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LILIPOH

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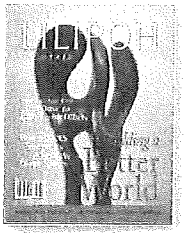
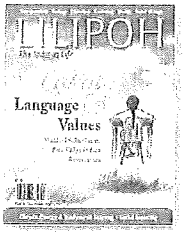

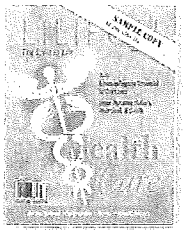
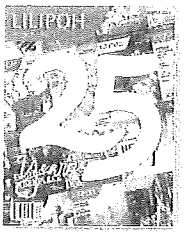

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Thoreau College and
the microcollege movement

An Educational Model *for* the Future?

JACOB HUNDT

When the history of American higher education in the twenty-first century comes to be written, 2024 will stand out as a watershed year when many dire predictions finally came true.

Less than halfway through the year, at least a dozen colleges with long histories announced that they are closing or are teetering on the brink. These include some of the most innovative small colleges in the country, as well as more mainstream private and public institutions of all kinds. The reasons for this mass extinction event are numerous and well-publicized, including a sharp demographic decline in the college-aged population, a botched roll-out of the new federal financial aid form by the Department of Education, and a disastrous college business model that continues to drive runaway tuition increases and deepening student debt.

However, when you spend a little time digging deeper into the state of higher education by talking with current students, professors, and administrators, or by browsing publications like *Inside Higher Ed* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education,* you quickly realize that these quantitative woes are really just the tip of the iceberg.

No one, it seems, thinks that things are going well on any level. This includes both ends of our increasingly polarized political spectrum, for whom colleges serve as a primary battleground and punching bag, as well as business leaders who fret about finding the next generation of educated and resilient workers. More urgently, this distress also includes many of the people actually engaged in higher education, such as educators and students themselves, whose levels of mental and emotional health—not to mention sense of meaning, purpose, and hope for the future—have collapsed catastrophically.

If we, as a civilization, find ourselves in the midst of a "meaning crisis,"[1] as cognitive scientist John Vervaeke and others have argued, it stands to reason that colleges and universities—the very

PHOTO: KRISTOPHER ROLLA/SOURCE UNSPLASH.COM

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heart of meaning-making in modern societies—are Ground Zero.

A More Human and Interconnected Approach

It is in the context of this metastasizing cultural crisis that Thoreau College and the wider micro-college movement finds its calling.

Rooted in the green ridges and valleys of the unglaciated Driftless Region of rural southwestern Wisconsin, Thoreau College seeks to rethink and renew education for young adults from the grass-roots up. Since incorporating in 2015, Thoreau College has prototyped and staged a variety of immersive full-time residential programs for small groups of young adults. These programs range in length from three weeks to a full year.

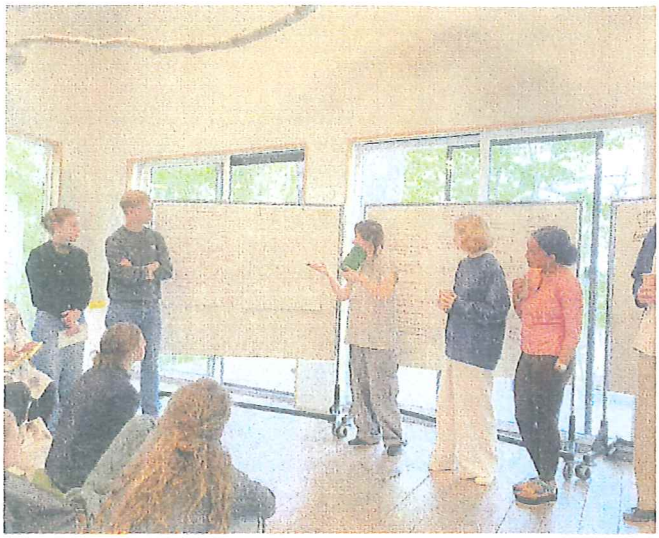
In addition to Henry David Thoreau and the American transcendentalists, this project has drawn inspiration from the ideas of Rudolf Steiner and Waldorf pedagogy, from the Danish folk high school movement. Its biggest inspiration, though, comes from Deep Springs College,[2] a remarkable and highly respected "microcollege" with twenty-six students that has operated on a remote cattle ranch in eastern California since its founding in 1917. Today, Thoreau College stands alongside Deep Springs and several other young initiatives around the world as representatives of a growing movement of microcolleges seeking to reinvent post-secondary education with a human face.[3]

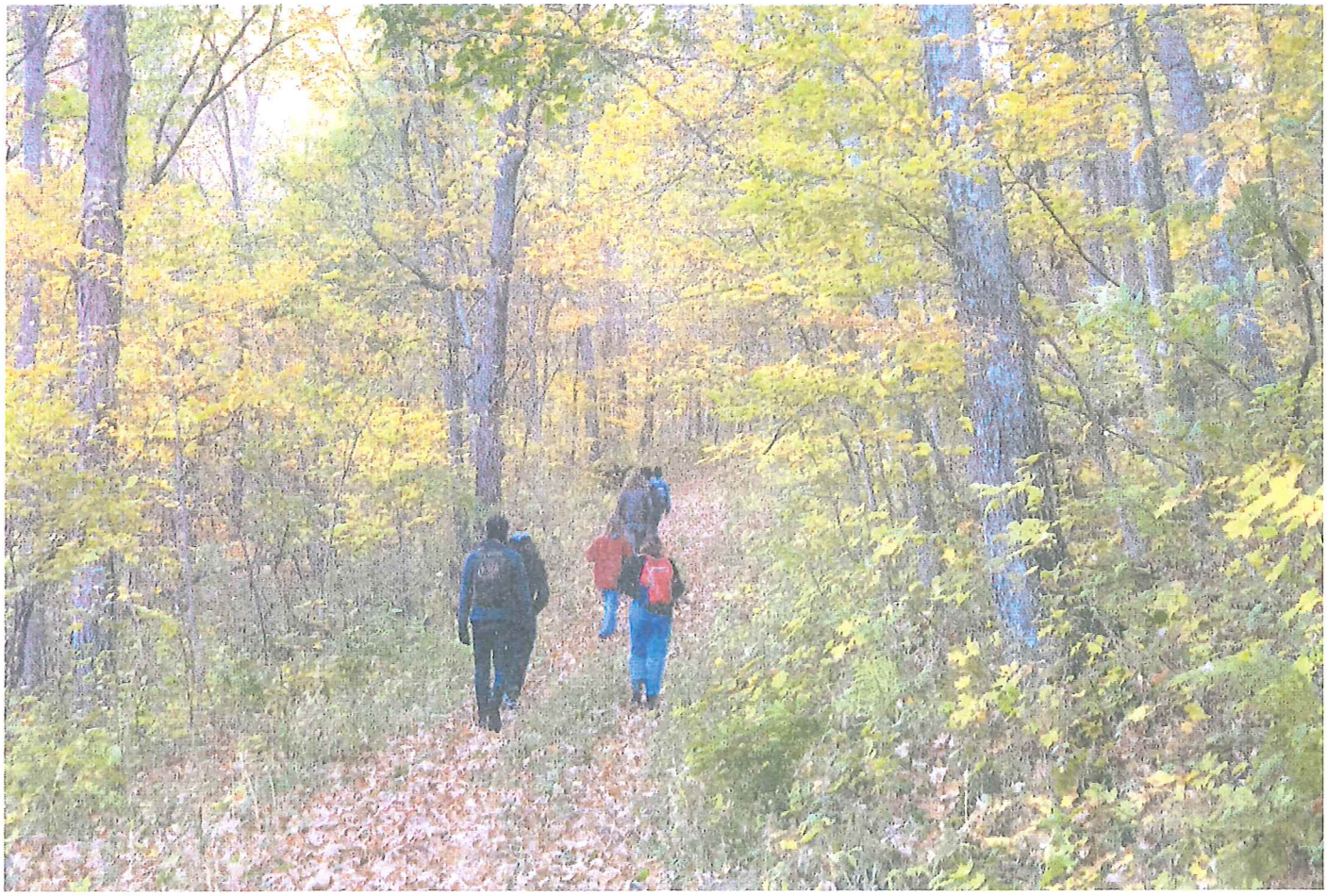
Although the movement is young and necessarily diverse, microcolleges, as we define them, share elements of at least four characteristics. To one degree or another, they are all humanly scaled, place-based, meaning-centered, and committed to offering a holistic curriculum that goes beyond academics or vocational training.

These characteristics are all strongly manifested in the core program at Thoreau College

> "MECHANIZATION OF THE SPIRIT, VEGETIZING OF THE SOUL, ANIMALIZATION OF THE BODY"—THIS FORMULA MAY SOUND STRANGELY FAMILIAR TO ANYONE WHO HAS VISITED A MAJOR UNIVERSITY CAMPUS IN RECENT YEARS.

PHOTOS COURTESY THOREAU COLLEGE MEDIA ARCHIVE





springboard foundation for whole person learning

With the aim of developing a generation of leaders with meaning, purpose, and the inner resources needed to address the urgent issues of our time, Springboard advances programs that intentionally focus on the personal development of young adults. We do so with the conviction that meaning and purpose can be cultivated, and that they must be for society to thrive. Cultivating meaning and purpose requires opportunities to:

- Work with real stakes, engaging in practical work that directly impacts the community and/or the physical environment
- Experience interdependence
- Form a meaningful relationship to place

In small-scale learning communities like Thoreau College, in which students are given ownership over matters of true consequence, students experience themselves as necessary to a whole. They experience that if and how they show up and engage has real effect. They experience what it feels like to have purpose and to matter.

In addition to Thoreau College, Springboard has identified several other exemplary living-learning institutes, or microcolleges, that help young people develop a durable sense of meaning and purpose. You can find them on the Directory page of our website—www.springboardlife.org.

Springboard has a three-pronged approach to advancing meaning-centered learning programs:

1. Establish a robust field of exemplary prototypes
2. Demonstrate impact and viability through research
3. Develop an ecosystem to support the flourishing of existing programs and deliberate development of new initiatives

We currently track baseline metrics including student enrollment in and capacity growth of identified programs. Over time we plan to capture more sophisticated qualitative and quantitative data.

Springboard needs your help in connecting with:

- Colleges and universities to grow student pipelines through domestic study-away partnerships
- Colleges and universities that want to strengthen their offerings by starting their own living-learning institutes.
- Publishers and media outlets who can amplify the work
- Mission-aligned supporters
- Researchers and facilitators of research-practice partnerships
- Future founders interested in starting a microcollege or living-learning institute in their home places.

If you are interested in learning more or would like an invitation to join the Microcollege Network to keep abreast of developments in the field, please send an email to Executive Director Kam Bellamy (kam@springboardlife.org).

in its Metamorphosis Gap Semester. Beginning in 2019, this roughly four-month-long residential experience for up to twelve students per cohort has brought young people from across the country and around the world together to engage

Growing up on an organic dairy farm in this special corner of the Midwest near the small town of Viroqua (population 4,500), from an early age I was immersed in a unique community of creative and empowered adults. Many of these people

> "WE ENGAGE REAL QUESTIONS AND PRACTICAL PROBLEMS, IN A SPECIFIC REAL PLACE.

in a curriculum organized around Five Pillars: Academics, Labor, Community, Nature, and Art. Students participate in seminar-style discussions of classic texts and natural phenomena, work in our kitchens, gardens, and small farm, and practice a variety of fine arts and folk crafts, ranging from community singing and drama to spoon carving and botanical drawing. They also participate in shared community governance and celebrations of the cycle of the year. And they immerse themselves deeply in nature through weeklong canoeing and hiking expeditions, as well as wilderness solos.

Rooted in Place and Community

A strong connection to place is a key aspect of the microcolleges, including Thoreau College. And this ethos has been deeply shaped by the college's context in the Driftless Region of southwestern Wisconsin.

were members of the back-to-the-land movement of the 1970s, who saw the daunting challenges of the moment and had the inner capacities to respond with new and innovative initiatives. These included numerous organic farms, consumer and producer cooperatives, small businesses, and grassroots nonprofits. They also included what would in time grow to become Organic Valley, the largest organic dairy cooperative in the country, as well as a vibrant rural Waldorf elementary school, Pleasant Ridge Waldorf School, founded in 1980.

In 1996, as a sixteen-year-old high school student, I had the life-altering experience of working alongside these remarkable adult mentors to play an active role in the creation of the Youth Initiative High School (YIHS),[4] a Waldorf high school that uniquely engages students in core aspects of governance, including hiring, admissions, curriculum design, and fundraising. After college—which included attending Deep Springs as well as stints at the American University in Bulgaria and graduate work at the

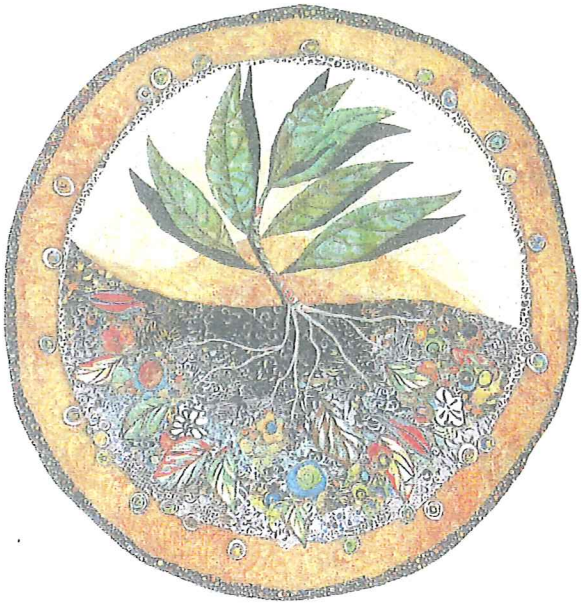
University of Chicago—I returned home to work at YIHS for over fifteen years as a teacher, college counselor, and Faculty Chair . The school is thriving today with a student body of over seventy students, including a household of boarding students from all over the world.

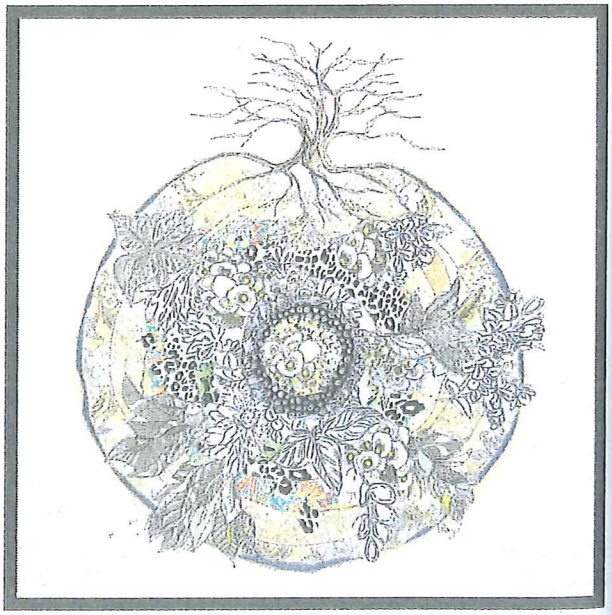
Small is Beautiful

This special rural community of farmers, educators, artists, and social entrepreneurs is the context that formed and nurtured me and Thoreau College.

From the time of its back-to-the-lander roots, this is a community where, alongside such classics as *Silent Spring*,[5] *Living the Good Life*,[6] and *The Sand County Almanac*,[7] one of the key texts found on numerous homestead bedstands was E.F. Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful*,[8] first published in 1973. With its catchy title and ringing indictment of what he called "the universal idolatry of gigantism,"[9] Schumacher's little book played a big role in shaping the thinking of these young practical idealists as they left the big cities and gargantuan organs of business, government, and mass culture to build lives that were more humanly-scaled, handmade, and rooted in connection with a particular spot on the earth.

Over fifty years later, these impulses towards smallness and rootedness seem more urgently relevant than ever in agriculture, government, and economics, as well as in higher education. In colleges and universities—and education more generally—digital technology, stiff economic and political pressures, and sprawling bureaucracy have manifested the "idolatry of gigantism" at a truly stupendous scale and have contributed powerfully to the deep crises I described above. For many, schools—these essential cultural hubs—have become opaque and soul-deadening places where individual students and professors despair of getting their practical questions and needs addressed, to say nothing of discovering and nurturing their unique vocation, sense of purpose, and pursuits of truth, beauty, and goodness. Students—and





"Trust" (TOP) and "Transformation" (BOTTOM), art textiles by Lorraine Roy, www.LroyArt.com

the civilization in which we live—seeking intellectual and spiritual nourishment from such places will surely starve, and this feeling of famine is indeed what I experience with many of the young people who find their way to Thoreau College.

Cultivating Meaning and Purpose

In 1919, surveying the ruins of Europe in the aftermath of World War I and considering the spiritual roots of this devastation, Rudolf Steiner declared:

> Natural science together with the machine threatens civilized humanity with a terrible threefold destruction...Mechanization of the spirit, vegetizing of the soul, animalization of the body—this is what we have to face without deceiving ourselves.[10]

As with so many things, Steiner was prescient in identifying the modern university as a key point of origin and manifestation of this triple threat.

The research university, in its modern form, originated in Germany, and Steiner's life path brought him into intimate contact with this paradigmatic modern institution, which he elsewhere characterizes as "a pickle factory" for the fruits of the human spirit. "Mechanization of the spirit, vegetizing of the soul, animalization of the body"—this formula may sound strangely familiar to anyone who has visited a major university campus in recent years. Academic work is often formulaic and dispirited and is now often literally mechanized, with the advent of widely accessible artificial intelligence (AI) text generators. The animalization of the body is also disturbingly literal, manifested in, for example, feedlot-style cafeterias. And surrounding it all, occasional outbursts of political unrest notwithstanding, there is an atmosphere of general emotional withdrawal and anesthesia—"vegetizing of the soul"—as students and others pull back from embodied community life into screens, substances, and deepening cycles of depression and anxiety.

Thoreau College and our fellow explorers in the microcollege movement are engaged in an effort to develop and model an educational community that is diametrically opposed to the form that the modern university has taken. Organically and experimentally, we are striving to craft a context in which our students can be physically, spiritually, and intellectually engaged in vital and meaningful ways with real questions and practical problems, in a specific real place, and with one another as members of a real, embodied

a deeper dive

Check out the following sites for more information about this dynamic and forward-thinking movement:

Thoreau College
– thoreaucollege.org/

"Microcollege" podcast
– thoreaucollege.org/microcollege-podcast/

Microcollege Network
– thoreaucollege.org/microcollege-movement/

– www.hylo.com/groups/microcollege-network

Nordic Bildung
– www.nordicbildung.org/

Springboard for Whole Person Learning
– www.springboardlife.org/