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AN unusual EDUCATION

Microcolleges, like Wisconsin's Thoreau College, offer a chance to step away from traditional classrooms

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MARK HOFFMAN/MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL

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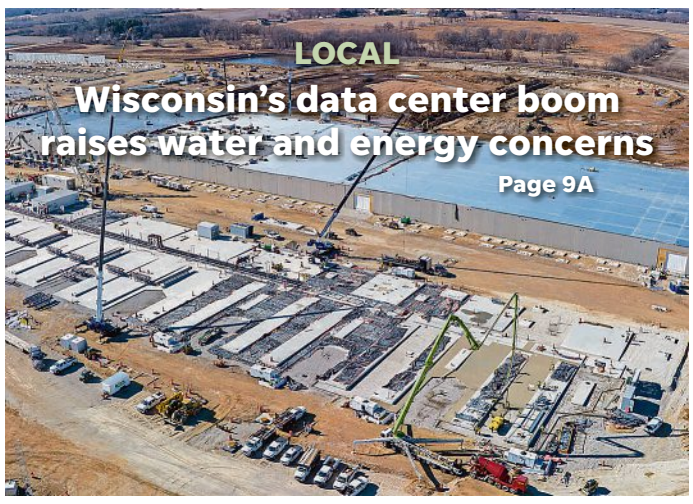

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Quirky CAMPUS

Kelly Meyerhofer
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel | USA TODAY NETWORK – WISCONSIN

It was a moonless night, perfect for stargazing. They moved some of their tents to a clearing in the woods for a better view. • Waiting for darkness to settle over the Kickapoo Valley, they paid attention to their surroundings. The earthy smell of mud caking their boots. The lingering crackle of their campfire. The owls' hoots and coyotes' howls echoing into the night. • Students are taught to notice nature at Thoreau College, a small experimental school in western Wisconsin that operates very much offline. Assigned readings are in the form of books or paper handouts. Phones are banned during classes, meals, meetings and field trips.

GALLERY

Scan to view more photos of Thoreau College, which offers gap semester programs in the Driftless Area

Wisconsin's crunchiest college is one you've probably never heard of

▲▲ **Fellows lead students in their morning circle time on Feb. 12 during winter camping, part of a program offered by Thoreau College. During this time, students share their reflections and move their bodies.** PHOTOS BY MARK HOFFMAN/MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL

▲ **Student Opal Smith speaks during a discussion on the Catholic Worker Movement in a class at Thoreau College in Viroqua on March 4.**

▶ **Founding director Jacob Hundt talks with students while dinner cooks on an open fire Feb. 11 during winter camping near La Farge.**

The first field trip of the spring semester, five days of camping, came in mid-February. The temperature hovered above freezing during the days and dipped into the teens at night.

The students' week was filled with a full spectrum of emotions: Impatience, because cooking meals over fire took longer than in a kitchen. Satisfaction, because food hits differently when hungry and cold. Curiosity, when they found a dead raccoon on the side of the road and skinned him in a lesson blending anatomy and ethics. Joy, when they laughed around the campfire over silly stories, like one about a chihuahua named Carlos.

The students were out in the elements, far from likes, follows, reshares and comments. Nature replaced the never-ending news cycle. Smartphone-addled attention spans swapped with 60-minute "solo sits" in the woods.

Student Soren Powers, of Minnesota, said social media taxed his mental health while attending Reed College in Portland, Oregon, last fall. He is taking a gap semester this spring at Thoreau, hoping it will help him decide whether he wants to switch from a science major to something in the humanities. His average phone screen time has dropped from up to five hours per day to about 30 minutes.

"I've been going through life on autopilot, relying on external measures of sucess, but I haven't figured out what I actually want to do," he said. "Thoreau is a place to slow down and see what calls to you in life."

Microcolleges offer an alternative postsecondary experience

Thoreau College is tiny – just eight students this semester – and self-governing. At the heart of the school's programming is experiential learning that bears little resemblance to the lecture halls and dorms dominating traditional higher education.

There are no provosts or associate vice provosts or assistants to the senior vice provost. There is no tenure system. No letter grades. No alcohol or drugs allowed.

Nestled in the Driftless Area, Thoreau teaches students to engage with the seasons and soils of the land. They canoe along the Wisconsin River in late summer, learn butchery in the fall, tap maple trees in early spring, grow vegetables in the summer and tend to livestock year-round. They perform about 10 hours of weekly manual labor and read works by authors ranging from Aristotle to Aldo Leopold to Wendell Berry. In a nod to the college's namesake, students also spend several days alone in the woods.

Thoreau College is among several "microcolleges" across the U.S. that offer an experimental alternative for students disillusioned by their mainstream postsecondary options.

Jacob Hundt, Thoreau's founder, defines a microcollege as "humanly-scaled," with a student body numbering in the single or double digits. It is intentional, creating a community that lives, learns and works together. And it has a strong sense of place, with a curriculum tied to its geographic location and history.

While some microcolleges award associate degrees, Thoreau does not, at least for now. Students can, however, earn college credits through a partnership with Prescott College in Arizona.

Most microcolleges have opened within the past 15 years. Thoreau launched semester-long programs in fall 2019.

The timing was apt. COVID-19 hit the following semester, a death knell for some small colleges that were already struggling financially. Wisconsin alone has seen eight public two-year campuses shutter or downsize, and three private colleges close since 2020.

But for Thoreau, it marked an opening.

"These small-scale, intimate environments are getting harder to find in higher education," Hundt said.

Thoreau founder's own education follows experimental pathway

Viroqua is the perfect place for a school like Thoreau. The hippie city is a hub for organic farming, sustainable living and experimental education. It's home to the state's first Waldorf school, Pleasant Ridge. Waldorf schools avoid traditional textbooks and prioritize learning by experience.

Hundt attended Pleasant Ridge and was among a group of students who pushed for a Waldorf-style high school to open in town.

Enter Youth Initiative High School, where students have a real stake in how the school runs. They fundraise to cover part of the school's budget. They can serve as voting members of the Board of Trustees. They clean their school, eliminating the need for a janitor.

Hundt was in Youth Initiative's second graduating class. He continued his nontraditional schooling at Deep Springs College in California. The highly selective, tuition-free liberal arts college was founded in 1917 on a rural ranch near Death Valley.

Hundt, who grew up on a dairy farm,

Continued on next page

Continued from previous page

was a natural fit for one of the college's more coveted labor positions: cowboy. He cared for a herd of 300 beef cattle and 10 horses, helping with branding, castrating and calving. Academics were intense. He read Plato, Nietzsche, Marx, Shakespeare and Homer.

Hundt returned home and taught at Youth Inititiative. But he wanted to give more young people a taste of the schooling he received at Deep Springs. Colleges today can feel generic, he said, teaching skills transferable to anywhere and failing to instill students with a sense of purpose and community.

"This feeling of being lost or ignored or inconsequential is something I hear from lots of students who apply to come here," Hundt said.

Finding purpose at Thoreau

It's hard to feel ignored at Thoreau College. Everyone has a say, especially at all-school meetings. Matters as mundane as whether to count abstentions as a calculation of the vote get a vote.

At a recent meeting, students voted on a future field trip destination. At another, they voted on a lunch menu for the following week.

"This isn't just pizza," Hundt said as the students enjoyed their selection. "This is democratically chosen pizza."

Students come from all corners of the country. Some are taking a break from progressive institutions, such as the University of California-Berkeley or Carleton College. Others sign up straight out of high school.

Opal Smith was homeschooled most of her life in rural Kentucky. She is open to the idea of a four-year college, but needs something to bridge the gap.

"I'm here to find my purpose – or at least get closer to finding it," Smith said.

Dorm life comes with chickens

Home for Thoreau students is a two-story white house with a front porch swing and backyard deck. The students cook dinner together most nights. They jointly manage the house's garden and chicken coop.

Student Nalia Higgins, of Virginia, has taken a liking to caring for the home's four hens. She found one of them, February, even jumps on command when coaxed with mealworms she splurges on at the local Tractor Supply store.

Higgins has toured at least 11 traditional four-year colleges. None called to her. She hopes to eventually work on farms and in the outdoors. For now, she's enjoying her semester at Thoreau. The chickens are a highlight.

Caring for the hens is about more than daily chores, Hundt said. It teaches students stewardship for living things.

"This relationship with other beings is really – it's a powerful, powerful experience," he said. "Lots of ethical and moral questions and practical questions are addressed by it."

More questions arise from the optional slaughters Hundt leads each semester, using pigs, chickens and lambs from his family farm. He creates a reverent atmosphere with dim lighting, incense and reflections on the animal's life. Some students walk away from the experience vegetarian, while some vegetarians return to eating meat, he said. Most all contemplate the slaughter over the next several days.

"It creates this rich context for conversation," he said. "We go from solemnity to celebration in a beautiful way."

Microcolleges' reason for hope

At a time when many other small colleges are in distress, can microcolleges make it financially?

The full sticker price for a semester at Thoreau is about $13,000, which includes college credits, housing and some meals. Thoreau works with students to craft a pledge of what they can pay based on their financial circumstances, Hundt said, bringing the average student's out-of-pocket cost to about $7,500.

The college keeps overhead costs low by operating a rented "campus." Thoreau leases space in a community center that serves as its classroom and cafeteria. It owns no buildings. Hundt's farm is the site of some labor activities, including grape harvesting and apple-tree pruning.

VIDEO

Scan to see Thoreau College students study a roadkill raccoon while winter camping

The college's workforce comes primarily through its residency program. Fellows receive a small stipend and housing in exchange for teaching or performing other work.

Dave Staley, an associate professor of history at Ohio State University who authored a book on alternative university models, said microcolleges' finances are precarious. What if a couple students drop out? The margins are razor thin.

Still, Staley believes the microcollege model has potential to grow. The explosion of homeschooling during the pandemic and the anti-technology movement among teens has expanded the pool of students who might find a microcollege attractive.

Another selling point for microcolleges is their intimate environment, he said. Research suggests students who find a mentor on campus in their first semester do better academically and are more likely to stay. Microcolleges are almost by definition relationship-rich.

"Most colleges try to benchmark every other college and so there's very, very, very little differentiation: We have a nursing program. Well, so does your competitor down the street. We have intercollegiate athletics. So does every other school around here," Staley said. "The microcollege becomes a differentiator."

Do microcollege grads make it in the real world?

Every day at Thoreau starts with morning circle. Students stretch their bodies. They meditate for a few minutes. One by one, they share their thoughts.

Morning circle is important. It creates a daily rhythm. The rest of the day can veer in so many different directions, from trying a new style of dance to discussing Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement to learning folk arts, such as wood-carving and basket-weaving.

"Underwater basket-weaving" is a long-running trope in conservative circles to criticize liberal arts degrees as useless. But Hundt waved off the joke, pointing to other skills he teaches, such as hog butchering or sausage-making.

"I think a lot of conservatives would get on board with that," he said. "These are manual skills that teach the body and the mind. These are problem-solving skills."

Sarah Mercer couldn't agree more. She came from Virginia in 2019 to join Thoreau's first class of students.

Mercer had planned to enroll at Virginia Tech. But in high school, a car crash killed her father. She needed to heal. She needed to grieve.

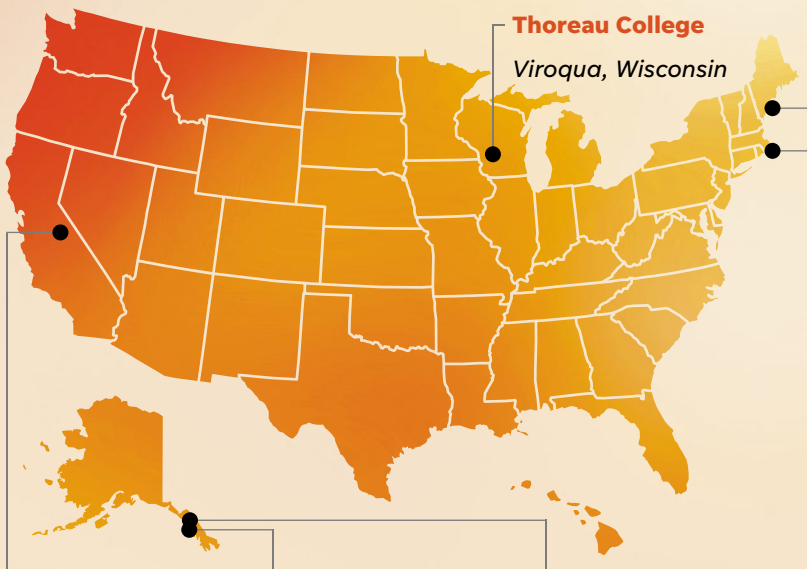
Thoreau offered a safe place to do that, she said. She enjoyed working at a local greenhouse, one of the assigned labor activities. After the semester ended, she stuck around town. She started working at the greenhouse.

Mercer now runs the greenhouse full time. But later this year, she is moving her business to a greenhouse she built herself. She sometimes wonders whether she made the right decision. If everything will pan out. She wrestled with similar questions when she moved to Viroqua at 18 to attend an experimental college.

"It'll be an experiment for you," Hundt said of her new business venture.

Mercer smiled. She liked the sound of that.

WHERE ARE OTHER MICROCOLLEGES?



Thoreau College
Viroqua, Wisconsin

Deep Springs
Big Pine, California
Students live and learn on a working ranch near Death Valley in California. The tuition-free liberal arts college is highly selective.

Outer Coast
Sitka, Alaska
Students live in Sitka, Alaska, and learn a curriculum anchored in Indigenous studies. They volunteer 15 hours per week.

Tidelines Institute
Gustavus, Alaska
Students live in southeast Alaska, paddling through icy fjords and climbing mountains. They manage a remote homestead and garden.

Seguinland Institute
Georgetown, Maine
Students live in riverside cottages in coastal Maine, learning philosophy, arts and more. The campus includes treehouses and a boatyard.

Gull Island Institute
Falmouth, Massachusetts
Students live on a remote island off of Cape Cod with minimal amenities. They work on an oyster farm and explore liberal arts in an era of climate change

ILLUSTRATION BY KRISTA VOLENSKI WILCOX/USA TODAY NETWORK; AND GETTY IMAGES

Thoreau College fast facts

Location
Viroqua, a city of 4,500 in western Wisconsin

Enrollment
Eight students in spring 2026

Full-time employees
Four, plus five yearlong fellows

Alumni ~75
Some continued their education at schools like Oberlin, Deep Springs College, the University of Chicago, Harvard and Oxford. Others got local jobs in schools, farms or businesses.

Tuition ~$13,000

Average out-of-pocket cost
$7,500

▼ **Students run down after a bluff-top discussion during winter camping near La Farge.** PHOTOS BY MARK HOFFMAN/ MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL

◀ **Anson Bond, a student from New Orleans, maintains a fire on Feb. 11 during Thoreau College winter camping near Lafarge. The school is in nearby Viroqua.**