

REPORT FROM A SEMESTER AT HAVERFORD COLLEGE

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PREPARATION AND PLANNING

During the fall semester of 2013, I taught the course *Introduction to Hinduism* at the religion department of Haverford College. The college is one of three colleges in Pennsylvania that were founded by the Quakers, the others being Bryn Mawr and Swarthmore, and they cooperate within what is called the tri-co, that is, the three colleges. Students can take courses at the other colleges and between Bryn Mawr and Haverford there is a special blue buss that runs as a shuttle for the students taking courses at the other college. For example, there is only a religion department at Haverford and Swarthmore, which means that Bryn Mawr students wanting to take a religion course needs to enroll for a cross listed course at one of these two colleges.

My contact with Haverford College began during the early spring semester of 2013, when I was assigned two contact persons: one for administrative affairs and one for academic matters. This was a brilliant solution and both persons fulfilled their roles perfectly. I could therefore already in the first half of the semester through email contact with my academic contact, which also was the head of the religion department, begin to take a look at the course that I was to teach during the fall. I choose to let them decide what course I should teach, thus it was foremost the needs of the department that was the basis for the choice and not my own preferences. The course *Introduction to Hinduism* was taught by another adjunct faculty during the spring and I could therefore build on an existing syllabus and list of readings for my teaching during the fall – though I made substantial changes to both.

I had one or two Skype conversations with my academic contact to discuss how different things worked at Haverford, that is, I had to understand many different points where the practice is different from that at a Swedish state university. I can especially recommend for new fellows at the Teaching Sabbatical program to have such electronic meetings early with your contact.

The communication with my administrative contact was handled by email and one especially important topic for me was housing as I was bringing my family with me to stay the whole semester. And also, as for everybody else, the visa application process, which proved to be quite complicated. I must recommend that the fellows are especially clear on that STINT is not a government agency and that the two year home requirement should not apply.

When I arrived in Haverford in April, for a weeklong stay to prepare for the fall, much had thus already been decided. The college had taken great care to receive me properly; a driver collected me at the airport and I stayed in an apartment provided by the college. My administrative contact took me to see the house that the college wanted to let out to us, which was ideal, as it was just beside the campus and I thus had only a few minutes of walk to work. The whole campus is managed as an arboretum and is a very popular place for joggers (there is a nature trail encircling the campus area), so my short walks to the office were pleasant indeed, even more so as the weather the whole fall was extraordinarily beautiful with sunny skies and golden leaves.

During my April week in Haverford, I received an employee card to use in the library, the gym and so forth. Furthermore, I met with my academic contact and discussed the course and had the opportunity to sit in on one of his classes and on one class at the course which I was going to teach during fall, and I also had time to talk with the teacher of that course.

I think to early get a feeling for the teaching culture at the college or university is very important as it is often quite different compared with that in Sweden.

TASKS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

I was an adjunct faculty, and not the only one. Mostly tenured positions are appointed with the help of a tenure track system in which a scholar is employed for a probation period of four years and then after a review given tenure or dismissed. On the side of that system there are rather many adjunct faculty that teach on short term contracts, which can be done for a very long time, and as there is no LAS; there is really no direct way from adjunct teaching to tenure.

Within my field, religions of India, more particularly Hinduism, all teaching was carried out by adjunct faculty and the department was wishing to get a tenure track within that area, which remains to be seen. We were actually three adjunct faculty teaching different areas within that field when I was in Haverford. One thing that struck me especially was the high degree to which teachers were couples. The head of the department, for example, shared a position with his wife, both specializing within the same area. The other two adjunct faculty teaching Indian religions were also married to teachers at the department, one also adjunct and one with tenure.

My course *Introduction to Hinduism* was my sole responsibility. I had more or less total freedom to assign readings and choose themes for classes, ways of examination etc. I, however, built my course on

the preceding version of it running during the spring semester, as I wanted to understand how courses are normally managed at the department. I think that it was a good experience not to be so constrained as in Sweden, in which a course is very strictly regulated by the syllabus and the position in a hierarchy of courses: changes in course literature needs to be approved by a committee or the director of studies. The syllabus in Haverford was a document between me and the students and not something designed to please a bureaucratic system. I thus for example changed the prescribed readings for the second half of the semester when I saw that the working load was too high.

I had two classes (Tuesday and Thursday) each week both one and a half hours long, and I had office hours for two hours on each Wednesday. For each class texts were assigned which the students should have read and be prepared to discuss. The focus is not on lectures but on active student participation.

Full time teaching is three to four courses during a semester which if one would count according to Swedish standards with 2–3 hours of preparation time and evaluation would amount to at least 100%, with no time for research. On the other hand, at Haverford they have a system of sabbaticals during which one can focus full time on research.

The class was rather small by Swedish standards, that is, from the beginning 11 students. Two of my students left college all together during the semester which unsettled me somewhat. Both were freshmen and I believe struggled to cope with motivation and the total workload at the college level. In Sweden of course students also leave but at a residential college this is a much more dramatic event.

I was lucky to be able to get a TLI (teaching and learning institute) Student Consultant during the whole course. She sat in on one class every week and we had almost every week a discussion of pedagogical questions. She also designed the evaluation of the course and has written a report on the course. Furthermore, the Head of department did a review of my teaching for the Provost, and he thus sat in on one class and sent out questions to the students. For those coming to Haverford, I really recommend the TLI Student consultant program, as it is very helpful to get continuous feedback during the course.

The examination of the course was done by two smaller essays and one larger final one. Also activity in class was counted for the grade. The grade system at Haverford is from A to F but each level is divided into three levels as A-, A and A+ and given numerical designations 3.3, 3.7 and 4.0.

ACTIVITIES DURING THE SEMESTER

Besides teaching my course, which held me very much preoccupied most of the time, as it required a lot of preparation and adjustment of the syllabus, I took part in some activities at the department and the

college. Foremost were the junior and senior colloquia which were nice ways to see the breadth of the teaching being done at the department and on which subjects the students choose to write their senior thesis.

During the fall, the department went through a review process, something which my department in Sweden was also going through at the same time and I had been involved in that process as a writer of the self-evaluation. It was thus interesting to see how this was handled at a small liberal arts college in the US.

Furthermore, I took part in the introduction for new faculty which gave me an opportunity to see the breadth of subjects offered at the college.

I also took part in one the meetings for all the faculty of the college, where in true Quaker spirit the decisions were taken by consensus. Amazingly for me, coming from a much larger university, all the faculty fit into one room.

Outside of the college, I gave two lectures at other universities in the neighborhood and took part in the huge AAR (American Academy of Religion) conference held in Baltimore that year.

IMPORTANT LESSONS

I have learnt many important lessons during this intense semester at Haverford. Foremost, I think, are the insights into the tradition of liberal arts education, which aims at a general education with a focus (the major). A combination of a beautiful campus, the students living there for four years and a low level of bureaucracy creates a much higher degree of belonging than I am used to. I became inspired to cultivate this more humanistic way of envisaging education than the factory model which predominates at Swedish universities (the production of HST).

COMPARISON BETWEEN THE FOREIGN AND THE HOME INSTITUTIONS (IN SWEDEN)

The student population at Haverford College is just above one thousand students and at my university in Sweden, University of Gothenburg, it is around 40 000 students. My department in Gothenburg is almost as big as the college. I think one of the most important possibilities for change in Sweden in this area is to adapt a similar focus on quality, according to which the ideal size of a class is between 10 to 20 students. To teach 100 students or more is a form of education that probably is best done through distance education technology and in which the teacher student interaction is very low. The added value of doing such lectures physically at a university is not very high. The student teacher ratio is something

given pride of place when liberal arts colleges present themselves, while this is seldom done in Sweden, but should be a natural part of the self-description, as it is of course a very good measure of teaching quality. This requires that the Swedish system for allocating resources for teaching is changed. My suggestion is that one adds a teacher student ratio to the calculus (different ratios for different levels) to make lectures to hundreds of students not a very cost effective solution for financing the salaries of the teachers at a department. My impression is also that students get twice as many classes as compared with Gothenburg, which means also that they have to study twice as hard. Above the introduction level in Gothenburg in religious studies, two courses with just one (three hour) class each week is full time, that is, a total of 6 hours of classes. At Haverford College, the amount is four courses with a total of 12 hours of classes.

In one sense the relation between research and education is lower at Haverford than in Gothenburg and in another sense it is higher. It is lower in the sense that the students (at an introduction course) come from all levels and from all disciplinary areas. Of my students only one was majoring in religion, the others were majoring in mathematics, pre-med, economics etc. You cannot, therefore, build upon previous courses as there is no absolute order of progression. Furthermore, there is no master level and no Ph. D. program which of course means that you do not have advanced teaching above the bachelor level. There was for example no common higher seminar at the religion department at Haverford. In another sense, the connection to research is much higher at Haverford, as the teachers decide themselves what courses to teach and there is not a very bureaucratic and longwinded process for doing so. Therefore, teachers teach what they also research to a high degree, and many courses are quite specialized. The exception of course being introduction courses like mine. Also the low student teacher ratio and the focus on the discussion of readings make it possible for the teacher to use his or her research experience in the teaching situation.

The teacher student relation at Haverford is, I think, quite similar to that in Sweden, with the difference that there is more respect for the teacher in the US. However, with a stronger focus on student activity, the role of the teacher as expert and lecturer is diminished in favor of being able to challenge and motivate the students. I think it could be good to transcend the distinction between seminars and lectures in the Swedish system, which is possible if the size of classes is brought down.

At Haverford, there is a strong emphasis on breadth in education in the sense that there are actual distribution requirements, a student needs to take both courses within the natural sciences and the humanities, social sciences. This is something which is the case at a Swedish gymnasium, but also there the Swedish students are much more specialized than American students at a high school, where there are no separate programs for the natural or technical subjects for example. This is radically different from my teaching situation in Sweden where almost none of my students come from outside the realm of

the humanities. The specialization in education at Haverford is the major, which means in religion that you must take a certain number of religion courses and write a senior thesis within the subject. I think this idea of broad education would be good to introduce at Swedish universities, as a counterweight to the increasing focus on a narrow form of economical utility, but then we must remember that the American bachelor degree is four years, that is, one year longer than a Swedish bachelor of arts. Thus an introductory year focusing on breadth can be introduced in Sweden similar to that in the Norwegian system. To make this happen a much more thorough cultivation of prestige must be done by the Swedish institutions in which alumni play an important role. One should be proud over having studied at a particular university, which means that the admission process needs to become more strict and not only focused on grades from the gymnasium. The prestige is connected to a higher degree of employability, not in the sense of more specialized knowledge, but through that the stamina and intellectual acumen needed to be admitted and to persevere until graduation is a guarantee for him or her being a successful employee.

Teachers are recruited at Haverford foremost through tenure track positions which are complemented by adjunct faculty. In this respect, the Swedish university has a lot to learn. It should be absolutely unthinkable to move a teacher from adjunct teaching to tenure. All positions should be openly advertised. The degree of inbreeding is very high at many departments at, for example, the University of Gothenburg. I believe a very good rule would be that you cannot get a position at the university where you have done your Ph. D. if not having at least four years of post-doctoral experience at another college or university. As it is now the optimal strategy is often just to stay put as an adjunct faculty until LAS forces the department to give you tenure. Also, the system with tenure track positions (biträdande lektor) with a clear evaluation after three to four years where proof of good teaching and research needs to be presented would benefit the quality of teachers at Swedish universities.

At Haverford, pedagogy is crucial for the college as it only has undergraduate education, while at the University of Gothenburg with graduate education and large sums allocated for research, of course research is of much higher importance. This is inevitable and is replicated in the US if we look instead at large research universities rather than at small private liberal arts colleges. I imagine what could be attempted, for example, at my faculty, the faculty of arts, is to emphasize the dividing line between undergraduate and graduate education much more strongly. Instead of organizing this progression as subjects stretching from the introduction course to the ph. D., I believe separate schools of graduate education would be a good solution. For example, a graduate school of historical studies that is much broader in scope than the subject history as constituted at a faculty of arts (mostly with a focus on Swedish history). In that case, undergraduate education can be more geared toward pedagogical concerns and a broader idea of education rather than research specialization.

The courses offered at Haverford were, as I mentioned above, more governed by the research specializations of the teachers than by a strict system of competences and knowledge that a student ought to acquire. In the

same sense, the students have the freedom to choose the courses they want in the order they find suitable. This cannot be applied *in toto* to the Swedish situation, but at the same time, I think, that the present system, at least in Gothenburg, for handling courses are too bureaucratic and involves too many moments, so that from the idea of a course to the actual teaching it takes at least one to two years, which is a far too long a time period. The idea of a perfect progression of courses is also unnecessarily idealistic; it is better just to design them on different levels of difficulty: 100, 200 and 300 levels, but leave it to the student to decide whether he or she has the capacity to get through the course.

The labor market is not addressed directly in liberal arts education, but, as previously mentioned, the care with which the students are admitted and the work load that is required to get a degree function as a certificate for employability. The professional specialization takes place at the graduate level, but a foundation is provided at the undergraduate level. I think, as indicated above, that the best way to make the students employable is to raise the level and quality of education. It should not be easy to get through the system, which is the case too often within the humanities and the social sciences presently in Sweden. I was happy to see that at last this has been raised in opinion pieces in the major newspapers during the fall in Sweden. Mostly, a Swedish student only studies 50 % of full time when managing 100 % of studies. That the students at Haverford, according to my calculations, have to study twice as much means that they are much closer to a 40 hour work week than their Swedish peers. This discrepancy requires immediate political action in Sweden, but the most probably course of action is, I fear, inaction.

Distance education is of course not a very prominent part of the studies at a liberal arts college where the whole idea is that of resident students in an intense environment where the college cares for the whole person. There is for example much focus on sports and health. For this business model (educational ideal) the big challenge is the MOOC courses which offer high quality teaching online for free. The liberal arts model must provide good reasons for the high price tag that residential liberal arts studies carry. I heard when in US that next year the cost is coming close to 60 000 dollar a year to go to a college like Haverford.

The use of technology at Haverford is approximately at the same level as at my department at home in Sweden. There are computer projectors in the class rooms while the older teachers write on the blackboards.

CONCLUSION

The semester at Haverford has been very fruitful with its intense focus on teaching, something which I mostly cannot bring about in Sweden as administrative concerns, research and project management take up a lot of my time. The help of a teaching consultant and the beautiful surroundings of the campus area let such reflections on teaching practice be set against an encouraging and contemplative environment. The location of Haverford on the East Coast outside of Philadelphia made it possible also to visit and interact with many other good academic milieus. For example, one of my colleagues in Gothenburg was for a year at Princeton, so I visited him there, as it is only an hour away from Haverford.

What I did miss was the more research focused graduate studies and the collegial gathering around a common seminar in which current research is discussed. At Haverford, the individual scholar has much freedom, which has its positive sides as in low levels of bureaucracy, but the interaction between faculty is quite low with few meetings and gatherings at the department level. All religion faculty do not have their offices in the same building and there is no common coffee machine where you get your free coffee as in Sweden, the natural meeting point of Swedish teachers and researchers. The research seems to be foremost the concern of the individual scholar not that of the department.

One thing which profitably could be changed in the Teaching Sabbatical program would be to make this a one year program as it is a lot of work to learn everything new just for one round so to speak. An idea would be to let the college or university receiving the fellow hire him or her for one semester as they, as it were, get one semester for free. That would not increase the financial obligation on STINTs part, but perhaps diminish the enthusiasm of the participating universities and colleges.

The final advice to future fellows within this program is that they do not restrict themselves to where they are placed, but see what other institutions that are in the surroundings, as I experienced the area was literally crowded by institutions of higher education. However, it is important to remember that such activity must be entered into the SEVIS system due to the visa regulations.

To see all the positive results of the semester at Haverford is not easily achieved right now, so close to the experience, some things will become manifest as the spring semester in Sweden gets up to speed. It is quite clear already now, however, that it was worth every effort.