

Focusing on the Environment, as a Discipline and as an Attraction

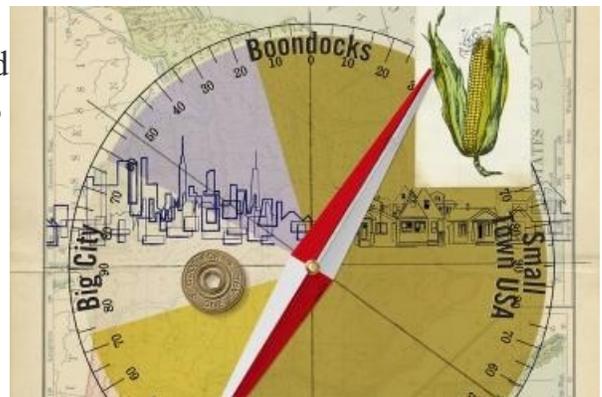
By *Kelly Field* SEPTEMBER 23, 2018

In 2014, Matthew Cooper had what many newly minted faculty scientists dream of: his own laboratory and a generous start-up package at a public research university. Then he heard about an opening at a liberal-arts college in rural northern Wisconsin and decided to give it all up.

Today, Cooper is an assistant professor of biology and natural resources at Northland College, where he has helped build a freshwater-research program staffed almost exclusively by undergraduates. He was drawn by the opportunity to work with students whose scientific careers are just starting, and by the lure of Lake Superior. Both he and his wife grew up on Lake Michigan and wanted to raise their children in a similar environment. Their new home, overlooking the Apostle Islands, "is like a little slice of paradise," he says.

On his way to and from Northland, Cooper might stop to kiteboard on the lake. On weekends, he and his wife pack their two children, ages 9 and 4, into a little fishing boat and poke around the islands.

Northland, with its roughly 650 students, is a small college in a small town: Ashland, Wis., population 8,179. The closest city, Duluth, Minn., is an hour and a half away. Most visitors fly into Minneapolis and drive the four hours to campus.



Attracting faculty members like Cooper to Ashland isn't hard, says Northland's president, Marvin J. Suomi. The location — with the rich research opportunities it presents — sells itself, he says. But students can be more challenging to entice.

"Students are either going to love it or say, This is not the right place for me," Suomi acknowledges. "It's a select group."

Like many small, private liberal-arts colleges, Northland, founded in 1892, has struggled with declining enrollment and budget deficits. Suomi, who grew up 50 miles away, in

Wakefield, Mich. — "a place that is possibly even more remote" than Ashland — was brought on this summer to help shore up the college's finances.

Diversity in Academe

Suomi was living in Los Angeles, where he was CEO of Kajima International, a large real-estate and construction company. His decision to trade LA and the corporate world for Ashland was motivated less by a desire "to go home," he says, than by a belief that his financial acumen could help the college. Suomi has served on the boards of 10 liberal-arts colleges.

"People in Beverly Hills said, 'Are you nuts?' he recalls. "But it felt very purposeful to me."

Still, he jokes, "I've been at this job for two months — check in with me in the dead of winter."

Suomi says he believes that by focusing on its academic niches — the environment and social justice — Northland will be able to survive in an increasingly competitive marketplace. Almost 90 percent of its courses across disciplines address sustainability, and its Sigurd Olson Environmental Institute sponsors annual awards for nature writers. The cover of one Northland marketing brochure shows a student hugging a tree.

"There are small liberal-arts colleges that are going to make it, and those that aren't," Suomi says. "I think this is one that will."

Kelly Field is a senior reporter covering student success, equity, and federal higher-education policy.