

I wanted to use this opportunity to learn more about the sustainability initiatives at the school where I was working last year. I knew a limited amount about sustainability on campus, and always wanted to devote more time to learning about it in depth, but...life is busy, other things take priority. It always bugged me, though, that I didn't know as much as I'd have liked. So I sent out my emails this morning and poked around on the website. Here's what I got:

Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center is located about ninety minutes North of Duluth, in Finland Minnesota. They house about 300 students and 20-30 staff on their campus, which has grown from one building in the 90s to 7 buildings now, including a dedicated energy center.

1. Heating these seven buildings is no small task (it gets exactly as cold there as you think a place called "Finland, Minnesota" would). The buildings are heated by a large wood pellet oven, which shunts heat through underground tunnels to the different buildings. The pellets burn much more efficiently than traditional firewood, which cuts down the number of deliveries have to come out to the backwoods. We got a truckfull (which would fill our big hopper/silo thing about 2/3 full) every 8 months or so. Wood heating is sometimes considered a renewable resource, sometimes not. In Minnesota, we can ensure that the wood we're buying is coming from in state, and being processed in state, and that the logging policies surrounding the wood are sustainable. At another school where I worked, we sustainably logged our own property using chainsaws and a draft horse, bucking and chopping all our own firewood several times a year. That was cool, and certainly more sustainable, and brought the community together, but we also used other methods of heating (geothermal), and had milder, shorter winters there. In Finland, the snow falls in September and it doesn't stop until May. It's not unusual for winter lows to be in the negative 60s with windchill. I think it is fascinating that people are able to live in such frigid conditions at all. It's beautiful. It's cool. It's very cold.

2. Living Building Certification: Wolf Ridge recently renovated its older dormitory to be Living Building Certified, an incredibly rigorous building standard during which every step of the building, managing, and even living process has to be monitored and accounted for. I had never heard of LBC before Wolf Ridge, and I'm trying to spread the gospel since. It's an incredible program that I hope will continue to catch on the way LEAD did. I think it would be incredible if Antioch considered using LBC standards on any building or renovation projects.

3. Farming! It's a thing you can do in Finland! The Wolf Ridge farm has been running for 5 years now, managed by a local CSA farmer who lives off-grid, produces his own energy, grows all his food, and is totally not even a crazy person. He's great. The goal for the WR farm is to grow all the produce and meats for the dining hall *year round*. In a place with such a short growing season, this isn't easy. They've extended their season with cold frames, and are working on plans for a deep-winter greenhouse (currently there's one in the town of Finland) that would allow for year-round growing. Not only that, but the manager worked with a team from the University of Minnesota to create a report showing it would be feasible to feed all of Northern Minnesota using only local small-scale farming and foraging. Even in a place with such harsh seasonal conditions, it's *still* possible to live and eat sustainably. What I most learned while I was there was that there is very little that a community cannot accomplish with a great deal of hard work and dedication. I think sometimes when things are hard, or seem too difficult, it can bring out a kind of motivation in many people. Or it might just be those dang Minnesotans. I'm not sure. Antioch does have a garden, and we connect with local farms and gardens, but I don't think we have any cold-weather growing infrastructure. I think giving students skills in how to build and manage sustainable winter farms would be a wonderful program, especially here in New England, where many of us are from NH, ME, and VT. There are a lot of misconceptions about what's possible when it comes to cold-weather growing. If Finland can do it, so can *anywhere* in New England.

I think the barriers to these projects are often based in finances and people-power. The community has to get behind projects like these in full force, not just a “I generally think that’s a great idea” kind of way. That was what I was so impressed by at WR. They are an organization that does *not* have extra money, but has worked very hard to secure grants and donations that invest in the organization. I don’t understand how grants work. I’m pretty sure they’re important.

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Whistle Barkan, Antioch University New England, wbarkan@antioch.edu

Username Whistle