

How I came to leave Swarthmore after 18 years on the faculty

By Jacob Weiner, Professor of Biology

I arrived at Swarthmore in August 1978, literally the day after I handed in the final version of my doctoral thesis at the University of Oregon. This summer, almost 18 years later, I will leave my tenured professorship here to take a position in agroecology and sustainable agriculture at the Royal Agricultural University in Copenhagen. I have to credit my students for encouraging me to try something that I have always wanted to do.

In December 1993 I met with seven students to discuss possible topics for the first-ever Capstone Seminar in Environmental Studies. This was to be an advanced interdisciplinary seminar within a major area of environmental studies, involving work in at least two, and preferably within all three, of the College's academic divisions. I saw the seminar as an opportunity for me to explore areas outside of biology, to learn more than to teach. I had no idea how it would contribute to changing my life.

Several topics were discussed during that meeting, but only one emerged with both enthusiastic and unanimous support: sustainable agriculture. At first it might seem surprising that seniors at a small liberal arts college would be so interested in agriculture, but upon reflection it's not surprising at all. Agriculture is the basis of modern civilization, the ultimate example of conscious human alteration of the natural world. It is the most fundamental technology. Furthermore the environmental degradation and resultant non-sustainability of farming are among the most important environmental problems facing the world.

The decision to focus on sustainable agriculture could not have suited me more. My interest in agriculture, specifically agricultural ecology, goes back more than 20 years. I had considered going into agricultural botany when I entered graduate school in the 1970s, but the worlds of "pure" biology (represented by the research universities) and applied biology (at land grant universities) are historically very separate. I chose to enter the world of academic science because it offered a more rigorous and broader training.

After coming to Swarthmore—which is about as different from an agricultural university as an institution can be—my involvement in agriculture was limited to discussing it in my courses and seminars and writing a chapter on plant population biology and agriculture for a book on agroecology a few years ago. Now I would at least have the opportunity to study agriculture in a serious way with my seminar students. And though I knew quite a bit about agricultural biology, the Capstone Seminar would also concern itself with the social, political, and economic context

in which agriculture occurs. I would have much to learn.

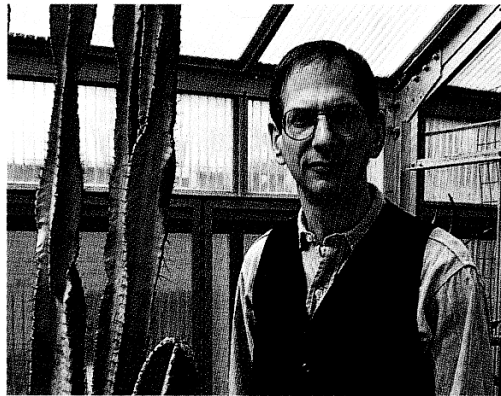
The seminar was very successful in analyzing agriculture from many different perspectives. By the end of the semester, it became apparent to me that agricultural ecology is the field I most want to study. It is not only interesting, but important, and I think I may have something special to contribute. My interest was apparent to the students, and they asked me: Why don't you do agricultural research if you are so interested in it? It simply didn't seem possible. While my research on plant population biology was conceptually and methodologically very close to crop research, I could not pursue serious agricultural research at a liberal arts college without an experimental farm. I had been at Swarthmore for 18 years. In another 18 I would become professor emeritus with a comfortable pension. So why should I become distracted by a fantasy to change fields? Swarthmore is an outstanding institution and has been good to me, but after many years of teaching, research, and administration, it

became clear to me that undergraduate liberal arts education had not become my calling. I have great respect for this type of career and can find little to criticize at Swarthmore. I have done the best job I could, but it is not what I most want to do for the rest of my life. Botanical research, pure and applied, is.

Several months after the Capstone Seminar, I saw an advertisement in *Nature* for a position at the Danish Royal Agricultural University. The job description was straightforward: basic and strategic research in agricultural ecology with the goal of contributing to the development of more sustainable agricultural systems. Although my research is internationally known within plant ecology,

I didn't think I would have a chance to get this position because I have little direct experience in agricultural research. I spent an entire day writing my application letter, describing my interests and the type of research I would like to do. I discussed my book chapter on agroecology and some ideas from the Capstone Seminar. Seven months later I was quite surprised to be offered the position.

My decision to enter this new and quite unknown world was difficult—not difficult to make but to accept. The change will be enormous: leaving friends and family behind to go off to a new country with a strange language, into a new field, working at a totally different type of institution with a very different job description. While it could be a huge mistake, it was clear that if I didn't go, I would always regret not having taken the chance. I realized that combining my scientific interests with my environmental and social values to help make agriculture less destructive of the environment is probably the only real ambition I have ever had. This summer I leave for Copenhagen to try it.



"After getting to know me, my students challenged me to become an environmental scientist. If I did not try to meet this challenge, I would not feel worthy of them," says Professor Jacob Weiner, who is leaving the College this summer after 18 years on the faculty.