

# STERLING COLLEGE:

## THE CASE FOR AN ECO UNIVERSITY



The human relationship with the natural world is in tatters, and higher education is partially to blame. Colleges and universities, like strip mines that cleave off the tops of mountains and factories that produce herbicides, are co-conspirators in the emergency now unfolding. It is critical, and overdue, that the academy, and its leaders, take action to avert imminent calamity.

Higher education is addicted to and promotes extractive economic growth and consumption. If we continue to be the source of training and inspiration for an economy that robs graduates of the livelihoods we promise, while failing to give them the education they need to contend with the ecological crises ahead, we will betray this and future generations. The seizure of the planet's natural wealth for financial gain by a powerful global elite must become a moral concern.

Colleges and universities were first established to serve the common good of society, not individualistic aspirations for wealth and advancement. Higher education does and can do much more good in this world. Therefore, the best prospect we may have for surviving the future is the transformation of these institutions into a force that advances ecological thinking and action. If civil society and our economic systems - capitalism or socialism - are to be rescued from themselves, it will be because these academic institutions return to fulfilling their original purpose.

The scientific evidence documenting that we have entered a perilous period is mounting. The May 2019 report from the United Nations on the rapid collapse of biodiversity and the state of our planetary ecosystems is chilling. The report also clearly states that it may not be too late to mitigate some of the most threatening effects of the changes to the climate and our global food systems. Students around the world know they will face the consequences of our inaction, and they are losing patience. Failure to act on their behalf would be a failure of moral courage and would condemn colleges and universities to irrelevance.

Vermont's Sterling College believes that the world needs a collaborative "eco-university" of partners to prepare a generation with the knowledge, skills, and responsibility necessary at this time of global disruption. We have focused on learning about and engaging with the natural world for more than fifty years, and now we have become the first institution in the world to focus its mission and vision explicitly on addressing the effects of climate change and the ecological problems caused by extractive economic growth and consumption.

Sincere regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "M. Derr". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Matthew A. Derr, MSW, Community Organizing  
President of Sterling College, Vermont, U.S.A.

# THE CASE FOR AN ECO UNIVERSITY

## Overview

The threats of climate change and biodiversity loss are too great for us to ignore, and the contribution Sterling could make to address them is too promising to withhold.



It is time to redesign higher education to address social and ecological disruption. We believe that the world needs an “eco university” of partnerships to prepare a generation with the knowledge, skills, and responsibility to be leaders in their communities.

Sterling is the first college to adopt a vision to address the problems caused by extractive economic growth and consumption. This small college has the passion and expertise to bring its successful curricular model to make a difference to communities around the world. It is also true, as 15 year old activist, Greta Thunberg, reminds us: “You are never too small to make a difference.”

Neither the narrow technician nor the uninformed idealist alone will be ready to address the issues facing humanity. Through place-based and experiential study and work, Sterling equips people with a bridge between thought and deed so that they can live meaningful and rewarding lives connected to community and inspired by the natural world.

Sterling seeks a philanthropic investment of \$55 million from individuals and foundations that understand these challenges and the need for a “eco university” of place-based partnerships to address them.

## Mission & Vision

Sterling advances ecological thinking and action through affordable experiential learning that prepares people to be knowledgeable, skilled, and responsible leaders in the communities in which they live.

Sterling uses education as a force to address ecological and social problems, including:

- Fossil fuel dependence and rapid climate change.
- Destruction of biodiversity and loss of wild places.
- Promotion of harmful agricultural practices that threaten human and natural communities.
- Persistence of structural oppression that impacts human and ecological wellbeing.
- Deterioration of civil society through estrangement from community, nature and place.

## Educational Philosophy

In place-based experiential learning through study and work, Sterling prepares people in all of its programs to:

- Achieve a sophisticated understanding of and personal engagement with ecological systems.
- Understand societies and cultures as dynamic and complex systems of relationships and interdependencies.
- Use research and creative endeavor to explore concepts, experiences, and artifacts.
- Articulate ideas and share information clearly, using a diversity of approaches.
- Demonstrate effective, knowledgeable, skilled, and responsible leadership in community.

## Action Steps

Sterling College is developing a sophisticated assessment model to support meeting its strategic commitments. The initiative that underpins our vision to create an “eco university” of partnerships and advance our ecological thinking and action mission by 2030, includes:

- Developing affordable place-based learning pathways that serve a diverse and underserved global population at all stages of learning for meaningful and rewarding lives that support and perpetuate resilient communities.
- Establishing collaborative partnerships with organizations around the world to offer and host our place-based learning pathways, creating a network of learning communities that constitute a global eco university.
- Furthering our commitment to dignity and equality by offering learning pathways that foster the development of communities that are anti-racist and anti-oppressive.
- Creating an economic model for Sterling that promotes ecological, social, and financial resiliency.

## Early Support

Sterling is addressing the proliferation of harmful agricultural practices that threaten human and natural communities. With support from a \$3.5 million challenge grant from The NoVo Foundation, Sterling established the Wendell Berry Farming Program in Henry County, Kentucky, with our partners at the Berry Center. Our collaboration transforms agriculture from one of the most destructive of human activities, to a regenerative endeavor that builds soil and community.

Sterling is ready to address the “unsettling” of the earth by sustaining our commitment to residential education and continuing to scale out and serve an exponentially larger and increasingly diverse student population through courses of study on our campus in Vermont and also through place-based projects like the Wendell Berry Farming Program. Sterling is seeking this philanthropic support to expand access to new learning opportunities by means of onsite and online resources, via established partnerships here in the United States and around the world.

## The Campaign for an Eco University

Over the next five years, Sterling will raise \$55 million to create a new model for higher education, one that encourages resilience in the face of the effects of climate change.

Innovation Capacity Fund	\$2 million
Online Learning & Infrastructure	\$3 million
Wendell Berry Farming Programs	\$6 million
Wilderness Field Study Programs	\$6 million
Global Partnerships Fund	\$13 million
Affordability Endowment Fund	<u>\$25 million</u>
	\$55 million

Sterling sees the NoVo Foundation grant that launched the Wendell Berry Farming Program as early evidence of support for a new model that places higher education on the front line in the communities it serves. The crises are real and urgent, and Sterling is prepared to take action.

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