

THE WENDELL BERRY FARMING PROGRAM



Wendell Berry's seminal work, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*, sounded an alarm that rings as loudly today as it did when it was published more than forty years ago. The loss of small family farms and the farming practices they employ has destroyed both our soil and our communities while serving as a major contributor to the economic, ecological, climate and social crises pervasive in rural America today. Institutions of higher learning have only compounded the problem by promoting the extractive practices and techniques of industrial agriculture over the place-based communities, restorative land management practices

and healthy local food systems that sustainable farming make possible. The Wendell Berry Farming Program of Sterling College was created to respond to these crises and to offer hope for the future of farming and rural communities.

With support from a \$3.5 million grant and challenge from The NoVo Foundation, Sterling College partnered with The Berry Center to launch the Wendell Berry Farming Program in New Castle, Kentucky in the fall of 2019. Based on the lifework and writing of Wendell Berry and Sterling College's highly regarded curriculum in ecological thinking and action, the program represents the most comprehensive change in agricultural education since the advent of the land grant universities and one that addresses the failure of higher education to use nature as its measure in preparing the next generation of farmers.

THE CHALLENGE

We must have more farmers who understand how to build soil and communities. We must debunk the narrative that happiness and upward mobility depend on migration away from rural communities and replace it with a new concept of education that includes farming at its center. The complexity of our present trouble is clear. We have lost much of the local culture that passes knowledge and land from one generation to another. Today, only sixteen percent of Americans live in rural places, leaving the future of thousands of communities in continued peril. With fewer than one percent of the population farming and the average age of an American farmer nearing sixty, it is critical that we reverse these trends by educating a generation of students to farm, to dig in, make a home and build strong rural communities.

"The complexity of our present trouble suggests as never before that we need to change our present concept of education. Its proper use is to enable citizens to live lives that are economically, politically, socially, and culturally responsible."

- Wendell Berry, *"Thoughts in the Presence of Fear"*

FRESH APPROACH

Farming is hard work. The Wendell Berry Farming Program attracts students who aspire to a lifetime of farming in Kentucky and elsewhere while embracing the concepts of ecological thinking and action and the hard work necessary to turn their aspirations into reality. Sterling is one of only nine federally funded Work Colleges in the United States with a focus on experiential, place-based education made possible by the seamless integration of work and learning. Through work in the classroom and in the field, and by using nature as their measure, Wendell Berry Farming Program students will learn to build good soil, strong communities and healthy food systems.



The partnership between The Berry Center and Sterling College links two organizations that have long shared a vision of a different kind of agricultural

education. Drawing from the work of Wendell Berry, Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson and others, Sterling College has worked for decades to deliver a different type of education; one that is rooted in place and in the importance of strong community and hard work. The Wendell Berry Farm Program adapts this proven approach to the land and community of Henry County, Kentucky - Wendell and Tanya Berry's home community and the home of The Berry Center.

“At the core of Sterling is the concern for the relationship between man and his environment. No more critical issue faces society today, and it has become very clear that neither the narrow technician nor the uninformed idealist can reach a solution alone. Sterling provides a comprehensive bridge between thought and deed as its students confront the questions that affect the future of us all.”

- Sterling College publication, 1978



Sterling is committed to Wendell Berry's idea that a college should make “succinct and tangible connections between education and communities and the land.” Drawing on the resources of both organizations, the Wendell Berry Farming Program of Sterling College is introducing undergraduate students to renowned agrarian thinkers and leaders, including Kentucky farmers, businesses and organizations. The curriculum serves students from generational farming families and those from families that have not farmed for generations. The common characteristic shared by our students is a strong desire for an education that prepares them to come “home” to farm and build strong rural communities.

“Education in the true sense, of course, is an enablement to serve - both the living community in its natural household or neighborhood and the precious cultural possessions that the living community inherits or should inherit. To educate is, literally, to ‘bring up,’ to bring young people to a responsible maturity, to help them to be good caretakers of what they have been given, to help them to be charitable toward fellow creatures . . . And if this education is to be well used, it is obvious that it must be used somewhere; it must be used where one lives, where one intends to continue to live; it must be brought home.”

- Wendell Berry, “Higher Education and Home Defense”

The Wendell Berry Farming Program is a residential program designed for students in their third and fourth - junior and senior - years of college. The agriculturally-focused liberal arts curriculum is offered by Kentucky-based Sterling College faculty, and graduates receive a bachelor of arts degree from Sterling College. Admission is highly competitive and focused on recruiting students with strong academic records and a demonstrated interest in farming and sustainable farming practices. With an initial enrollment of 12 students in the fall of 2019, the program will double to 24 students in the fall of 2020.

THE PARTNERSHIP

The Berry Center was launched in 2011 to foster a conversation and to preserve the legacy of Wendell Berry's work and writing. The Center advocates for farmers, land-conserving communities and healthy local economies. It seeks to provide solutions to essential issues that are rarely in public discourse and certainly are not reflected in agricultural policies. The Center sought an educational partner to help address what it will take for farmers to be able to afford to farm well and to determine how a culture can support good farming and land use. After an exhaustive review of hundreds of programs and potential educational partners, The Berry Center chose to collaborate with Sterling.

Sterling College is an accredited college with a long-standing place-based experiential model of education. It was one of the very first colleges in the United States to focus on sustainable agriculture and has had a campus farm since 1965.

Using nature as its standard, Sterling sees the urgent need to increase access to its unique educational mission. Recognizing that our graduates aspire to live in rural places and to be land stewards who strengthen their communities, the opportunity to partner with The Berry Center represents a chance for a small college to leverage its resources and mission to scale out, without having to scale up.

AFFORDABILITY

High levels of student loan debt and the prohibitive cost of acquiring land to farm are major impediments for would-be farmers. To meet the present challenges we face in agriculture, we need to remove these barriers and begin to promote farming as a vital social need. To this end, the Wendell Berry Farming Program offers students a “tuition free” education, the cost of which is supported by philanthropy, financial aid and tuition credit earned by students for their participation in the Sterling College Work Program.

With the support of the faculty and The Berry Center, students of the Wendell Berry Farming Program complete a “whole farm plan” as part of their academic requirements that will identify a community and land on which the student will farm after graduation. The program’s endowment, as yet unraised, will be used to help graduates secure low-interest loans to meet the capital barriers that so often keep this generation of aspiring farmers from being successful in building rural communities and a livelihood for their families.

“This ideal is simple that farmers should be educated, liberally and practically, as farmers; education should be given and acquired with the understanding that those so educated would return to their home communities, not merely to be farmers, corrected and improved by their learning, but also to assume the trusts and obligations of community leadership.”

- Wendell Berry, *“The Unsettling of America”*

STRONGER RURAL COMMUNITIES

A healthy American democracy and nation depends on strong rural communities with vibrant local economies. The Berry Center and Sterling recognize the urgent need for a new generation of farmers in this country. With so few Americans farming and many of today’s farmers cresting retirement, we need to create models that do not leave the outcome to chance but facilitate the transition from graduation to getting on and staying on land. We need to close the loop for a generation that aspires to rebuild healthy rural communities and land. At Sterling College in Vermont, we’ve demonstrated that this model works.



In Vermont, we’ve learned that a college with a curriculum focused on the working rural landscape will contribute to the wellbeing of that community. Unlike so many colleges, our campus is the human and extended natural community of which we are a part. We also know one another and meet as a community of faculty and students to establish the patterns and standards of living together. Our students volunteer at the fire department, fiddle, attend church, walk the woods, paddle, hunt and fish, work extra hours at the General Stores and for local farmers. Sterling teaches place, not the theory, but the practice of place-based rural living. The white clapboard houses, pastures and woods that make up our “campus” blend into those of our neighbors. So too will be the case for the students of the Wendell Berry Farming Program in New Castle, Kentucky.

Sterling graduates live in rural communities across the nation, with most living nearby in Vermont and New England. Eighty-percent of Sterling graduates report to us that they are working in a field related to their studies and ninety-percent report that they are meeting their vocational goals. They strengthen the fabric and economies in communities in which they

live by finding gainful employment focused on improving the relationship of the places they live by taking into consideration the land and the people. Sterling alumni start businesses, farm, conserve land, teach, volunteer, organize around issues, conduct research, write policy and bring vitality and health to the communities in which they live, work and raise families.

With a graduating class of 24 well-educated community-minded farmers each year in New Castle, Kentucky, the Wendell Berry Farming Program will have a similar and lasting impact while contributing to the vitality of the region and generating local agricultural resilience. It is our view that, building on what we've learned in Vermont, that the same principles and vision can be extended to other communities with a similar effect.



REQUEST FOR CONSIDERATION

The Berry Center and Sterling are undertaking a collaborative effort to raise the funds necessary to grow and sustain the Wendell Berry Farming Program. We need these resources to revive farm economies, good land use and vitality for rural America. We believe that a new agrarian educational model, one that is both practical and visionary, is essential at this time.

Second Cohort Funding **\$3.5 million**

The Berry Center and Sterling College, as partnering organizations, are seeking to match the \$3.5 million grant made by the NoVo Foundation in 2018. The NoVo grant supports a cohort of 12 students - *tuition free* - for the first five years of the program. It is critical to the success of the program that we be prepared to enroll a second cohort of 12 students in September 2020 to bring the program to full enrollment of 24 students through 2024.

Affordability Endowment Fund **\$15 million**

The urgency of the challenges facing rural America and the crisis in farming requires that we prepare students to farm and to establish them in rural communities and on land. To do so, we first have to break the crippling effect of student loan debt on aspiring farmers. This endowment fund will support tuition for 24 students enrolled in the program, in perpetuity, after 2024.

Tuition Free: The endowment, held by Sterling College, will be restricted to sustain a tuition-free and student debt-free program of study for 24 students in perpetuity. Students would remain responsible for room and board through Work Program wages and family support. The endowment goal represents approximately \$625,000 per student. Based on the College's investment policies, the annual endowment income draw would provide approximately \$31,250 per student.

Access to Capital: Our endowment assets will also be used to assist graduates who have successfully completed a "whole farm" plan in securing low interest loans from partner financial institutions that will enable them to begin farming and building strong rural communities.

Funders of the Wendell Berry Farming Program

Additional generous start up funding, in addition to that provided by the NoVo Foundation, has been provided by individuals, The Endeavor Foundation, Lydia B. Stokes Foundation, and The Norton Foundation.

LEADERSHIP

Local knowledge and educational vision have come together in the Wendell Berry Farming Program to establish a new radical partnership and model of farmer education, not only for Vermont and Kentucky, but for rural communities everywhere.

Matthew Derr, President, Sterling College



A community organizer and educator, Matthew has led Sterling College through a period of growth in enrollment, philanthropic support and focus on its mission. He was recognized by the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education as chief executive officer of the year in 2010. He is an advocate for place-based models of education and led the efforts to establish both the School of the New American Farmstead and the Wendell Berry Farming Program. President Derr is a trustee of The Berry Center, serves as the Chair of the Work Colleges Consortium and is treasurer of the Center for an Agricultural Economy.

Mary Berry, Executive Director, The Berry Center



Mary Berry was raised by her parents, Wendell and Tanya Berry, at Lanes Landing Farm in Henry County, Kentucky, from the time she was six years old. She farmed for a living in Henry County, starting out in dairy farming, growing Burley tobacco and later diversifying to organic vegetables, pastured poultry and grass-fed beef. A trustee of Sterling College and the Schumacher Center for a New Economics, she speaks all over the country as a proponent of agriculture of the middle, in defense of small farmers and in the hope of restoring a culture and an economy that has been lost in rural America.

STERLING COLLEGE

Founded in 1958, Sterling College 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. It was the first college in the world to acknowledge - through all of its programs of study - that the principle issue facing humanity and the natural world is consumption and extractive growth and divest its endowment from fossil fuels. Enrolling 125 undergraduate and 200 continuing education students, Sterling is accredited by the New England Commission on Higher Education and recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as one of only nine Work Colleges in the United States.

THE BERRY CENTER

The Berry Center is putting Wendell Berry's writings to work by advocating for farmers, land-conserving communities and healthy regional economies. Their work seeks solutions to essential issues that are rarely in public discourse and certainly are not reflected in agricultural policies. "What will it take for farmers to be able to afford to farm well?" and "How do we become a culture that supports good farming and land use?" They believe that the answers—while firmly rooted in local work—are central to solving some of the world's most pressing problems including the devastation of natural resources and biodiversity; rapid onset of climate change; economic and social inequities; and the collapse of farming and rural communities.

Sterling College

WORKING HANDS. WORKING MINDS.

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