

Stint report from Williams College fall 2015

Introduction

I spent the fall semester 2015 at Williams College, Williamstown MA. Williams College was established in 1793. It is an elite undergraduate college with approximately 2000 students and 350 teachers (the student-faculty ratio is 7:1). The college is private, residential, and liberal arts, with graduate programs in the history of art and in development economics. Williams aim at maintaining a high degree of diversity; US students are admitted without regard to their ability to pay. The college meets 100 percent of every admitted student's demonstrated financial need for four years. More than half of all Williams students receive financial aid from the college.

Williams College is a 'classic' liberal arts college with a long tradition of educating the whole person rather than training students for a defined career choice. Williams have 25 departments, 36 majors, and several concentrations and special programs (I worked in one of these concentrations; Global Studies). The academic year consists of two four-course semesters plus a one-course January term.

My responsibility at Williams in the Fall of 2015 was primarily to organize and teach a 200 level course (first and second year students) in European Union Politics for 16 weeks. I belonged to the department of Political science, in the concentration called Global Studies. My teaching obligations included teaching 1,5 hours twice a week (Mondays and Thursday, and office hours 1,5 hour two days a week. The class was primarily made up of 15 students (a few seniors and first and second year students). Only one of them followed the global studies program, most was political science majors and 2 were science students. Only one of the students had any previous knowledge of European politics so the focus of my course needed to be introductory. In addition to my teaching responsibilities, I participated in seminars, committee meetings and faculty meetings. Also I took part in a seminar twice a week for new employed (first three seminar).

Preparation

Because I brought my family with me to Williamstown I visited Williams early in February to meet with faculty members, look for housing and schools. This trip was necessary and very successful and the welcoming from the college was fantastic. After a few meeting with my contact person it was agreed which course I would teach which gave me a long period of preparation time. My course came about in dialogue with the contact person, who was also the chair of global studies. Williams expressed their interests in a European Union course and after submitting the curriculum from a courses I had taught before we agreed on an

overall framework. After that I was free to construct the course in the way I preferred. Most practical matters, such as soccer for my kids, school and youth center were also arranged very easily thanks to the dean of the college who put me in contact with the persons I needed to talk to.

Teaching at Williams

I did the preparation for my course during the summer home in Sweden and I arrived with my family to Williams in a few weeks before the start of the semester in September. It was very difficult to get a clear sense of the level of the students and their background knowledge before I arrived and once I started to teach I realized that I had to revise it substantially, mainly because the student's previous knowledge in political science was more limited than I had expected. This was due to the fact that being a second year student taking a course in European Union politics does not necessarily mean that you have done any political science before.

Compared to my previous experience from teaching in Sweden, the student population at Williams was significantly different. The students worked very hard in their courses and they were highly motivated. The students at Williams are generally a very homogeneous group, all US born and under 20 years old. They all had a strong educational background, especially the writing skills was good compared to the Swedish students. Because of the extreme competition for admissions at Williams, the admitted students are highly capable of doing the coursework and have been very successful in the high school studies. The students was also highly motivated and seemed interested to learn. In the European Union course taught at Williams I required about the double compare to a similar course in Sweden in terms of readings and essay writing. The students were expected to read 1-2 academic articles or book chapters before every class and they handed in 4 written short essays during the course in addition to the final exam. On the other hand, the student was less used to discussions and hesitant to talk about political issues. I asked colleagues about this and they all agreed and the explanation I got was that they "desperately want to stay mainstream..." or "they are so afraid of offending you that they do not dare to discuss". In my view this is a major problem, especially in a discipline as political science which is also about talking and arguing and debating.

At Williams, a close relation between students and teachers is encouraged (and made possible with the 1:7 teacher-student ratio). The faculty prides themselves on their close, relationships with their students and this is encouraged by the college (e.g., funding for informal dinners, coffee, etc.). It is not that you can take your students out for coffee to discuss a paper; you are supposed to do it. As a Swedish university teacher these expectations did feel as a pressure and to be honest, I never became comfortable in this

role. In order to avoid it I instead offered my availability at my office also outside my office hours and told the students it was always an open door for them to stop by and just talk about anything. They did use this opportunity, and many students came around my office both during and outside the office hours.

University and curriculum structures

In terms of teaching and learning there are several things to learn from a comparison between the American system and the Swedish system that can be made. First, at Williams, the students take 4 courses at a time which meant that my course which (equivalent to 7.5 hp in Europe) was spread over approximately 16 weeks instead of the 4.5 weeks it would be in Sweden. This has several advantages. And gave the student much more time to assimilate the information and reflect. Second, as the teacher has all 16 weeks he or she has the ability to cover almost as much information as in a 15 hp course and to give a number of assignments which can improve learning. In my course I gave the students both readings (approximately 2 articles) for every session and a short essay that ended each teaching block we had. This meant that before the students even started to study for the final exam they had read about 20 articles and written 4 essays about European politics and was pretty familiar with this topic. Third, in the US a teacher does not give an assignment such as read two articles) without following up that the students really read it. I did this by either asking the students to hand in short comments on the article or to prepare questions for the session. This of course takes time and would not be possible on our system considering the few hours we spend teaching a course, but there are still parts that are possible to incorporate. The American way to divide education into small parts, and assess and give feedback on each small part perhaps makes students even more grade oriented and might cause a lack of overall understanding and less independent BUT it makes them learn the content of the course on the way.

Assessment

Grading was a major challenge at Williams, mainly because the American scale and the way it was used at Williams and the ECTS scale are different. Grades are assigned as A+, A, A-, etc to E, with the average grade in a 200 level course being B+ which translates into 90%. In general only A, B and C are used. (If a first year student gets more than one C on an assignment the teacher is expected to hand in a warning notifying the dean that there is a student in trouble). I discussed grading with my contact person and this discussion was enormously interesting and fruitful, not only in terms of understanding how the US system works, but also how I as a teacher can work with grading. At Williams there are no such things as learning objectives and written criteria are rare. In spite of this, I spend more time on explaining my grading criteria and relate feedback to them than I had before, mainly because the system

was new to me and I needed to stand on firm ground. In my course I divided the assessment into 40 % written essays, 10% a map quiz, 10 % attendance and 40 final exam. A major problem is the student's obsession with grades. This was also a topic of discussion in several of the faculty meetings I attended. There was a major concern with grade inflation grades are increasing at an alarming rate at both Williams and other colleges and universities. To address both these problems, the idea of making all courses Pass/fail has been raised but there is a general fear that this would make their students less attractive to universities for further studies or for employers Another way the college addressed this was to set a target for medium grades at each course and if the teachers was above this they became notified. This was not a popular system among teachers.

Educational development for teachers First 3: New faculty orientation

Williams has a fantastic way to introduce their new teachers and visiting professors into their college. After only 4 months at Williams, I feel I knew substantially about the college's culture, policies, teaching philosophies and resources for students and faculty due to the First three seminar I attended twice a week. This was also an opportunity to meet faculty. The introduction is done in two steps. The first step is a few days of work-shops that are held before the start of the semester. During a week a large number of workshops, seminars and social gatherings were offered. This includes everything from library resources and grading policy to also course design and effective teaching.

These introductory activities were helpful especially to new faculty with limited teaching experience. A difference between the courses offered at most Swedish universities and those at Williams is that these were offered *before* the faculty began teaching whereas most of our faculty take these courses after having taught for several years. The second step is a seminar held twice a week during the semester through the First 3 lunches. The lunch was organized at the faculty club where faculty in their first three years of teaching at Williams could join for discussion of various topics. College representatives invited from administration or a senior faculty member gave a brief informal talk about the topic followed by discussion with the participants. The discussions were held in an informal way and you really felt free to ask any kind of questions. Examples of topics laid out were: How to negotiate the Williams' Cultures? How to make use of your office Hours? Academic Resources, Athletics at Williams, The Honor Code, Grades, Grading, and Grade inflation etc. Taking part in these lunches made me learn a lot about Williams specifically, but also about the US system of higher education in general. New teachers got the opportunity to meet at discuss with deans, administrators and other personal in a way that probably never take place at Swedish universities.

Concluding remarks

For my personal experience as a teacher the semester at Williams will have an effect in different ways. First in my duties as a teacher I will spend more time in the future in constructing assignments for students in order to increase their learning. Even if I know this is time consuming I now believe this is the way to improve the students learning. Second I will schedule shorter classes (maximum 2 hours instead of 3), third I will follow the course structure I used at Williams where I combine several parts of assessing the course. I expect this to result in decreased transition rates but increased quality.

On the institutional level as responsible for courses in educational development for university teachers I will try the format of a “seminar” rather than only regular “courses”. It is clear to me how much a new teacher benefits from meeting and discussing with colleagues and persons in positions. From the fall 2016 UPE will start a supervision seminar for teachers interested in learning more and discussion supervision of students. I will also apply for funding for my department to visit Ohio State University which has a large and well developed university development unit where I think our university can learn and be inspired by how university development take place in the US. The head of this unit talked at the Stint Mid-term seminar in Columbus Ohio and gave me great inspiration for how development work can be structured.

I want to end by giving my thanks to STINT who made this possible, to my 15 terrific students at Williams following the course in European Union Politics and to all the wonderful people in Williamstown, MA!

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