

Sterling College

Working Hands. Working Minds.

Sterling College Internship Program: A Report for the Vermont House Committee on Commerce and Economics

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Founded in 1958 in Craftsbury Common, Vermont, Sterling College is the leading voice in higher education for environmental stewardship. The College was among the first colleges in the United States to focus on sustainability through academic majors in Ecology, Environmental Humanities, Sustainable Agriculture & Food Systems, and Outdoor Education. The campus and its community of 120 students call the Northeast Kingdom home. 20% of our student body comes from Vermont.

Sterling College is one of only seven federally recognized Work Colleges in the nation. Work is a recognized part of the curriculum in which every student participates and contributes to the community. The work program includes both on-campus jobs and at least one required off campus internship.

The internship program at Sterling College is entering its 34th year. While the college has moved from awarding A.A. degrees to B.A. degrees, the internship program has remained a constant.

The internship program consists of three courses over three semesters that total 9 credits. Students enter the program in the Spring semester of their first year by taking a career development course called "Work Search." As students begin to develop their career goals and learn about the job search process, they apply these skills to finding an internship. Students search for their own internship opportunities looking for a match that will support their learning goals.

The actual 10-week internship, a 6-credit course, is a self-directed learning experience based on the work-learning-service philosophy of Work Colleges. Host organizations and students find a balance between service (to the organization) and learning (for the student) through a structured curriculum that is designed to promote student learning and development while addressing the needs of the hosting organization. The internship course is titled "Practicum in Environmental Stewardship" and supports the areas of studies in the Sterling College curriculum. Attached you will find a list of the organizations located in Vermont that have hosted a Sterling College student; all the internships support environmental stewardship.

Sterling College students have completed internships in 22 countries and 46 states, with 20% of the internships happening in Vermont; 5 to 15 Sterling students a year work for Vermont non-profit and for-profit organizations. (A list of Vermont hosts organizations has been provided with this report.) Students immerse themselves in a potential career by working full time (40 hours/week). The practicum provides students an opportunity to

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apply what they have learned in their courses, but also to apply what they have learned through Work College jobs to a professional work environment.

Students are responsible for recording and reflecting their learning experiences through structured weekly reports. Around the mid-point of the internship, faculty members visit the students at their internship site. The site visit provides a professional development opportunity for faculty, a networking opportunity for the supervisor, and most importantly, an occasion for the student to share their “classroom” as well as the progression of their learning,

Sterling College expects employers to compensate their interns in some form. A portion of each student’s internship work hours is compensated through the Work Program.

Upon returning to campus, students complete the internship program by taking a professional writing and public speaking course (Writing & Communications). In this course, students develop public speaking and presentation skills as they reflect on the internship experience and prepare a presentation for the school and local community.

When surveyed Sterling alumni give the internship experience high marks. Alumni consistently rank the internship highly when asked what experiences prepared them the most for their career and the work world. No wonder the program has been such a long-standing tradition at Sterling College.

We also received just as many accolades from internship hosts, who have rated our program the best they have worked with, often placing our program above many from larger institutions.

Recently, the college was awarded a large Rural Business and Enterprise Grant from the USDA to provide small businesses (food producers and processors) the technical assistance to develop internship programs.

85% of Sterling College alumni find employment in their areas of study within a year of graduating. The most recent alumni survey reports that:

- 38% are in business
- 24% are self-employment
- 22% are in education
- 10% are in government
- 4% are raising families
- 1% are in the military

Currently, 38% of our alumni are living and working here in Vermont. And I know of at least 7 businesses within 45 minutes of the college that were started by Sterling College alumni, from dairy farmers to cheese makers to bio-diesel fuel production to forestry management to bakery to vegetable farms; all of them environmental stewards of Vermont.