Reader's Guide for College Students

The Nature of College

The Nature of College is generally a reader-friendly book, but it moves pretty quickly and sometimes the analytical elements can get lost in the narrative. This reader's guide helps us to focus on some of the larger issues addressed in the book. It's also easy to fall into the trap of reading as a passive pastime, and not as a practical activity that makes a difference in our real lives. This guide is intended to help readers engage the book not just as a story "out there," but also as a challenge to our own thinking, values and habits.

The guide for each chapter includes a section on "Coming to Terms," with some of the concepts and ideas that are most important to understand. As you discuss these terms, think about the ways they help you understand the world better (or not). The guide for each chapter includes a set of "Some Questions for Consideration" as well, helping readers to focus on important issues in the book, but also helping readers to connect the book to their own lives, to the cultural patterns in which they live, and to the new and improved cultural patterns that might characterize a sustainable society.

Prelude

Coming to Terms
Global weirding
Designing minds

As you think about your everyday life at college, what proportion of it prepares you to design a sustainable society? Ten percent? Five percent? One percent? Less? Why is this so?

Farrell contends that "global weirding" is a better term for current climate changes than "global warming." Why? Is this just a sign of his weirdness, or is there more substance to the idea?

Farrell quotes Paul Goodman's challenge to college students: "Think about the kind of world you want to live and work in. What do you need to know to help build that world? Demand that your teachers teach you that." Are you doing that in your education? If so, how? If not, why not? What are the cultural patterns that keep us thinking seriously about the world we want to live in?

Farrell agrees with David Orr that the purpose of college is to prepare "designing minds." Do you agree? If so, why? If not, why not?

Introduction

The introduction contains concepts and ideas that appear in virtually every chapter of *The Nature of College.* As you encounter them in other chapters, you can come back here to remind yourself about the unusual way that Farrell has framed the issues in this book.

Coming to Terms

Culture of nature
Cultural work
Romantic nature
Resourcism
Hidden curriculum
"Natural"
Common sense/uncommon sense
Cultural scripts
Materialism
World processing
Moral ecology/ethics of everyday life
Expressed values/operative values
The "good life'
Thoughtlessness/thoughtfulness/mindfulness
Individualism
Systems/symptoms

Individualization of responsibility
Institutions
Institutionalization of responsibility
Externalities
Habits/habits of our hearts/habitat
Systems/systems thinking/feedback loops
Natural resources/cultural resources
Full-cost accounting
Undergraduate cynical
Hope/histories of hope/hoping mechanisms
Words/rhetoric/persuasion
Exploratory essay
Culture of permanence
Empathy as a way of knowing

Farrell begins the introduction with a discussion of the culture of nature. How does this concept complexify our common-sense understandings of the nature of nature? What practical good is it?

How is Farrell's definition of materialism different from our everyday use of the word? How is our materialism linked to "world processing?" And what good is an understanding of consumer culture?

How is "moral ecology" different from ecology? What's the difference between expressed and operative values? What do we gain from an understanding of the moral ecology of everyday life?

On p. 8, there's a list of operative values that Farrell calls the "environmental values of college culture." How are these values environmental?

Why is there a section on institutions in this chapter? Isn't this a book about nature?

Farrell contends that "words structure our worlds," and he offers some examples of the ways that words don't just express our ideas, but shape our thinking as well. Can you think of other words that influence your common-sense relationship with the natural world? And what are the words that are helping you see your world more clearly, the ones that allow you to challenge worldviews and change the world?

Are you ready to be an "ecologician?"

Chapter 1: Waking Up to Nature

Coming to Terms

Disengaged pragmatism	Sabbath
Cultural work	Toilet bowl principle
Time poverty	Impression management
Convenience	Ecosystem services
Thinking in time	Beauty
Presentism	Mindfulness
Progress	Regenerative design
Posterity	Systems thinking/ linkingthinking
Extinction	"Normal"/"natural"

"Cultural work"—the idea that everyday actions, artifacts and entertainments reinforce (or challenge) deep cultural values, institutions, assumptions and expectations—is one of the most important concepts of this book. What does Farrell mean be cultural work, and how does it show up in our daily lives? How do we get worked over by the cultural work of everyday events and amusements?

The first part of this chapter is about "thinking in time." How does your everyday life look different to you when you view it through different time frames? How is convenience an example of thinking in time? When does convenience become an inconvenient truth?

Farrell contends that "we are making history with each of our everyday actions," but few of us usually think so. What would happen if we began to understand ourselves as agents of history, whether or not we intend to be?

On pp.19-20, Farrell summarizes the ecosystem services that nature provides for us. How many of these services would you like your grandchildren to enjoy? What are you doing about that desire?

Is there a way for humans to offer ecosystem services too? Can we design our lives to be part of nature's regenerative designs? What's one good example of regenerative design in American culture?

When "shit happens," what else happens? What kind of cultural work happens in our bathrooms in the morning? Where (besides the toilet) does your life link up with "the toilet bowl principle" of American life?

If we're in the water cycle when we're in the shower, when are we ever out of nature's cycles? Does this change our conception of "getting back to nature?"

When you look in the mirror in the morning, do you see "nature looking into nature?" Do you see the complexity of the student body and its ecological relationships? How would systems thinking help us see ourselves more clearly?

Who decides what's normal? How much freedom do we have to set the norms for our own lives? To influence the norms of our culture? Where have you come in conflict with cultural norms, and what did you do about it?

At the end of this chapter, Farrell offers some suggestions for "waking up to responsibility," suggesting that a new mindfulness could help us in designing a more sustainable college culture (and American culture). Working from your own experience and your own studies, can you add five more suggestions?

Chapter 2: The Nature of Stuff

Coming to Terms

Peer socialization	Banality of evil
Consumer individualism	Decontextualization/recontextualization
Indi-filiation	Murketing
Comparison shopping	Structural sin
Just-in-case consumption	Secondary markets
Upscaling/downscaling	Voluntary simplicity
Buy-o-sphere/biosphere	Social construction of cool
Embodied energy	Work-and-spend
Phantom load	Tools for conviviality
Invisible complexity	Ecological materialism
Ignorance	

Why—socially, psychologically, economically and politically—do we have so much stuff? What's it for? What's it mean?

On p. 39, Farrell includes a dorm-room inventory for one of his students. What would your inventory look like? Why—individually and culturally—is all of that stuff there? What cultural and environmental patterns explain your stuff?

When we think of stuff, we don't usually think of energy. What happens when we begin to think about the embodied energy in our stuff?

How do marketing and marketing affect our relationships with stuff (and the natural world)? How do advertisers sell your values back to you in the form of commodities?

What's the politics of advertising? How does government make it easier (or harder) to have too much stuff? Do you support subsidizing advertising with a tax deduction?

Would you support legislation requiring full-cost accounting for the stuff we buy? Would you support extended product liability laws requiring manufacturers to design stuff so that they could take it back and recycle it?

Do you use any environmental guidebooks or certification programs before you buy your stuff?

What's at the end of your personal waste stream? Where does your garbage go? Where's the "away" when you throw stuff "away?"

When the buy-o-sphere threatens the biosphere, what can we do, individually and collectively? What are you doing now? What measures might help to curb the *culture* of consumption?

Why does Farrell want us to be more materialistic instead of less? How could we practice ecological materialism, both individually and collectively?

Chapter 3: The Nature of Clothes

Coming to Terms

Fitness	Jeanetic engineering
Fashion/obsolescence	Remote control
Comfort/comfearth	Sweatshopping
Excorporation	Ordinary consumption
Sexcess	Ethics of globalization
Appeerances	Neoliberalism
Consumption community	Conspicuous frugality
Totem	Brand equity
Ideology of choice	Right relationship

Farrell identifies at least seven reasons that we buy clothes. Can you add to his list?

How do appeerances work in your life? How do peers socialize you in your choice and use of clothes?

What's the story of your jeans? See if all the steps of jeanetic planting and processing are on the manufacturer's website. If no, write to them and tell them you want to know.

How do our clothing brands brand us? If you wanted to dress more environmentally, what brands would you wear? Or would you wear brands at all?

What's sweatshopping? How is it an environmental justice issue? What's your ethic of globalization? Out of sight and out of mind? Something else? Does your ethic show up in what you wear?

What's the politics of clothes? What political policies (domestic and international) make it easier to exploit other people and the world's environments? What groups are working to change those policy rules? What "new rules" would make it easier to be good?

What's "brand equity" and how can it be useful to movements for social and environmental change?

On your campus, how could you begin to create a culture of conspicuous frugality?

Chapter 4: The Nature of Food

Coming to Terms

Food, food system, food chain, foodshed

Topsoil/soil erosion/eating dirt

Pesticide/herbicide/fertilizer

Dead zone

Chronic hunger, malnutrition

Nutritionism

Commodity, culture of commodification

Natural capital, nature's economy

Columbian Exchange

Cultivated wildness, domestication

Side effects

Consumer forgetfulness

Monocultures/monocultures of the mind

Transcontinental strawberry

Crude foods

Intensive/Extensive pleasures

Vegetarianism/vergetarianism

Locavores

CSA—community-supported agriculture

Permaculture/perennial polyculture

Mindfulness

Grace, gratitude, gift economy

Just food

Social trap

Politics of food

Politics of consciousness

What's the common sense of a college cafeteria? What's on your mind when you go to eat? What's not on your mind?

How and why does industrial agriculture work so well to feed the world (except, of course, the thousands of people who die of starvation every day) and degrade it at the same time?

If you are what you eat, what are you today? Make a list of everything you've ingested (solids and liquids) in the last 24 hours. What's your foodshed? What difference did your consumption make to anyone else but you? How did your eating affect the planet?

How many crude foods did you eat today? How many food miles does it take to make a hamburger on your campus?

How is the food service on your campus changing the menu for sustainability? Check out the company's website for more information. Ask for a behind-the-scenes cafeteria tour focusing on sustainability.

Have you ever experienced the extensive pleasures of food? If so, how? If not, why not?

What's grace and why might it be important even to people who don't pray?

What's the politics of your food? How do politicians and their policies (especially farm policy) affect your diet? What's the food politics of the future? What can we do now (individually and institutionally) to move toward that new politics?

Farrell makes at least seven suggestions for making the food system more sustainable. Using the AASHE website, see how many other suggestions you can add to his list. How many of these options are possible on your campus? Why or why not?

Chapter 5: The Nature of Cars

Coming to Terms

Need, necessity, social construction of necessity
Auto-motive
Car culture
Rite of passage
Auto-nomy
Car-acter
Homo automotivo
Carcooning
Escape, car-scape
Technological fix
Common good/commonweal/the commons
System justification
Oil wars
*My*opia
Bounded freedom

Regenerative design
Reverse adaptation
Feedback
Hypermiling
Cost, real cost
Road kill
Normal accidents
Boundary effect
Habitat fragmentation
Pollution
Sinks
In-car-ceration
Gas tax, carbon tax
Cap and trade, Cap and dividend
Smart growth
Carma

How many miles are on the odometer of your car? If a car is, as Farrell says, a meaning machine, what does that mean, individually and culturally and environmentally?

After you were born, did you come home in a car? What other steps were important in your automotive socialization? Do cars seem natural to you?

Getting a driver's license is probably America's #1 rite of passage to adulthood, and it won't disappear soon. But the skills and virtues needed to drive a car are not the ones we need for a sustainable future. If you were to design a substitute ritual for a sustainable culture, what would it include?

Farrell suggests that there are ten components of the common sense of cars. What would you add to his list?

As a counterpoint, he also offers an uncommon sense of cars. Which do you think are his strongest arguments? Weakest?

Farrell uses the term "technological fix" in two ways. Which seems more appropriate to you? Why?

Make a systems map of American car culture, including natural resources, extraction, manufacturing, distribution, sales, advertising, infrastructure, insurance, environmental impacts, and junkyards, as well as socialization, driver's ed, motivations/intentions, unintended consequences, and other elements you might add.

Given that most Americans don't think about the complexities of car culture, what are five ways to make people more conscious/conscientious about car use?

What's the politics of cars? How do political policies support the driving we do? What kinds of politics/policy could improve our car culture?

Chapter 6. The Nature of Screens

Coming to Terms

Screenagers
Multitasking
Mediated lives
Facebook/Farcebook
Technology/ /technological determinism/technological utopianism
Invisible technology
Appropriate technology
Social networking/social notworking
Tele-*vision*
Watching TV, watchfulness
Vegging out/couch potatoes
Sitizenship
Uses and gratifications
Cultivation theory/observational learning
Affluent-world syndrome
Epistemology of TV
Truth/credibility
Attention span/paying attention
Environmental imagination
Anthropocentrism
Good weather/bad weather/disaster porn
News/good news
Infotainment

Decontextualized information
Balance
Pastoral/sublime/commercial sublime
Resourcism
Climate control
Domesticated nature
Greenwashing/green consumption
Capitalist realism
Normal-world syndrome
Unvironmentalism
Me media, *my*opia
Friend/friending/friendship/friendy
Social capital
Culture of distraction
E-waste
Cloud computing
E-materialization, e-tailing
Artificial urgency
Full life-cycle costs
Meaning making
Plot projects
Placebook
Web, web of life

Farrell lists many benefits of screens (TV, computers, video games, smart phones, etc.). Based on your own experience, what would you add to his list?

What's the difference between invisible technologies and appropriate technologies?

How much is our worldview shaped by our tele-*vision*? What kinds of "observational learning" comes from watching your favorite shows? Write a one-page single-spaced summary of what you learn about nature and culture in a single episode of one of your favorite shows. Send it to dr.america@gmail.com.

Farrell sees many uses of screens as distractions. Do we really live in a culture of distractions? What do we want to be distracted *from,* and why?

Draw a systems map of the television in your room, including the TV itself (resources, extraction, processing, manufacturing, shipping, distribution, retailing), TV watching (socialization, advertising, peer pressure, conversations, opportunity costs, etc.), programming (production, corporations, sponsors, advertising), including the feedback loops between the different elements.

Farrell shows how TV ads *use* nature to sell stuff? Can you think of any ads that actually serve the environment (and not just greenwashing)?

We often think of electronics (and especially computers) as a kind of de-materialization, but there are material inputs/impacts of our screens. Like what? How could we make those inputs and impacts more visible?

Chapter 7: The Nature of Parties

Coming to Terms
Fun/*fun*damentalism
Wild/Wild party
Beer/beer pressure
Neophiliac
Dehumanization/rehumanization
Social learning
Social capital
Positive psychology
Flow
Happiness

Farrell's students taught him almost everything he knows about parties—only the interpretations are his own. What did they miss in describing a wild party, and what did he miss in making sense of them?

Why *is* fun so central to college culture, when it's hardly ever in the mission statement? What good is fun in "the good life?"

Make a list of things that are fun (and not fun). What patterns do you see in the two lists?

If we lived happier lives, would we need to party so much? Or would life *be* a party?

Do you think that Americans/college students are "amusing ourselves to death?"

How much is boredom a factor in student life? How is boredom socially constructed, and how are our solutions socially (and commercially) constructed too? Why can't we live in a society that's less boring?

On *The Nature of College* website [www.natureofcollege.org], there's a cartoon of Thoreau playing beer pong. If Thoreau spent a week with you, what would he say about your life? And what would you say to him?

If college prepares us to succeed in the world as it is, and that world's not sustainable, isn't that a definition of desperation [literally, "lack of hope"]? Do we lead lives of quiet desperation?

What makes you truly happy? How could you increase the happiness (qualitatively and quantitatively) in your life)? In the lives of other people in your culture? How could institutions be configured to make more people happier?

Sustainability isn't just keeping the earth's ecosystems minimally intact; it means designing a society that promotes human fulfillment for all people for all time. How would you change your college (and college classes) to make them more fulfilling? And how could you assure that future people will find that joy and fulfillment too?

If we were using our designing minds (p. xiii), how might we re-design weekends for more sustainable fun and joy? And how would we re-design environmentalists so that it wasn't just doom-and-gloom grouches? Is it possible that environmental activism could be more fun than fun?

Chapter 8: The Nature of Sex

Coming to Terms

Sexual fun, fun morality, hookup, hookup culture
Sexile, sexting, sexy, "good sex"
Players, sluts, walk of shame, stride of pride
Double standard
Birth control
Romantic love
Romanticization of commodities
Commodification of romance
Pornography, pornification
Intercoarse, raunch culture
Adultescence

Cohabitation
Birth control, precautionary principle
Intercourse, population increase
Sexually transmitted infections (STIs)
Moral drift
Culture of silence
Creation, co-creation
Passion, compassion
Biophilia
Ecology of love, extensive pleasures of love
Casual sex, causal sex

Chapter 9: The Nature of Religion

Coming to Terms

Secularization
Going deep
Lived religion
Privatism
Flexidox
Spirituality
Spiritual, but not religious
Moralistic therapeutic deism
Social gospel, ecological gospel
Identity lockbox
Uncool
Freedom of religion, freedom from religion
Don't ask, don't tell
Parachurch
Justice
Vocation, consumption as vocation
Good work, good job
Stewardship, dominion, domination
Creation, creativity, decreation
Sacramentality
Holy Land, holy ground

Humility, reverence, gratitude, grace
Mysticism, wonder
Sabbath
Biophilia
Seasonality
Liturgy, celebration
Ecological intelligence
Simple living, asceticism, conspicuous
frugality
Zen affluence
Right livelihood
Downshifting
Discipline, restraint, limits
Prophetic tradition
Endangered species
Trickle-down economics
Overconsumption, underconsumption
Practices
Virtue
Soular power

Where do you and your friends fit in the world of religion and spirituality described in this chapter? Is religion part of your campus culture, or is it a counter-culture in a secular culture?

What do you think of Tim Clydesdale's idea that college students stow their religious values in an "identity lockbox" while they're busy with everyday life management at college?

What do you think of Smith and Denton's description of "moralistic therapeutic deism?" Does it describe your religious commitments? Those of most people on your campus? What's the consequence (if any) of such a creed? Or is it just inconsequential?

In the phrase "American religious values," which adjective is more powerful—American or religious? Is American culture religious, or is American religion Americanized? What's the evidence?

If you're religious or spiritual, what difference does it make to anyone else buy you? How does your religion/spirituality shape your responses to social institutions? How does it shape your work? How does it shape your everyday consumption choices? Driving behavior? Sexual practices? Party time? How does it shape your environmental values (and practices)? Why?

How does your college deal with the relation of religion and the environment? How is religion a part of the culture of nature on your campus?

Farrell lists ten examples of religion as a natural resource for environmentalism. Which seem most sensible/useful to you (if any)? Why?

Do you think churches can assist in the ecological revolution of the 21st century? If so, how? If not, why not?

Is there a culture of silence on your campus? Can people talk freely about their deepest values? Do they? Why or why not?

Where do the big questions about the meaning of life (and not just human life) get asked (and discussed) on your campus? Are you a part of those discussions? Why or why not?

Chapter 10: The Nature of Politics

Coming to Terms

Motivated disengagement	Citizen, sitizen
Social contract, postwar charter	Monitorial citizenship
Cheap-energy minds	Me, the people
Green taxes	The "real world"
Regulation	The [name of college] bubble
Perverse subsidies	Tree-hugger
Political/apolitical socialization	NIMBYism
Mediated politics, media bias	Instrumentalism, credentialism, careerism
"I"'m not political	American Dream
Cynicism, undergraduate cynical	Net politics, netizens
Unvironmentalism	Participatory democracy
Apathy	Communitarianism
Hypocrisy	Obamamedia, Obamamania
Optimism, hope	Symptoms, systems
Activism, passivism	Individualization of responsibility
Partisanship, apartisanship	Institutionalization of responsibility
Ignorance excuse	Cap-and-trade, cap-and-dividend
Silence, silent majority	Carbon tax
Posterity	Environmental justice

When college students think of politics, what are the first words and/or images that come to mind? Why?

When you look at your own political socialization, how did you learn (by expression and example) to do politics? Who socialized you most—parents, peers, teachers, media, or someone else? And what's the result: what's your operative political participation?

When people say that "I'm not political," what do they really mean? What are the primary patterns of this apolitical pride?

Do you encounter "undergraduate cynical" in your crowd or on your campus? What are the deeper effects of this worldview?

On pp. 233-36, Farrell suggests that higher education is to some extent responsible for students' apolitical activity. What do you think? Has your education conformed to the patterns that Farrell points out? Or has college helped to make you an activist citizen?

On p. 241, a table illustrates the difference between citizens and consumers. When you look at your life analytically, where would you classify yourself and why? Who gains most when Americans like you act as "sitizens?"

What's the difference between the individualization of responsibility and the institutionalization of responsibility? Where do your representatives stand on the issues of institutional responsibility? Why aren't environmental issues more important in today's political discourse? How can you help to change that?

11. Making Environmental History

Coming to Terms

Progess, success	Designing minds
Default settings of culture	Negawatts
Fun, fulfillment	Thrift, thriving
Corporations, advertising	Prosperity, sufficiency, enoughness
Making history	Free market, commercial capitalism
Complexity, complicity	Remote control
Business, business as usual	Precautionary principle
Social trap	Culture of permanence
Rhetoric	Social marketing
Commons sense	Ecological revolution
Tragedy of the commons	Invironmentalism
Triumph of the commons	Happily ever after: sustainability
Sunshine, solar power	

Farrell contends that we all make history every day, even though we're not intending to. How do you think that historians a hundred years from now will judge college culture and American culture? What will your grandchildren say to you in the year 2050? Are you making the history you want to make?

On p. 253, Farrell presents two sets of American (environmental) values. As you map your life, which side are you on? Why?

Farrell contends that college students need to develop (and practice) a new *commons sense* and he offers ten guidelines for this new *commons sense*. Which of them seems most crucial for the ecological revolution of the 21st century? How can you help, individually and institutionally, to convert this commons sense into common sense?

The illustration on p. 261 is a static rendering of an interactive webpage that explores the complex interrelationships of a culture of permanence. Check it out at http://www.reliableprosperity.net/. Is this your idea of a new American Dream? If not, what would you change? If so, what would you change in your life to make this dream a reality? And how will you begin to institutionalize your environmental values?