

# Chapter 16

## Community-Based Folk High Schools in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark

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### Introduction

In the broader discussion of the American community college and how it has served as a model to other countries around the world (Kintzer and Bryant, 1998), little has been written about its impact in the Scandinavian countries of Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. This is likely because there is no direct counterpart to the community college in Scandinavia – instead, these countries offer a variety of educational opportunities which, collectively, serve the diversity of purposes met by community colleges in the United States. While the Scandinavian “folk high school” (known as *folkehøjskole* in Denmark, *folkehøgskole* in Norway, and *folkhögskola* in Sweden) has long been cited as the Scandinavian equivalent of America’s community-based tertiary education system (e.g., see Greenberg, 1991), it is actually only one unique facet of Scandinavia’s approach to nonuniversity adult education.

Scandinavian countries meet the diverse goals of American community colleges in various ways; here, we focus specifically on “folk high schools.” This system of nonformal adult education originated in Denmark in the mid-1800s, and, like the community college system in America, was founded on the premise of “welcoming all who desire to learn, regardless of wealth, heritage or previous academic experience” (AACC, 2007). Folk high schools emerged in response to the need to educate rural citizens who would not otherwise have access to higher education; since then, they have spread to urban areas as well, but continue to serve a unique set of functions in each Scandinavian country. In Norway and Denmark, folk high schools remain resolutely outside of the official educational system, offering a year of courses which do not directly contribute toward one’s degree, but instead offer students the invaluable opportunity to explore various topics and subjects without concern for grades. In Sweden, folk high schools offer both a nongraded “year off,” as well as the opportunity for students to complete their upper secondary school requirements in a noncompetitive, individualized setting.

In this chapter, we use Scandinavian folk high schools as a counterexample to the prevailing trend of exporting American models of tertiary education to other countries, given that – prior to the emergence of the first “junior college” in America in 1901 – Scandinavia had already developed its own unique form of

egalitarian, community-based education. Indeed, as we shall discuss, the folk high school model itself was imported to America by a handful of socially conscious individuals who were inspired by its underlying philosophy; while these early schools were ultimately short-lived, and did not directly influence modern community colleges, we hope (like Gilliland, 1986) to show that researchers interested in improving and/or expanding the American community college model could benefit from a comparative study of folk high schools, a form of tertiary education which remains little known in the United States.

## Methodology

Data for this chapter were collected from both primary and secondary sources. Both authors have often been to Scandinavia. Rust has spent considerable time in Scandinavia and has written extensively on Norway's educational system (e.g., see Rust, 1989). Bagley – of Norwegian descent – traveled to Norway and Sweden in May 2007, specifically to visit representative folk high schools in each country, gathering pamphlets and brochures, and talking to dozens of teachers and citizens about their impressions. In addition, Bagley conducted an interview with Øyvind Brandt, director of information for Norwegian folk high schools, and a former folk high school teacher himself.

Additional data was collected through extensive reading of books, articles, and online sources. Academic literature on folk high schools in the last 30 years or so is scarce, with Steven Borish's seminal ethnographic text on Danish folk high schools, *The Land of the Living* (first published in 1991), remaining the primary recent work on the subject. Fortunately, the Internet is a wonderful source of up-to-date information on folk high schools in Scandinavia; each country has a central Web site (see bibliography) with basic information on the folk high school system (often in English, for foreign visitors), and each school has its own Web site with further detailed information on courses offered.

## Tertiary and Community Education in Scandinavia: An Overview

The need to make higher education accessible to larger populations of students has long been met in America through community colleges, which serve four primary functions: career (vocational–technical training); collegiate (academic transfer of general education courses); remedial (compensatory classes); and so-called community education, which meets the short-term goals of community members seeking classes for personal interest, recreation, or lifelong education (Cohen and Brawer, 2003). As we will discuss throughout this chapter, the latter function is the one most clearly addressed by Scandinavian folk high schools – which, like

community colleges, provide services “created out of local community interests and demands” (Wang, 2004); yet the need for remedial courses is also being met, in Swedish folk high schools.

As noted previously, the above set of four goals – career, collegiate, remedial, and community education – are not met by a single institution in Scandinavia. Over the years, Denmark, Sweden, and Norway have each developed a range of post-compulsory educational opportunities – usually funded by the government – in order to meet the shifting needs of their adult populations. Before discussing adult education in Scandinavia, however, we begin by briefly describing the compulsory education system leading to tertiary education.

In Scandinavian countries, compulsory education lasts from first to tenth grade. The period from first to sixth or seventh grade is known as primary school; the period from seventh or eighth to tenth grade is known as lower secondary school. After graduating from lower secondary school, Scandinavian students are entitled to attend upper secondary school (usually for 3 years) on either a vocationally oriented track or an academically oriented track.

After 1 year of general education courses, students on the vocational track may choose from a wide range of career-driven subject areas, including options as diverse as construction, economics, welding, bartending, or tourism. Thus, the vocational–technical training aspect of American community colleges is offered to Scandinavian students while they are still teenagers in upper secondary school. Meanwhile, students on the academic track make progress toward entering a university rather than focusing on a specific career goal; however, it is important to note that even students who have been on the vocational track are given the opportunity to qualify for higher education as part of their general secondary schooling, by taking additional courses.

Unlike in the United States, university undergraduate degrees in Scandinavia typically require 3 (rather than 4) years of study, and are highly specialized. Rather than taking 2 years of broad lower division courses (such as those offered at community colleges in the United States), students in Scandinavia enter a university with a specific undergraduate degree in mind, and begin working immediately toward it. Thus, the “collegiate” goal outlined by Cohen and Brawer (2003) – that is, the use of community colleges as “transfer” colleges to 4-year universities – does not, in general, apply to the Scandinavian higher education system.

There is an exception, however. In 1969, the Norwegian government began a movement to implement “regional colleges” throughout the country, in an attempt to “extend equal opportunity and employment-oriented education to rural and remote areas” (Kintzer, 1974, p. 303). Today, there are 25 “university colleges” throughout Norway, though they are no longer necessarily in rural or remote areas. These colleges offer more vocationally oriented courses (lasting between 2 and 4 years), as well as some introductory subject-area courses which may be applied to a university degree. Oslo University College, for instance, offers around 50 different professional higher education programs, and enrolls approximately 11,000 students each year. It was formed in 1994 by merging 17 smaller colleges in the Oslo area; similarly, the university college in Bergen (the country’s second largest city) was formed in 1994

through the merging of six former independent colleges, and currently enrolls approximately 6,000 students per year. University colleges are under the same regulation as universities, and are considered to be on par academically; indeed, credits are easily transferable between university colleges and universities.

The two remaining goals of American community colleges – remedial education and community education – are the focus of this chapter. All three Scandinavian countries offer adult citizens the opportunity to take remedial courses which will allow them entrance into higher education: in Norway, these courses are offered through what is known as a folk university (*folkeuniversitetet*); in Sweden, they are offered through either a folk high school (*folkhögskola*) or a folk university (*folkuniversitetet*); and, in Denmark, they are offered through a variety of “liberal adult education” venues (known collectively as *folkeoplysning*). The goal of short-term “community education” is also met through each of these venues, as well as through folk high schools in both Denmark and Norway.

We should point out here that the term “folk high school” – while originating from a uniquely Danish concept – has taken on different forms over the years in each Scandinavian country. Swedish folk high schools are distinct in that they offer remedial education courses in addition to broader community education, while both Danish and Norwegian folk high schools remain resolutely outside of the formal education system. We should also note that we will not be discussing German and Austrian folk high schools (*Volkshochschulen*) here; while sharing the same name as their Scandinavian counterpart, these schools fill a unique national role of their own. Finally, due to space constraints, we will not be discussing folk high schools in either Finland or Iceland, though these non-Scandinavian countries are part of the Nordic Folk High School Council as well.

In the following section, we describe the current status of folk high schools in Scandinavia. First, however, we discuss the origin of folk high schools as a unique educational concept.

## **Folk High Schools: A Scandinavian Phenomenon**

The theoretical and inspirational force behind folk high schools was the Danish Lutheran bishop Nikolai F. S. Grundtvig (1783–1872) (Allchin and Lossky, 1997; Fain, 1980a; Hart, 1927; Hollman, 1936). Denmark found itself crippled by the devastating Napoleonic wars in the second decade of the 1800s, and Grundtvig was the driving force for reviving a spirit of nationalism in his native country. He challenged the pervasive ideology of rationalism in higher education, arguing that while the university might remain grounded on the foundation of rationalism, a different kind of national educational institution should also be founded – one which was grounded in passion and nationalistic feelings. He believed a school like this could help restore Denmark’s cultural heritage and national spirit.

Grundtvig was concerned with the common people, the “folk” of the nation. He believed that both spiritual and national feelings could only be restored through

music, poetry, myths, informal lectures, and community meetings. Although Grundtvig never established a school, he is universally regarded as having given birth to the idea of a “school for the people” – a “folk high school” which would equip peasants with the intellectual and spiritual equipment necessary to restore both nation and church (Allchin, 1994).

The first Danish folk high school appeared in 1844, in what is today known as Schleswig Holstein, in Germany. The concept quickly spread outside Denmark, first to Norway (in 1864), then to Sweden (in 1868), and finally to Finland (in 1889). Early folk high schools were originally created to meet the everyday needs of farmers (Begtrup and Lund, 1980), to help them resolve “basic economic and social needs,” with an emphasis on “personal development, good citizenship, and democratic participation, together with practical knowledge of agriculture” (Mortensen, 1967). A sharp distinction was made at the time between “formal education” and the type of education offered at folk high schools. In formal education, a primary reason for studying is often to qualify for a job and to earn a living. The folk high school does not address vocational issues so much as it claims to be a school for life. As we shall see, this emphasis on self-determination – and an explicit resistance to “rationalizing” education in terms of work – remains a distinctive feature of Scandinavian folk high schools even today, despite the prevailing trend to address market demands through restructuring higher education (Fägerlind and Strömqvist, 2004).

Grundtvig’s initial vision for folk high schools was different from what eventually emerged (Borish, 2004). Grundtvig’s ideal was to bring together all of Denmark’s “best minds” into one central folk high school, to prepare them for becoming leaders in their democratic nation. Instead, as folk high schools in all three Scandinavian countries began to appear, each developed its own ideas about what was most needed for local citizens. Norwegians, for instance, explicitly rejected Grundtvig’s emphasis on elitism, instead advocating the teaching of peasant dialects (Paulston and LeRoy, 1980). Both Norway and Finland emphasized the propagation of nationalism, using folk high schools as a means to instill patriotic pride in citizens (Fain, 1980; Paulston, 1980). In Sweden, folk high schools played an integral part during the formative years of its democracy (Erickson, 1980), and currently contribute to Sweden’s guiding educational principle of lifelong learning (Strömqvist, 2006).

These days – while they are no longer the only nonuniversity adult education option for students – folk high schools remain a unique and culturally valued form of nonformal education in Scandinavia, offering students the opportunity to learn and explore without concern for grades. Modern folk high schools in Scandinavia share the following common goals and characteristics, which we will address in more detail shortly:

- A desire to foster social and democratic participation
- A boarding-school environment, in which learning to get along with each other is considered an important aspect of the folk high school experience (though not all students live at the schools)
- No exams or course-specific grades

- Pedagogical freedom
- An emphasis on developing both personal and social skills

Folk high school management is decentralized – with each school given an enormous amount of freedom – yet they operate under the auspices of a national folk high school association, which is responsible for policy concerns, political lobbying, marketing, and development. In addition, all Scandinavian countries (as well as Finland and Iceland) are part of a larger Nordic Folk High School Council, which meets four to five times a year to discuss broader issues and concerns about the future of folk high schools.

In the following sections, we describe the current state of folk high schools in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, using a specific folk high school as a case study in each country. We end by discussing how the folk high school idea was transplanted briefly to America at the turn of the century, and note that researchers interested in exploring alternative conceptions of community-based higher education would do well to study folk high schools in more detail.

## **Danish Folk High Schools**

The first folk high school in Denmark came about through the initiative of a professor named Christian Flor, whose stated goal was to create an institution where “farmers and other citizens can receive useful instruction – not so much with regard to technical operations as with regard to his position as a son of the country and a citizen of the state” (Borish, 2004, p. 183). Another key figure in the establishment of the first Danish folk high schools – and someone considered to have “an even greater influence ... than Grundtvig or Flor” – was a man named Christen Kold. In 1851, after meeting with Grundtvig, Kold established a school in Ryslinge, on the island of Fyn, which was visited by several prominent future folk high school principals. From 1864 to 1876, a “veritable explosion” of new schools occurred across the Danish countryside (p. 193).

There are currently 79 folk high schools throughout Denmark, with both short-term and long-term courses offered. Approximately 6,500 students each year enroll in the latter (which last anywhere from 8 to 40 weeks), while approximately 45,000 participate in the former. The schools receive financial support from the Danish government, and, as at universities, tuition is free; however, students must pay their own boarding fees. Long-term courses cost approximately 1,200 Danish kroner per week (for boarding), while the cost of short-term courses varies greatly. Students are not allowed to work while attending a folk high school.

Lifelong learning, democracy, and citizenship are the primary concepts upon which the schools are based; to this end, teaching is conducted through dialogue, discussion, and cooperation, with teachers and students exhibiting mutual respect for each other. According to the Web site of the Danish Folk High School Council: “The Folk High School is a place to meet across differences and become valid

actors in society: to learn to live together in respect and reciprocity in spite of, or even because of, these differences.”

As in all three countries we discuss in this chapter, there is great diversity in the types of Danish folk high schools, with some having a radical political or gender orientation, others exhibiting a conservative Christian religious agenda, and still others focusing specifically on athletics, music, or foreign languages. Four Danish folk high schools are currently geared toward senior citizens, while a few Youth High Schools are specifically for students between 16 to 19 years of age; at the moment, there are no folk high schools specifically addressing the needs of minority or immigrant students. Most courses are taught in Danish. Although all schools maintain a high degree of autonomy in terms of what they choose to teach, they must submit to the tenets of the “Law of the Free Boarding Schools.” This law stipulates the following requirements:

- The minimum age of enrollment is 17.5 years old.
- No exams or tests may be given.
- While specific areas of interest may change, every school must offer a set of “general education” courses.
- Personal enlightenment and democratic education must be the primary aims.

General subject area offerings (which are different at each school) include humanities and social sciences; athletics and gymnastics; art and creativity; music, theatre and dance; nature, science and technology; society, politics, media, and traveling; and social services, therapy, and health. While folk high schools exist explicitly outside of the formal Danish educational system, and students do not receive any type of formal academic credit for their work, many students take courses which eventually lead to a career as, for instance, an actor, a nurse, or a journalist.

### *Danish Case Study: Djursland Folk High School*

Djursland Folk High School (<http://www.djfh.dk/>) is located just north of Århus, on the east side of Jutland. It is one of the newer folk high schools in the country, having taken over a renovated space previously occupied for many decades by an old-folks’ home and hospital. The school is overseen by a board of directors, who set the mission of the school and hire its leaders. Djursland takes advantage of the nearby urban life in Århus, but, like most folk high schools, is situated in a rural, farm-like, open-air setting which exposes students to life in nature. In 2007, the staff consisted of just 13 people, including the director, the cook, the assistant cook, an IT specialist, and an historian.

Djursland Folk High School attempts to establish a lively environment for students of all ages, who come from the entire district of Djursland. There is room for at least 40 people to live in the dormitories at any given time, although the enrollment rate is typically much larger. Djursland provides a wide variety of year-long and/or short-term courses in music, drama, art, social studies, natural sciences,

sports, ceramics, outdoor life, and Internet technology. In addition to these courses, the school offers a full schedule of debates, lectures, projects, concerts, festivals, and excursions. Each day begins with a general assembly at 8:30 a.m., with students engaging in modules of 1.5 h each; the instructional day ends at 6:00 p.m.

According to the school's Web site, it aims, among other things, to help each student "find the melody in one's life," to "paint and draw outside the lines," to "get better at what you already do well," and to "play the leading role in your own life."

## Norwegian Folk High Schools

Although isolated Norwegians were familiar with Grundtvig's ideas, it was a Norwegian named Ole Vig (1824–1857) who is considered to be primarily responsible for inspiring the formation of folk high schools in Norway. He published a popular journal called *The Norwegian Folk School*, and advocated on behalf of establishing a folk school which would "stem from ... the common culture, the natural mode of Norwegian life" (Fain, 1980, p. 104). One of Vig's students eventually opened Sagatun, the first folk high school in Norway, in 1864.

There are currently 77 folk high schools (47 "free" and 30 "Christian") located throughout Norway; most are in rural areas, but a few exist in metropolitan cities such as Oslo and Bergen. The majority of folk high schools (67) are owned and run by private organizations or foundations; ten are run by county or municipal authorities. As in Denmark, tuition is covered by the government, but students must supply the costs of their own boarding, excursions, and other materials. Loans are available to cover these extra expenses.

A major distinction in Norwegian folk high schools has been that between so-called free and "Christian" schools. Christian folk high schools began appearing in the early 1900s, with more of an emphasis on recruiting younger students (15–16-year-olds rather than 17–18), training them in moral values, and giving them tests and evaluations (a practice strictly looked down upon in "free" folk high schools). In recent years, however, "free" and "Christian" folk high school organizations have come together to form a stronger political presence; in the spring of 2007, the two organizations began moving into a new, communal office located in downtown Oslo, and – as just one example of their newfound collective power – specifically lobbied to keep folk high schools "exam-free" for another 7 years.

About 6,000 students attend folk high schools in Norway each year; approximately 10–12% of Norwegians have attended one at some point in their life. According to Øyvind Brandt, director of information for Norwegian folk high schools, an informal (unpublished) study was conducted a few years ago which indicated that approximately 32% of all 18-year-olds were interested in attending a folk high school; it is Brandt's stated goal to learn more about why only one third of these teenagers ended up attending.

Most students attending Norwegian folk high schools are between the ages of 18 and 25, and most have completed their upper secondary education; however, there

are exceptions. Two folk high schools – the *Nordnorsk Pensjonistskole* in Sømna and the *Norsk Senter for Seniorutvikling* in Melsomvik – are geared specifically for senior citizens, while *Ål Folkehøgskole* in Døve is exclusively for deaf students.

The majority of folk high schools in Norway provide on-site housing; indeed, living at the school amongst one's classmates is considered an essential part of the overall folk high school experience. As described on the Norwegian *folkehøgskolene* English-language Web site:

Folk high schools are one-year boarding schools based on the idea of learning for life. We provide an opportunity for you as a student to grow as a person and as a friend, in a small, unique learning community. On offer is a variety of exciting subjects such as outdoor life, theatre, music, media, and more. These are schools where you broaden your horizon, deepen your social insights, get more confidence in yourself, and learn tools for lifelong learning.

Indeed, an important emphasis in Norwegian folk high schools is “to form a community, a common bond within the student body, in class and out of class.”

Courses are taught in a hands-on method, with students contributing ideas and suggestions. A wide range of subjects are offered, including arts and crafts, Bible studies, computers and IT, cooking and baking, creative writing, dance, international studies, leadership training, media and communication, motors and engines, music, Norwegian language and culture, organic farming, photography, riding and horse care, sign language, social services, sound engineering and stage design, sports and outdoor life, and theater. Some schools offer a handful of core subjects to choose from; others – such as *Toneheim Folkehøgskole*, a renowned folk high school which focuses exclusively on classical music – emphasize only one or two. Students spend between 10 and 20h per week studying their core subject, and may choose from a variety of electives as well. Many schools offer courses in Norwegian language and culture for international students, and most schools incorporate school excursions.

The priorities of Norwegian folk high schools have shifted over the years. After World War II, there was enormous debate in the country over how to spread and maintain democracy; thus, in 1948, a “Folk High School Law” was passed, mandating the existence of folk high schools around the country in order to encourage democratic ideals. In the 1970s, emphasis shifted toward personal growth and development. Until this time, all students enrolled in a particular folk high school were only offered one basic set of courses; in the 1980s, this changed, and students were able to select from a wider variety of options.

In 2002, the Norwegian Folk High School Council (the national organization which oversees management of all folk high schools across the country) successfully lobbied to get the Folk High School Law renewed for a second time (it had been renewed once in the early 1980s). Although it is difficult for new folk high schools to be built in Norway, those already in existence are guaranteed funding, and are allowed to operate with relative freedom. The council was also able to guarantee, in law, that no exams may be given in any folk high school, thus securing the ability of folk high schools to emphasize personal growth and development without concern for passing tests. According to Brandt, the Folk High School Council is determined to maintain its autonomy, and to be allowed to operate outside the

confines of the formal Norwegian school system. The goal, he maintains, is for folk high schools to continue to be “an arena for the individual” rather than to serve a larger governmental (or market-driven) purpose.

### *Norwegian Case Study: Elverum Folk High School*

Elverum Folk High School (<http://www.elverumfhs.no/english.html>) – located in a forested area 2h north of Oslo, in between Lake Sagtjernet and the Glomma River – is a representative example of multi-subject folk high schools. It was founded in 1917 by a wealthy man named Helge Vaeringsåsen, who had attended the first folk high school in Norway (in Sagatun), and left 1 million Norwegian Kroner in a fund to build a folk high school in Elverum.

Elverum, like other folk high schools throughout the country, strives to develop a concept known as *danning*, which translates roughly into “formation” of the “whole human being.” According to the *rektor* (principal) of the school, Åsmund Mjelva, Elverum’s goals are to develop personal growth and responsibility in students, to help them to “believe in themselves,” and to provide them with “tools for a better life.” The subjects taught at the school – which change on a regular basis, depending on student demand – are simply a means to this more important end.

About 90% of students at Elverum live on campus. Students are responsible for taking care of their own living space, and have weekly meetings to discuss any issues or concerns that may arise. No alcohol is permitted on campus, students are not allowed to return to school with visible signs of having been drinking, and no drug-taking is allowed. Four meals a day are offered at the school; students can eat breakfast, lunch, and supper on their own time, but everyone comes together for dinner, and nobody can leave the table until everyone has finished.

Core subjects offered at Elverum (some unique, some similar to other folk high schools) include African aid and culture (which involves a trip to Africa); extreme backpacking; band, rock, pop, and soul; photography; theater; outdoor life; Norwegian; snowboarding; and arts and crafts. Electives include fishing, football, photography, outdoor life, glassblowing, guitar, craft-making, ceramics, kickboxing, rock climbing, knife-making, choir, art, motor sports, dark room photography, piano, snowboarding, bodybuilding, sports and games, theater, African dance and music, woodworking, wool dyeing and designing, and volleyball. Wednesdays are a “main group” day, with all students at the school doing activities and projects together, including attending seminars, and participating in the school choir.

By law, students at Elverum cannot receive any grades or evaluations. Instead, students are assessed simply on attendance, and receive a certificate at the end of the school year listing the subjects they have taken, and how many absences they have had (which cannot equal more than 10%). Students themselves take a survey at the end of the year rating their experiences at the school and offering suggestions for improvement; this is the extent of formal evaluation.

In the 2006/07 school year, students from 17 different countries attended Elverum – indeed, international participation is common in Norwegian folk high schools, and encouraged. There are 120 spots at Elverum, and these are typically filled long before the deadline; last year, according to Mjelva, there were 470 applications. In general, students are accepted on a first-come, first-serve basis. The oldest student at Elverum last year was 39, but one year there were two older housewives in their sixties, who, according to Mjelva, said they were “tired of always doing work for other people and wanted some time for themselves.”

## Swedish Folk High Schools

In Sweden, the original idea for a folk high school came from Professor Christian Flor, principal and founder of the first Danish folk high school (Forster, 1944). Flor was surprised by what he saw as a “lack of interest in Sweden ... by peasant farmers and labourers in matters of state,” and expressed his concern to Dr. Sohlman, editor of the Swedish daily paper *Aftonbladet*. Sohlman began advocating on behalf of a school for the common folk in Sweden, and sent one of his subeditors, Dr. Ålund, to Denmark to study the movement. Intellectuals soon took up the debate, and by 1868 the first *folkhögskola* was founded in Skåne, near the border of Denmark. The founders of *Hvilan Folkhögskola* stated that they wanted to create “a place of instruction where the young could not only develop their physical powers and improve their minds, but also their souls, and infuse into their daily life the higher aspirations, and learn that in the less luminous positions good and far-reaching work for the community lay to hand” (Forster, p. 88).

By 1870, 20 schools had been founded in Sweden. In what would remain a typical decentralized managerial framework, much control was given to the principals, with the schools changing continually to meet the needs of the people. For example, when initial winter courses were found to be insufficient, they were extended to year-round courses, and students were allowed to take a second year of study. The *lantmannaskola* (agricultural school) soon arose as a counterpart to the more general social science courses offered, but it shared the same space and leadership. By the turn of the century, youths in industrialized parts of the country began learning about folk high schools, and attended classes during their holidays.

There are currently 148 folk high schools across Sweden. Of these, 105 are run either by various “popular movements” or NGOs, and the remainder are run by county councils or regions. Approximately 30,000 students take part in long-term folk high school courses each year. As in Norway, the minimum age of enrollment is 18, but there is no maximum age limit. As in both Denmark and Norway, tuition is covered by the government, but students must pay boarding costs and other expenses, which average approximately 4,000 SEK (Swedish kroner) per month (as a point of comparison, the average monthly salary in Sweden is about 25,000 SEK). All students are provided with about 2,000 SEK per month from the government, and are able to receive a loan for up to 4,000 additional SEK per month.

The Swedish word *folkbildning* is used to denote liberal, nonformal, voluntary adult education. As noted on the English-language Web page of the Swedish Folk High School Council:

*Folkbildning's* philosophy presumes that all citizens are free and independent individuals, with the right to participate in all aspects of a democratic society. The activities should provide a comprehensive approach, stimulate curiosity and critical thinking; as well as be a part of the crucial process of lifelong learning. *Folkbildning* creates the conditions necessary for people to freely pursue knowledge and contributes toward giving them the opportunity to change their lives.

As in Norway and Denmark, the original folk high schools in Sweden came about due to the realization that “the common folk” needed to be educated beyond an elementary school education in order to make informed decisions about their country and their own future.

According to Swedish Folk High School Council Web site, the primary objective of Swedish folk high schools these days is to provide a “general civic education”:

Folk High Schools offer a unique opportunity to enhance each individual's human resources. The students' experiences of working life and society are put to use, and their contribution is very vital. The schools constitute small, educational societies where each individual makes a difference. Studying in a warm and open environment, working closely with other students and staff stimulates personal growth and development.

Folk high schools are given the freedom to develop their own curricula, within certain limits set by the government. Governmental guidelines stipulate that all folk high schools in Sweden must

- Emphasize common goals and values, as well as human rights
- Encourage multiculturalism
- Keep local demographics in mind when developing curricula
- Encourage lifelong learning
- Coordinate cultural activities with available resources in the area
- Provide accessibility for handicapped students
- Promote general health and well-being, including an awareness of environmental issues and global justice

A general council evaluates each folk high school once a year to ensure that these mandates are being met, and each school submits a report describing its goals and progress; this is the extent of the formal institutional evaluation which takes place.

Unlike Norwegian and Danish folk high schools, Swedish folk high schools are unique in that they are funded partly on the basis of the “basic courses,” or *allmän kurser*, they offer. Successful completion of these courses (which last between 1 and 3 years, depending on previous levels of education) provide students with the equivalent of an upper secondary school “leaving certificate,” and allow students to apply to universities, which in turn are required to admit a certain quota of students with folk high school *allmän kurs* certificates each year. Courses in the *allmän kurser* include Swedish, civics, science, English, religion, and mathematics.

As in Norway and Denmark, no grades are given to students for specific courses; students are simply held accountable through attendance, and may not miss more than 10% of class time. However, in addition to providing proof of *behorighet*

(indicating that a student is “capable” of moving on to university), the *allmän kurs* certificate indicates one cumulative grade (from 1 to 4) for a student’s overall performance (*omdöme*). The following distinctions are made:

- Excellent study aptitude (4)
- Very good study aptitude (3)
- Good study aptitude (2)
- Poor study aptitude (1)

Factors taken into consideration when determining a student’s *omdöme* grade include the development of their knowledge and skills, their capacity for analyzing and processing information, their motivation and persistence, their organizational abilities, and their social skills. Teachers meet to discuss a student’s performance in all the classes, looking at the “whole person” when coming to a collective decision on the final score.

### ***Swedish Case Study: Ingesund Folk High School***

Ingesund Folk High School (<http://www.ingesund.se/>) is located in the Swedish/Norwegian border town of Arvika, a 2-h train ride from Oslo. It was founded in 1905 by Valdemar Dahlgren, in Western Värmland off the shore of the Glafs fjord. Students may choose to live in one of three dormitories or commute from the local community, but most live on campus.

Students wishing to take *allmän kurs* at Ingesund have a variety of options to choose from. In addition to a regular “academic” set of *allmän* courses, they can choose a special “profile” emphasizing either advanced Swedish, studies on homo-, bi-, and transsexuals (“HBT”; gay and lesbian issues), Spanish and Italian, Web design, nature and biology, or handicrafts. These thematic offerings vary from year to year, in accordance with the perceived needs and interests of the community.

In addition to *allmän kurs*, Ingesund offers three other “tracks” of study: music, theater, and environmental studies. Ingesund’s music school is quite renowned, and entrance is competitive. Students enrolled in the music school usually attend for 3–5 years rather than 1, and sleep in a different dormitory.

Ingesund also offers shorter-term courses for community members. During the 2006/07 school year, a highly attended “travel course” was offered to senior citizens, consisting of weekly courses to learn about a foreign destination, and then a culminating trip. Finally, Ingesund houses a special program for unemployed citizens, who take courses in basic computer skills with the goal of eventually finding work. Again, the specific needs of the community are taken into account when determining what types of classes to offer at the school.

Classes at Ingesund are small, with only 10–20 students per class, and often fewer. The emphasis is on communication and dialogue, with teachers serving more as facilitators than lecturers. Students are strongly encouraged to make connections between the material and their own lives. For instance, during a biology class lesson (observed during a visit to the school in May 2007), students listened to a special

lecture on environmental issues, then had an open discussion about the ideas they heard. Afterwards, a student gave a presentation on hearing, using a model of a human ear. Discussion was then opened to the class, with various students sharing their own experiences regarding hearing issues. One student pulled back her hair to reveal a hearing aid; another student discussed her son's inability to accurately gauge his volume when speaking. The atmosphere was relaxed and friendly.

## American Folk Schools

American folk high schools (generally known as “folk schools,” thus dropping the confusing “high school” distinction) originated from two major sources: first, Danish emigrants wishing to preserve their cultural traditions, churches, and educational practices; and second, Americans hoping to copy the Danish model in order to vitalize and bring about fundamental change among farmers, hill people, and the poor in America. The first folk schools in America were established by Danes who emigrated to America either to escape the domination of the Lutheran Church (Mortensen, 1967), and/or to find greater economic prosperity (Houston, 1971). Once they were settled in America, they set about establishing various mechanisms to retain their culture and religious heritage. The first folk schools in America were Elk Horn Folk School in Elk Horn, Iowa (1877); Ashland Folk High School in Grant, Michigan (1882); West Denmark Folk High School in West Denmark, Wisconsin (1884); Nysted Folk High School in Nysted, Nebraska (1887); Danebod Folk High School in Tyler, Minnesota (1888); Grand View College in Des Moines, Iowa (1896); Brorson Folk High School in Kenmare, North Dakota (1902); and Atterdag College in Solvang, California (1911). These folk schools quickly changed characteristics “beyond recognition” (Kulich, 1964), however, and were ultimately short-lived (Larson, 1980), particularly as community colleges began to blossom across the country and addressed many of the needs previously met by folk schools.

American interest in community-based education – including folk (high) schools – flourished once again in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1976, the Folk School Association of America (FSAA) – now known as the Institute for People's Education and Action (IPEA; <http://www.peopleseducation.org/>) – was founded, with the purpose of “advocating and organizing around the Scandinavian concept of the folk school as an adult learning center.” Their current mission is to “identify, support, and facilitate community-based, learner-led education as a strategic tool for community organizing,” and they rely on both individual and organizational membership fees to stay afloat.

According to the IPEA Web site, existing folk schools in America include (but are not limited to) the following, which we list here simply to provide a sampling of the diversity of folk schools in America:

- The North House Folk School (<http://www.northhouse.org/>) in Minnesota, which aims to “create a rich, positive environment that inspires life-long learning in a non-competitive environment”

- The Driftless Folk School (<http://www.driftlessfolkschool.org/>) in Wisconsin, which aims to “support healthy, sustainable communities and personal development by providing creative and meaningful educational opportunities and inspiring lifelong learning for individuals and families”
- The Alabama Folk School (<http://campmcdowell.com/folkschool/index.htm>) at Camp McDowell, which provides “the opportunity for people to come and stay for a week in order to study a topic of their interest”
- The Clearing Folk School (<http://www.theclearing.org/>) in Wisconsin, which aims “to provide diverse educational experiences in the folk school tradition,” in a noncompetitive environment without grades or degrees
- The Camp Sister Spirit Folk School (<http://www.campsisterspirit.com/>) in Mississippi, focusing on social issues such as racism, sexism, and homophobia, and emphasizing “awareness of and appreciation for a shared background through direct, person-to-person interchange”

As should be clear from the brief descriptions above, American folk high schools – just like Scandinavian folk high schools – are designed with local needs and interests in mind, each one offering a unique set of experiences to students. Some – such as the Alabama Folk School – offer weeklong retreats; others, such as Driftless Folk School, Clearing Folk School, and North House Folk School, offer daylong or afternoon classes in local crafts and skills; still others, like the Camp Sister Spirit Folk School, simply serve as a central site for various cultural events and retreats. Despite this diversity of goals and settings, however, they all maintain a common emphasis on learner-centered, nonthreatening, nongraded education. To this end, they remain a distinctive – albeit far less ubiquitous – alternative to community colleges.

### ***American Case Study: Highlander Folk School***

Highlander Folk School (<http://www.highlandercenter.org/>) is a rare American folk school which has endured since its inception in the 1930s. It opened its doors in 1932 in Monteagle, Tennessee, and continues today under the name of Highlander Research and Education Center (Adams, 1980; Bledsoe, 1969). The key player in its establishment was Myles Horton, a devout Christian who identified deeply with the mountain people of Tennessee, and hoped to provide them with socially meaningful educational experiences. While enrolled in the University of Chicago’s Graduate School of Sociology, Horton met a Danish-born Lutheran minister who suggested that the Danish folk school could serve as a model for Horton’s school. Horton began immediately to study Danish culture, language, and folk schools; in addition, he read books such as J. C. Campbell’s *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland* (1921), which gave him additional information about the southern mountain life and people, and how a folk school might contribute to their welfare.

In September 1931, Horton traveled to Denmark to see folk high schools for himself, and he was impressed with the schools’ strong sense of purpose and moral mission (Horton, 1989). In May 1932, Horton returned to the United States, where

he and a partner obtained permission to locate the school on the farm of Lillian Johnson at Monteagle, Tennessee. Since its inception, Highlander has maintained a flexible approach to education, and its programs and personnel have been in constant flux. There are no grades, credits, examinations, or degrees, and “the needs of the students largely determine the curriculum of the sessions” (Glen, 1988).

At the core of Highlander’s current educational activities are residential workshops, clustered around themes such as Grassroots Think Tank, Multilingual Capacity Building, Seeds of Fire: Youth Organizing, and more. Programs last anywhere from 2 days to 8 weeks, and they focus on specific, concrete subjects. A workshop might attract between 15 and 40 adults of various racial, religious, and educational backgrounds, and assists participants in analyzing and responding to the ways in which problems affect them personally.

Staff members refrain from imposing a preconceived set of ideas on students, instead using consultants, movies, audio recordings, drama, music, and written materials to build on the students’ knowledge, and to introduce new values, options, and perspectives. Participants then evaluate their findings, assess their new understanding of their problems, and develop plans to initiate or sustain activities once they return to their communities.

As reflected in its Web site mission statement, Highlander’s goals are very much in line with that of Scandinavian folk high schools:

The goal of Highlander was and is to provide education and support to poor and working people fighting economic injustice, poverty, prejudice, and environmental destruction. We help grassroots leaders create the tools necessary for building broad-based movements for change.

Thus, the guiding philosophy of Highlander is that the answers to society’s problems lie in the experiences of ordinary people themselves.

## Conclusion

As indicated by the title and topic of this book, the American community college model has had an enormous impact on the educational systems of many countries around the world. In this chapter, however, we have provided a counterexample to this trend by illustrating an alternative community-based educational format – one which originated prior to the establishment of the first “junior colleges” in America, and has existed largely outside this prevalent model.

Unlike many educational systems, folk high schools in Scandinavia did not emerge through the ubiquitous model of “cross-national borrowing” outlined by Phillips and Ochs (2003), which involves a linear process of governmental “attraction” to a new idea, legislative decision-making, implementation, and “internalisation” by citizens (pp. 451–452). Instead, the process was more dialectical and “grassroots” in nature, with key individuals and groups taking the initiative to form individual schools, and advocating on behalf of their proliferation.

In Denmark, for instance, Grundvig provided the initial conceptual framework for the idea of folk high schools, but it was men such as Flor and Kold who actually

established the first schools, which served as a concrete inspiration for others. In Norway, a popular journal first disseminated the idea of folk high schools, which quickly became reality; however, it was not until the crisis of World War II – when democracy in Norway was seriously threatened – that the broader need for a means to educate all citizens in democratic ideals was seen, and a “folk high school law” was put into place by the government. Similarly, in Sweden, it was key individuals who advocated on behalf of educating “peasant farmers and laborers,” and eventually a unique system evolved which combined both “general” social science courses and agricultural courses. In America, folk high schools were started by motivated philanthropists (such as Myles Horton), who learned about this unusual form of community education, and decided to try importing it. While American folk (high) schools continue to exist in various parts of the country, however, they were never internalized as an essential part of the country’s higher educational system.

These days the closest counterpart to Scandinavian folk high schools in America are rural community colleges, many of which offer residential boarding (Moeck et al., 2007), and are deeply embedded within the local community’s lifestyle and economic structure (Miller and Tuttle, 2007). Like folk high schools, rural community colleges are limited in terms of the number of programs they are able to offer to students (Hardy and Katsinas, 2007), and must gear their programs toward perceived local needs. Thus, while urban and suburban community colleges characteristically “strive to be all things to all people” (Cejda and Leist, 2006, p. 253), rural community colleges in America are more like Scandinavian folk high schools (and Norwegian University Colleges) in their attempt to meet the specific needs of local constituents.

Yet there are still enormous differences between Scandinavian folk high schools and rural community colleges in America. Folk high schools in all three Scandinavian countries emphasize lifelong learning and personal development above all else (Cohen, 1993); and, while strategic economic or career-oriented objectives may be embedded (either explicitly or implicitly) within the courses offered, these are ultimately secondary to the broader goals of nurturing the “whole human,” and allowing citizens a “transitional year” in which they can consider future educational and employment opportunities. Indeed, higher education in Scandinavia has a long tradition of being viewed as a “social good” (Fägerlind and Strömqvist, 2004, p. 13), and folk high schools fit squarely within this stated goal.

With that said, Scandinavia has not been immune to the effects of globalization and internationalization of the marketplace. While Scandinavian countries remain committed to maintaining a certain level of national autonomy in educational affairs, market-oriented thinking has caused “a restructuring of the public sectors in the Nordic countries ... [and has] strongly influenced their higher education systems” (p. 14). Thus, while their place in the overall educational system is relatively secure at the moment, folk high schools must either evolve to meet competing demands (as is happening in Sweden and Denmark) or continue to stake a strong lobbying claim on behalf of existing outside the realm of market-based educational policies (as Norway has successfully done, at least for the time being). It remains to be seen how well Scandinavian folk high schools will flourish in the uncertain economic future.

As noted earlier, the amount of recent research on folk high schools remains slim, with no data currently available on how folk high school students fare once they enter the job force or enroll in a university. This is likely because, as we have shown, Scandinavian folk high schools exist to serve a different purpose – one more geared toward personal growth and inner development than economic advancement. To this end, we believe that American community colleges can benefit from investigating the folk high school system, which remains committed to meeting the needs of local communities on a level outside of purely economic necessity. In addition, folk high schools offer a unique historical perspective on how institutions of higher education can play a vital part in local communities – a topic addressed recently, for instance, in an article by Miller and Tuttle (2007), who nonetheless do not draw upon the folk high school model in their exploration of nonacademic and noneconomic results of community college activities in rural areas.

In sum, we believe that Scandinavia's folk high schools offer a constructive counterexample to the rapid proliferation of the American community college model around the world. While this model provides an invaluable paradigm for countries struggling to develop a more equitable system of higher education, the history of Scandinavian folk high schools shows us that community education can emerge in a variety of forms – and that there are multiple ways to ensure democratic access to learning.

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