculty members as 5 or above. The Associate Dean is charged with overseeing and maintaining the quality of advising, although the formal implementation of this position starts July 1, 2016.

6. *Students*

Admissions
Sterling College has grown from 109 students in fall 2013 to 116 students in fall 2016, according the Data First fall census report. Consistent with the College's mission, Sterling attracts and recruits students committed to their unique education delivery, which combines academics and hands-on work to develop environmental stewards. The College is one of seven recognized Federal Work Colleges in the nation and its motto is "Working Hands. Workings Minds."

As part of the Strategic Plan developed in 2013, Sterling has created a Student Recruitment Plan to support enrollment growth with an emphasis on recruiting a more diverse student population including but not limited to students of color, transfer, and veteran students.

Although the College's goal is to attract a more diverse student body, the Admissions team also recognizes the importance of enrolling the right student. At the beginning of the 2015 admissions cycle, the Admissions team began requiring an interview of all applicants as part of the application process. This interview has proven to be a highly effective means of identifying students who are not the right fit for Sterling College, leading to stronger retention and greater academic success of students who do enroll. Although the higher selectivity caused the overall admit rate to drop from an average of 93% in the three previous years to 82% in fall 2015, in absolute numbers the new student enrollment in fall 2015 was 4% higher than the average of the prior three years. Overall college FTE continued a slow but steady year-over-year growth, increasing by 2.3% for FY16 compared to FY15, as noted in the Data First form. This reflects steady improvement in retention as well as in new enrollment.

As part of the overall enrollment strategy, Sterling is supporting recruitment with enhanced marketing and public relations efforts that are now underway at Sterling. The College just rolled out a new website, a key recruitment tool for future enrollment growth.

Retention and Graduation
The College continues to improve on attracting and retaining students who align with the College's mission. Sterling's caring community contributes to the college's strong student retention. This is introduced in the program called A Sense of Place (ASOP), the intensive two-week orientation that kicks off new students' first semester at the College. ASOP introduces students to college life, the Sterling community, and its culture. It also provides opportunities for assessment and proactive development of learning plans for each participating student. Staff and faculty as well as student leaders participate in this engaging student experience.

To continue to foster student success, the College recently formed an Enrollment Council, a cross-functional team representing key departments on campus. The group is comprised of staff from the following areas: Admissions, Business Office, Financial Aid, Academics, Registrar, Community/Student Engagement, and Work Program. They meet weekly to address students concerns from the point of acceptance through graduation. In the near future, this group plans to begin to assess the recruitment and retention plans that are underway at the College and continue to make improvement to these efforts.

Student Services
Sterling College has a strong commitment to student development and success. Student Services are guided by compassionate, caring, and competent staff members, with the focus on student success through individual growth and accountability.

Students are advised by faculty who are experts in their fields, and who want to see the students succeed. The faculty as well as staff have an unwavering commitment to Sterling students, and have created an environment that encourages learning in and outside the classroom. The advising that students receive at Sterling directly supports the mission and culture of the College.

The college has created a strong sense of belonging and engagement among the student body. Sterling students have many opportunities to develop leadership skills, in part by participating in organizational governance at the college. Students are invited to become active members in the college's standing committees. One of the unique student leadership opportunities is to run the weekly Community meeting. The Community meeting is for students, staff and faculty to come together to share concerns, upcoming events, and celebrate successes.

Students are also empowered to lead the Student Activities committee. This student-run committee offers a wide range of events for students. The events are proposed and led by students, for students.

In spring 2013, the college participated in the Noel Levitz Student Satisfaction survey, with 95% of students completing the survey. Using a Likert scale of which 7 represents "very satisfied" Sterling's overall rating was 5.81%, compared to the national average of 5.31% for 4-year private institutions. But the college rated even higher in the following categories:

- Concern for the individual: 6.05%
- Student Centeredness: 6.08%
- Campus Climate: 5.89%
- Campus Support Services: 5.86%

Institutional Effectiveness
Students have been actively involved in the strategic planning process along with the rest of the college community. National student and alumni surveys have reported above-average student satisfaction with their education at Sterling. The college plans to begin to assess its recruitment and retention efforts as well as the ongoing effectiveness of student services.

7. *Library and Other Information Resources*

Resources and Access
The college provides sufficient and appropriate library and information resources to its community, including a concerted effort over recent years to include state of the art technology in all aspects of operations. The library space is well-suited to the needs and culture of the college.

It is clear that the Library is viewed as an important component of the student's education at Sterling. There has been a rapid increase in database usage since the establishment of a much improved technology infrastructure on campus. This is clearly a library that recognizes that it must be nimble in all of its resource development decisions given the individualized nature of education at the college.

The Library's annual reports include data on borrowing and utilization of information resources as well as annual objectives. The Library director has been at the college since its existence as a two-year institution; she interacts with faculty and students regularly, and orients all new students to the library. She often makes presentations in classes, and has expressed interest in attending more classes throughout the curriculum.

The college's archival materials are crammed into boxes in a small space. A small grant has recently provided capacity for modest assessment and organization of these materials. If the college is to create sufficient archives, it will need to invest in more adequate space for such materials, as well as exploring the digitalization of materials.

Information and Technological Literacy
The introduction of technology into the curriculum is a work in progress at Sterling. With the College's focus on human beings' relationship with the natural world, the mix of student and faculty attitudes about technology is different from what one would see at a different institution, although this is rapidly changing. In the past, some students rejected technology; increasingly, students now come to the College expecting a high level of technology and access. Given a long history of scant availability of information technology resources, many faculty and staff have grown accustomed to functioning without it. The consequence is unevenness in usage as well as interest in technology training. This creates frustration for more tech-savvy students as well as for staff and faculty whose work could benefit from using IT applications more thoroughly. The college could stress this more as a priority for all faculty and staff.

There are three classrooms with Smart technology, which is already aging. To establish instructional technology as a learning environment priority, five or six additional classrooms need to be outfitted.

Under the leadership of the IT director, Sterling has worked steadily toward incorporating information technology and the academic importance of information literacy into community life in ways that support the mission and philosophy of education that make Sterling distinctive. The college received a Davis Grant in support of information literacy at a time that, as reported by the President and others, turned out to be premature given the weakness of the technological infrastructure that existed at the time. Now that better infrastructure is in place, various faculty and staff are working toward better incorporation of information literacy into academic life. The Library will continue to be an important player in this process. To create the infrastructure for cutting edge technology across campus, enabling the future possibility of, for instance, distance education, the college would need to invest in additional speed and bandwidth enhancements.

Institutional Effectiveness
The College is clearly committed to its library and information technology as well as expansion of awareness of and utilization of resourses across campus.

8. *Physical and Technological Resources*

Sterling College is located in the rural Northeast Kingdom of Vermont on 300 acres of land, 26 of which comprise the area of the campus buildings. The 18 buildings with a total of about 57k sq ft were mostly constructed in the 1800's and provide adequate space for academic uses now and for the growth anticipated in the college's master plan. Recent additions include three new residence halls, the Rian Fried Center for Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems, a fiber arts building and a multi-disciplinary classroom

space. Substantial renovations include two larger and two smaller spaces used as dorms and the Kane Hall building that includes Admissions.

The college has invested over $2M in technology infrastructure and facilities over the last three years. This has cleared the major structural issues on campus. Most buildings are old and many could use work to improve energy efficiency, usability, fixtures and finishes, and to address settling, but all are in serviceable condition. Some of the older buildings still have dirt-floored basements, as well as water issues that have resulted in one building being slated for demolition and another to be moved but to have the lower portion of the first floor cut away to remove rotting sills caused by water damage. The college remains dependent on fundraising for all major renovations and though recent fundraising success has been impressive there is still much work to be done.

A major facilities study was executed in 2013, providing a good summary of campus conditions at that time and creating a Campus Master Plan for future work. Since then, much work has been done on the highest priority items as well as on some opportunistic donor priorities. The next project targets have been identified and are included in the strategic plan. Annual projects are planned as part of budgeting but executed as time and outside funding allows.

There is a strong team who lead the facilities efforts on campus, while many of the custodial tasks and some of the maintenance is performed by students as part of the Work Program.

There is a college-wide risk management committee responsible for evaluating and addressing risks on campus. Most of the buildings are not handicap-accessible but are brought up to code as renovations are made. New buildings are constructed to code.

Three classrooms are currently equipped with SmartBoard technology. Training is planned to expand interest in using the SmartBoard technology, as few faculty are conversant with it at present. This may also drive additional demand for SmartBoard-enabled classrooms. Students generally bring laptops/computers to campus; the computer labs are up to date and are used for in-class activities as well as by individual students. With the advent of the new higher speed fiber network and the many refreshed and new spaces, the atmosphere is conducive to study and research.

The college has implemented a Blackbaud student information system that is used by the Business Office and the Registrar's Office. In the Registrar's Office only one year of data is currently available, but conversion of the rest of the Registrar's data is in progress. The Advancement Office has also implemented new Blackbaud software.

Personal identifiable information is appropriately safeguarded per relevant state and federal laws and regulations and the college is aware of and cares about data security.

Based on reports reviewed the institution has an appropriate level of technology to ensure its ability to plan, administer and evaluate its programs.

Institutional Effectiveness
The College is small and the professional staff is deeply familiar with the condition of the facilities and technology. Combined with the foundation of the Master Plan and feedback

from the campus community there is a realistic idea of what work is needed, a commitment to see that urgent situations are attended to, and strong efforts to continue the recent forward progress by seeking additional funding for the major projects.

9. *Financial Resources*

Sterling's 2013-2018 Strategic Plan makes an explicit assumption that "to remain small and to thrive will require that Sterling both increase its financial resources and carefully align its aspirations with a prudent plan for growth that will strengthen the College's long-term stability," and recognizes that sustaining its small size will require "diverse sources of income."

Recognizing that long-term financial stability is one of its most critical needs, the plan calls for "an economy of scale for the College that is sustainable at 120 students," with a 40-45% discount rate. Addressing fundraising, it further notes the need to double annual giving over the five years of the plan, and to raise capital funds for facilities to obviate the need to use operating funds for capital renewal. It calls for increasing endowment support for operations through careful investment, continued conservative endowment draws, and the addition of $1.5M of new gifts to endowment.

The first years of operation under the new plan have seen slow but steady progress in each of these areas. Enrollment has improved from 104.5 FTE in 2013 to 113.2 FTE in 2016. The mostly intentional increase in the discount rate from 35-40% to near 50%, though somewhat higher than the plan anticipated in 2015 and 2016, limits net tuition growth. But net student revenue has nonetheless grown from $2.1M in FY13, to $2.3M in FY14, to $2.4M in FY15, and is anticipated to rise again for FY16. And preliminary enrollment data for FY17 supports a continuation of these trends.

 Unrestricted annual giving has improved from $635k in FY13 to $1M in 2014, surged to $1.8M in FY15, and is now projected at $1M in 2016. Non-operating gifts have also begun to grow. Between 2012 and 2015 capital fundraising, supported by a $250K challenge grant, enabled the college to invest $500K to transform its agricultural facilities into the Rian Fried Center for Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems, underpinning the launch of the continuing education programming that will enhance educational opportunities for undergraduates while providing a new revenue stream and increasing awareness of Sterling within the food industry. At the end of FY15 gifts totaling $100K enabled the renovation of one of the college's oldest buildings into a welcoming and efficient Office of Admission and Financial Aid.

This steady growth, anticipated by the strategic plan, is now joined by the introduction of a critical third leg of the revenue stool, a "diverse source of income" as mandated by the strategic plan, non-student earned income. This new revenue stream results from the introduction of the summer short courses of the School of the New American Farmstead, responding to both professional and avocational interest in artisan foods. This summer's proposed courses include such offerings as Food Writing, Small-Batch Brewing, and Fundamentals of Artisan Cheese. And plans are underway to offer such courses at additional sites nationally, including Sonoma County, California.

The overall improvement in resources has been measured but consistent, and has already begun to make a difference. It has allowed modest salary improvements and even some critical staff additions. It has allowed the college in the last two years to increase the full-time faculty by 30% (three positions). It enabled the trustees, at the end of FY14, to authorize a construction loan of $500K for infrastructure improvements, half of it to address the most critical deferred maintenance and half to install a comprehensive underground fiber optic system and make the initial capital investment in the Blackbaud software system.

In FY 2016 Sterling had a fall FTE enrollment of 113.2, which is 8-10 FFTE lower than the expectation although it is still an improvement of 2.5% over the previous year. Sterling was able to make the necessary $200k of budget adjustments through a combination of expense budget reductions and increased fundraising expectations, demonstrating its ability to respond to financial emergencies and its commitment to maintaining a balanced budget. The additional financial burden did result in the college borrowing from the temporarily restricted endowment in the amount of $203k in November of 2015, which was returned to the endowment at the end of February 2016.

Total debt for the college is $2M and includes leases for computers and vehicles and $900K that was borrowed on the value of a gift of property, which is expected to be sold and the debt retired. The advanced borrowing on the property sale was used to good effect on the campus infrastructure projects described above. The donor of the property has guaranteed to make up in cash any amount by which the proceeds of the sale fall short of the anticipated $900K.   The balance of the debt is a line of credit that is paid off each year during times of peak cash receipts.

Review of board documents and discussions with the Treasurer clearly show the Board of Trustees' ongoing engagement with financial and strategic planning and their review of the outcomes. This includes planning for and reviewing financial aid expenditures, as well as meeting with the outside auditors.

Planning and forecasting are realistic and prudent, with evidence of mid-year increases to revenue estimates as well as, at times, decreases in estimates.

Community engagement with the budget process and priority setting is an orderly and well-managed process that ties expenditures closely to the academic program and the strategic plan and provides integration of all areas of the college including physical resources.

The institution has a solid professional leading its financial team although they there is no one currently titled chief financial officer. There is a search open for a new head of finance, due to the departure of the incumbent for a new job, who will hold that title.

Fundraising efforts are shared between the President and the Director of Advancement and Alumni Relations, and are closely tied to mission. Fundraising materials reflect Sterling's roots and mission and accurately portray the value of a gift to Sterling.

The institution is regularly audited.   Results show no material weaknesses and further show that information is presented fairly in compliance with generally accepted accounting principles. Fiscal policies are in writing and detail the handling of all relevant aspects of accounting

Institutional Effectiveness
Financial planning, as well as financial outcomes, track closely with the established strategic plan. Fluctuations in revenue or expense during the fiscal year are monitored closely, and quick action is taken to rebalance the budget. To paraphrase the Strategic Plan, the college and its community seek to expand the resources that support the daily work of educating the next generation of environmental stewards, but they have consistently demonstrated that they are "able to make do with the resources at hand and to be effective in the use of funds."

10. Public Disclosure

Sterling College devotes considerable resources to managing the multiple types of communication required of current practices in higher education. Through an array of print and electronic media devoted to communications both inward and outward facing, the college strives for clarity, transparency, and thoroughness. The college publishes the traditional publications including an Admissions view book, program targeted search pieces and a semi-annual college magazine, *Common Voice*.

In spring 2016, Sterling College launched a newly designed website. The website is visually appealing and easy to navigate, and conveys a compelling, and accurate, sense of the reality of Sterling. It incorporates the information requirements specified in Standard Ten, many of them incorporated in the Community Guidebook. It includes an electronic course catalog, which will be archived annually, intranet portals for the college community, advising forms for faculty, and a robust portal for parents.

Institutional Effectiveness
The college's newly designed website provides increased public disclosure through its various social media sites, such as the new blog that explores the community in-depth, and through student narratives and faculty essays. The new site's search capacity was rigorously tested for seamless access to the academic catalog as well as for the 32 categories of disclosure identified in Standard Ten.

Sterling's print and electronic publications are reviewed and revised on an ongoing basis. The college ensures that the publications are complete, accurate, available, and current. The results of the review are used for improvement.

11. Integrity

One of the most dramatic expressions of Sterling's institutional integrity is its practice of community governance. Through fairly formal organizational structures, all members of the Sterling community can see clearly how decisions are made, and most participate actively in the process, through three Councils and a variety of teams, standing committees, and working groups. Meaningful responsibilities are linked with the appropriate problem-solving and decision-making authority. Deliberations are open, and new or dissenting opinions are welcomed.

The openness of the governance processes contributes to equally free and open communication throughout the community. Even Board of Trustees meetings are open except when the Board goes into executive session.

The college's print and electronic publications strive to provide an accurate and "real" sense of life at Sterling. The Admission Department's urging of applicants to visit before making a decision, and its requiring an interview, at least by phone, before acceptance, reflect the college's commitment to making as sure as possible that the unique Sterling environment and education will be a good fit for prospective students.

Sterling is committed to using the standards and expectations of the various outside entities to which it reports, such as NEASC, governmental agencies, and its audit firm, as a challenge to go beyond baseline compliance, to measure their own progress and discover gaps, and to practice the highest professional standards.

Institutional Effectiveness
Rather than codifying integrity in one central policy, Sterling has chosen to embed it within all the policies and practices that define daily life at the college. It is consequently less frequently reviewed and addressed on its own but is constantly under review as the practices and policies in which it is embedded are assessed.

Institutional Effectiveness Summary

Because of its processes of community governance, with their emphasis on accountability, and its commitment to collaborative planning and to measuring progress against those plans, there are many ways in which Sterling College is assessing it effectiveness on an ongoing basis and making adjustments based on those assessments.

Results of the Noel Levitz and the NSSE student satisfaction surveys, for example, were discussed in various venues, and changes in campus life were instituted in response. Last year's poor retention among first-year students in Outdoor Education triggered a faculty study of that program's curriculum, which led to support for an expedition-style global field study program and informed the search criteria for a new faculty member in Outdoor Education. Recognition that students who struggle in ASOP (A Sense of Place), the two-week program for new students, were at a higher risk for attrition led to a policy change to put such students on academic review immediately rather than waiting until the end of the semester, so that they could begin receiving additional support services immediately.

But systematic and integrated assessment of student learning outcomes, as well as of broader institutional practices, is not in evidence. Sterling's small size has allowed them to be fairly effective with informal instances of assessment. But only a more systematic approach will provide the assurance that they are not missing something critical. And such an approach will require good data collection and analysis, which has not been readily available. Promising new efforts in institutional research as well as the implementation of an integrated information system can begin to underpin more rigorous assessment.

Affirmation of Compliance Summary

Team members reviewed Sterling College's Affirmation of Compliance form, signed by President Derr, and documented the college's compliance with federal regulations relating to Title IV. As noted in the form, both the credit hour policies and policies on student rights, responsibilities, and grievances are incorporated in the Community Guidebook, readily available on line. Notification of the evaluation visit, with an invitation for public comment, was provided both on the college website and in the Front Porch Forum, a daily electronic bulletin board serving the Vermont communities surrounding Sterling. The bulletin board is deemed a better way to reach the community than the area newspaper.

Sterling College's definition of the credit hour demonstrates engaged time expectations for different types of courses (e.g., standard courses, independent studies) that are in line with both Commission policy and the applicable federal regulations. Sterling ensures that its engaged time standards are met regardless of whether courses are offered in the Intensive or Long Block format. Credit transfer policies, as well as a list of colleges with which Sterling has articulation agreements, are readily available on the Admissions page of the college website. In general, Sterling transfers any college-level credit earned at an accreditation institution with a C or better, with the caveat that all students must earn at least 30 credits at Sterling to be awarded a degree.

A more detailed discussion of the college's credit hour policy and its implementation, as well as transfer credit, is included in the **Integrity in the Award of Academic Credit** section in Standard 4: The Academic Program, above.

Strengths

A culture of mutual respect and caring, embodying a strong sense of responsibility to the community, provides students, faculty, and administrators with a sense of identity.

Every aspect of the school is deeply and obviously tied to the singular, highly specific mission.

Planning processes, and progress reporting, are school-wide and collaborative.

Both personal and intellectual development are formal parts of the educational experience—Working Hands/Working Minds--and this is clearly reflected in how students reflect on their education.

Sterling has made considerable progress toward a true community governance model, characterized by mutual trust, without the usual tensions between faculty and administration, and practiced with both care and competence.

The bright new website dramatically and faithfully portrays what Sterling is.

A dedicated, altruistic, and committed faculty provide the Sterling education.

Fundraising success and infrastructure improvements show positive trends.

An innovative president is empowering a strong staff, fostering development of the community, and driving inclusive planning, while distributing authority to match the loci of responsibility for its execution.

Concerns

There is vulnerability in new growth, simply because of its newness, in all three key revenue streams: net tuition, philanthropy, and continuing education.

- Incipient progress in salaries, facilities, and other expenditure areas creates risk of frustration and loss of confidence if progress can't be continued.

- Exciting new initiatives like community governance, The School of the New American Farmstead, and growing institutional research capacity are still works in progress, so still fragile, and add new stresses on faculty and staff time.

- Total compensation and workloads remain concerns.

There is no formal assessment process, in curriculum or in other institutional functions, that would support data-driven decision-making.

Similarly, while there is new distributed ownership of and enthusiasm for institutional research, more effort will need to be focused in this area to provide the basis for good trend analysis and decision support.

The utilization of technology for greater operational efficiency and more robust, innovative pedagogy has yet to achieve full buy-in. Integrating technology into a largely experiential pedagogy will require creativity but could be an interesting challenge.

Faculty and administration do not reflect either the incipient diversity in the student body or the college's aspirations for diversity.