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EDUCATION

In Driftless Area, Thoreau College reimagines higher education



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It's unusual to try opening a new college nowadays. Many small institutions are feeling the financial squeeze. Dozens have shuttered in recent years, [including three in Wisconsin](#).

But microcolleges are having a moment.

Most have opened within the past decade or so. They offer a different kind of higher education experience, one their leaders say more young people are seeking. There's little technology, lots of nature and plenty of contemplation about life's purpose.

In Wisconsin's Driftless Area, Thoreau College students might be reading Aristotle, making puppets, butchering chickens, voting in all-school meetings, harvesting microgreens for a meal or spending several days alone in the woods.

More: [At Thoreau College, students raise chickens, go camping and limit use of tech](#)

Here's what to know about the school and the broader microcollege movement:

What is a microcollege?

Jacob Hundt, Thoreau's founder, said three characteristics are key to a microcollege:

"Humanly-scaled," with a student body numbering in the single or double digits.
This spring, for example, eight students are enrolled at Thoreau.
An intentional living and learning community
A strong sense of place within its curriculum

Where is Thoreau College?

Thoreau College is based in Viroqua, a city of 4,500 in western Wisconsin that's become a hub for organic farming, food cooperatives and sustainable living.

It's also a popular place for experimental education. The state's first Waldorf school, Pleasant Ridge, began in Viroqua in 1980. Waldorf schools avoid traditional textbooks and prioritize learning by experience.

A Waldorf-style high school opened in 1996. At Youth Initiative High School, 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.

Can I earn a degree from Thoreau College?

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.

How much does it cost to attend Thoreau College?

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.

How many people work at Thoreau College?

The college employs four full-time employees, plus five yearlong fellows. The fellows receive a small stipend and housing in exchange for teaching or performing other work.

What does the Thoreau College campus look like?

This isn't your typical campus with a dining hall, dorms, academic buildings and a quad to play Frisbee.

Thoreau keeps overhead costs low by renting. It leases space in a community center that serves as its classroom and cafeteria. Students and fellows live in residential rental homes. Hundt's farm is the site of some labor activities, including grape harvesting and apple-tree pruning.

More broadly, Viroqua and the western Wisconsin region become the backdrop for exploration and learning. Students canoe along the Wisconsin River, camp in the Kickapoo Valley and spend several days alone in the woods. They also take many field trips.

Where do Thoreau College alumni go?

Since Thoreau College launched semester programs in 2019, more than 75 students have graduated.

Some continued their education at schools such as Oberlin, Deep Springs College, the University of Chicago, Harvard and Oxford.

Others have gotten local jobs in schools, farms or businesses.

How many microcolleges are in Wisconsin?

Thoreau College is the only microcollege in Wisconsin – for now.

Hundt has talked to former faculty at Northland College, an Ashland-based liberal arts school that [closed in 2025](#). The group is [exploring the possibility](#) of a microcollege in northern Wisconsin.

Where are other microcolleges?

There's no official list and some debate about what is, or isn't, considered a microcollege. But here are some other programs in which a small group of students live and learn together with a curriculum tied to the land.

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

Outer Coast: Students live in Sitka, Alaska, and learn a curriculum anchored in Indigenous studies. They study the Tlingit language and volunteer 15 hours per week at local sites, such as a fish hatchery or animal shelter.

Tidelines Institute: Students live in Alaska's southeast chain of islands, sometimes called the Alaskan Panhandle. They paddle through icy fjords, climb mountains and manage a remote homestead and garden.

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

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

Will the microcollege movement grow or fizzle out?

Microcolleges' finances are precarious, said Dave Staley, an associate professor of history at Ohio State University who authored a book on alternative university models. What if a couple students drop out? The operating 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](#)

[some teens](#) establishes two pools of students who may find a microcollege attractive.

Another selling point for microcolleges is the intimate environment they provide, 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.

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