

# Where Campus Meets Community

FOUR PROFESSORS REFLECT ON HOW VERMONT'S SMALL COLLEGES HELP STUDENTS BRING TOGETHER THE CLASSROOM AND THE OUTSIDE WORLD. / STORY BY NOREEN CARGILL

**V**ERMONT COLLEGES ARE small, and it's a good thing. Even the University of Vermont, generally thought to be a big school, is small when compared to many colleges nationwide. In some ways, our entire state might be considered one big campus. In 2006, Ohio State University at Columbus, for example, had an undergraduate enrollment of 38,479. This happens to be almost 4,000 more students than attend all of Vermont's 23 colleges combined. (In 2006, Vermont's undergraduates numbered 34,811.) Enrollments range from tiny (105 undergrads at Sterling College in Craftsbury and 336 at Marlboro College) to mid-size (1,615 at Johnson State) to the state-high roster of 10,082 undergrads at UVM in Burlington.

Susan Englese, the executive director of the Vermont Higher Education Council (VHEC), points out that the approachable size of Vermont's colleges is a big part of what draws students to the state, along with the Green Mountain scenery, outdoor recreation, and culture, of course. If pressed on the size question, Englese might even say something like, poor Ohio State.

"It's hard for some out-of-state schools to understand how much we can offer at our small colleges," Englese says. "Kids bloom and blossom with this kind of individual attention."

Faculty members also benefit from the close ties—to their students, to each other,

and to the college community—that Vermont's small schools foster. The following four professors reflect on why they love to teach in Vermont, and how our small colleges can help students bring the classroom and the real world together.

## The Study of Food Science

Catherine Donnelly, a professor of nutrition and food sciences at the University of Vermont, wants her students to take what they learn inside the classroom out into the community.

Vermont is small enough so that Professor Donnelly is familiar with the players involved in food-safety issues statewide. As a food microbiologist interested in the ecology of food-borne illnesses, she is frequently asked to discuss relevant issues, such as cheese-production safety, with state legislators.

The environment in Vermont tends to be "friendly and informal, but informative," Donnelly says. This makes it a perfect place for her students to study the science, economics, and politics of food safety. When she drives to Montpelier to meet with legislators and other business leaders, she often brings students with her. These field trips offer students a chance to see politics in action, and to understand how classroom knowledge applies to the community.

"The students are incredibly talented," Donnelly says. "The quality of the undergrads doesn't even compare to other state

universities with which I've been involved." Vermont college students engage their professors in wanting to learn, she explains. She has particularly enjoyed her graduate students. Over the years, Donnelly has worked with students from all over the world, including France, Russia, and Kenya. "In Vermont, the size and scale of agriculture is small. International students can relate it to more than the big farms and commercial agriculture out West," she says.

Students in her program can see that they have a voice in state government, and in federal government, too. Donnelly, who has served on several national advisory committees, understands how public policy is formulated and can share this experience with her students. She's able to offer an "insider's view of pressing issues."

"It's empowering for students with this level of training," she says. They can have a visible impact on decisions, and they can see results through her first-hand accounts. They also can get involved themselves. "Whenever there's a change in regulation policy," she explains, "there's always a public-comment period that goes with it." She encourages her students to write public comments. "We are all consumers when it comes to food and safety," she says, "but these students are so much more knowledgeable. It gives them confidence, because they understand the issues."

In Vermont, leaders in food-safety issues have adopted "a total educational

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PHOTO: JOSEPH HEALY

approach,” she explains, “rather than having a regulatory body simply tell people what to do.” People across the state want to work together to make our products safer—and Donnelly’s students get to be part of the solution.

### **A College Dance Community**

“I loved my teachers,” says Maris Wolff of the dance instructors she had while studying in New York City in the 1960s. “They came from a different era. They were part of the Ballets Russes that toured Paris for the first time in 1909—they changed fashions.”

Now Professor Wolff is the beloved teacher, to her students at Johnson State College. It has a lot to do with her extensive background in dance—and now, after living and teaching in Vermont for 30 years, it also has a lot to do with the artist she has become by living in this state. “Vermont is simple, and real, and not artificial at all,” Wolff says, “and that’s a wonderful environment in which to be an artist.”

It was love that first brought Maris Wolff to Vermont, and love that kept her here—love of her husband, and love of the community and environment they found together. “My husband had traveled all over the country, and he felt that Vermont was the most beautiful place to be. I agree,” says Wolff. “It’s the best of all worlds, in a very green package.”

When comparing life as a dancer in the city to life here, Wolff says Vermont will win every time. “In my dance studio at Johnson State, we look out on trees and mountains; we can open the windows and breathe fresh air. On Broadway and Eighth Avenue in New York City, I might tell my students, ‘Okay, take a deep breath... ah, maybe not.’”

And in Vermont, Wolff feels she can talk about real things with her students, without encountering what she calls “guarded issues.” “I’ve been mugged in New York City,” Wolff says. “You walk fast, you don’t really relate to people, you don’t make eye contact. Students in a big city tend to bring

that with them.” In Vermont, it’s not like that. “There’s something about not having to be afraid, not being protected all the time, that opens one up more,” she says. “It allows you to get to the basic conversations between human beings.”

Professor Wolff’s students benefit from her experience and her open attitude. “Four years is a lot of time to be able to spend with someone who’s developing, and to have a chance to make a difference,” Wolff says. “I feel like their mother. I’ve even had the pleasure of teaching generations. I’ve had mothers and daughters study with me. And they bring their children to visit.”

“Johnson is small enough so that I’m given a lot of freedom to do what I think is best. If I’m put in a box, I tend to rebel,” admits Wolff. “When I’m given freedom, I give every ounce of myself. I’m being creative then, and it’s exciting for me.”

“I even have a small professional dance company in residence, the Vermont Dance Collective. The college is totally in support of that,” adds Wolff. Her advanced college

PHOTO: COURTESY OF GODDARD COLLEGE



PHOTO: COURTESY OF MARLBORO COLLEGE



PHOTO: COURTESY OF JOHNSON STATE COLLEGE



From top left: Tomas Mario Kalmar of Goddard and Sterling, T. Hunter Wilson of Marlboro, and Maris Wolff of Johnson State share a love of teaching in Vermont.

students sometimes join the Collective, and some student are invited to work with her in a Boston group that performs music and dance from the Renaissance and Baroque periods. This way, “students can bring what they’ve learned out into the world,” Wolff says. “It’s really important for them to share their dance with the community.”

### The Art and Conversation of Math

Tomás Mario Kalmar, who teaches math at Goddard College and systems thinking at Sterling College, shares Wolff’s enthusiasm for teaching in Vermont. “I’ve lived in many different places, many different countries, and many different states,” he says. “I never thought I’d be so proud of a state—never thought I’d be so proud to be a Vermonter.

“Vermont means community, community, community,” says Kalmar. “The community makes decisions.” And for students

who study at small Vermont schools, like Goddard and Sterling, “who you are matters,” Kalmar says. This seems to be true of the faculty at these small schools, too.

“I’m a border-crosser,” Kalmar says. “I’m not comfortable in a college where everyone has to stick to their department.” With that in mind, he brings his unique experience and his love for math to students and faculty alike... but not what he calls the “Mickey Mouse Math” pursued by many schools. “I want to de-institutionalize math,” he says. “The tests don’t test anything worth testing.” He doesn’t think colleges should have a math requirement. If a subject is required—if it’s a subject students need for life—then the subject should be dance, he says.

“Every college has the same question,” Kalmar says: “What are we going to do about the math requirement?” This conver-

sation is ongoing even at Goddard, which does require math. Kalmar had hoped to apply for a grant, to explore how students could learn math the “Goddard way”— at Goddard, students integrate who they are, what they know, and what they do—but it hasn’t yet materialized.

“I want to explore how doing and knowing math can be a healing experience,” Kalmar explains, “and how to help people find their mathematical voice.” Kalmar talks about math as a living language, such as French. Students can learn French grammar in the classroom, but that doesn’t compare to being able to walk outside the classroom and say to another person, “*Nous sommes heureux.*” (“We are happy.”) It’s the communication with other people that matters. He craves math conversations, the notion of math as a second language.

In the end, though the school sent stu-

dents to a nearby community college to fulfill a math requirement, Kalmar did succeed in inspiring five Goddard students to try his style of math. “Once a week, for about 10 weeks,” he wrote in a letter to friend, “I joined them for freewheeling conversations lasting up to three hours. We sat on a couple of beat-up couches in an old Victorian house and talked about many experiences—religious, mathematical, and otherwise. We told jokes.” And, he goes on, “we visualized the distribution of the primes.” Kalmar called this group study “Varieties of Mathematical Experience.” The students had fun with it, and, in the end, they found a new and simple Prime Number Theorem that until that point had been unknown to mathematicians.

Kalmar continues to seek out math conversations. Currently on a one-year sabbatical from Goddard, Kalmar is now teaching systems thinking at Sterling. “Really, this is a commune pretending to be a college,” he says of Sterling. “The experience of community is one of the big things you learn here.”

“I came to Sterling to see what it would be like to teach a course in green math, free-range organic math,” he says, and laughs. “Oh, that was a math moment,” he adds. “That was a math moment.”

### The Town-Campus Connection

Working in Vermont is a bonus for instructors from away—like Maris Wolff, Catherine Donnelly, and Tomás Mario Kalmar—but it’s a draw for locals, too... such as T. Hunter Wilson, who teaches writing and literature at Marlboro College.

Wilson came to Vermont straight from the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. But in moving to Vermont, he was coming home, he says. Wilson lives in a house he built himself, not far from the college, on land that has been in his family since 1792.

“This is where I grew up,” says Wilson. “This is where we came every summer, where I went to first and third grade, and where I’ve had friends since as long as I can remember.”

Like many of the faculty members at the college, Wilson is pleased to play a role in the community, both on and off campus. Wilson served on the town’s school board for eight years while his children were in school, and he continues to stay involved by working as a justice of the peace, and serving as a member of the zoning board and the housing rehabilitation committee.

Similarly, faculty and students help

shape the community on the college campus. “Marlboro College, with its town-meeting governance, reflects the town in which it’s located,” Wilson points out. “It’s a good model for students to see how they can participate.”

“Rather than have a set program that constitutes a major,” Wilson explains, “Marlboro students have to put together a comprehensive program themselves. Each student works with the faculty during the last two years to design a plan of concentration.” This makes it exciting for the students, and for the faculty, too.

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“As a teacher, I’m constantly being taken off in directions slightly different than what I might have done. I’m always learning and doing new things myself, as well as teaching students,” he says. “I’ve been at Marlboro a long time, but I don’t feel like it’s the same job, because it keeps changing, and that’s exciting.”

At many schools, students don’t feel they have a voice, Wilson believes. They can select a major, he says, but they’re basically told what that major will comprise. This is not the case at Marlboro. At this small Vermont college, students hold positions on the admissions, financial aid, and curriculum committees, among others.

“Students have a genuine voice in how the institution operates,” Wilson says. “I think that provides an educational model and also a civic model, and that’s rare.”

“I would be reluctant to say a school like Marlboro could exist only in Vermont, because then it wouldn’t be much of a model,” he says. But, he adds, a school like Marlboro makes particular sense in a place like Vermont. Wilson thinks Marlboro College mirrors the state in many ways, with

Vermont’s small size and history of town meetings.

“Most of us know, or can know, our representatives in the state legislature,” he says. “If we want to, we can get to know Bernie, or Peter, or Patrick. I think in most states, that’s not true.”

### Politics Empowering Education

Vermont’s political environment makes it an easy place for everyday people to play a part, and, according to Susan Englese, of VHEC, Vermont’s small-scale politics play a role in the success of the state’s colleges, too.

In some states, explains Englese, before making any changes, such as adding a new major to the school’s offerings, a college must get approval from the state government, not to mention from each of the other schools in the state. This is not true in Vermont.

“Vermont’s small schools can be reactive,” she explains, “and this makes them very dynamic.” This fall, Vermont colleges are offering more than 30 new majors, from digital filmmaking at Champlain College to Asian studies at Marlboro. In other states, the process might take up to two years. “We look at it as a market,” Englese says. In Vermont, colleges can give students what they want. The state government does not create roadblocks for Vermont’s colleges; instead, it gets involved in making the schools successful. “We’re all working together to promote Vermont,” Englese says.

Each year, about 5,000 new undergrads from out of state come to Vermont for college, Englese says. For the past six years, each of these families has received a special letter of congratulations from the Governor of Vermont (it has been written by both Democrat and Republican administrations now).

The families love it, Englese says: “The parents say, ‘Oh, my gosh! This is so welcoming.’” The letter is similar to one a student might receive from a college president, but this letter is from the Governor—welcoming them to the school and the state.

The small-college education offered in Vermont makes the community, both on and off campus, accessible for students and faculty members. The two communities are combined, really—the line between “town and gown” is blurred in Vermont’s small schools—helping students to bring a real education, and real life, into sharp focus. ▀

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