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### **Stint Teaching Sabbatical at Williams College, Fall 2017**

My Stint teaching fellowship placed me at the [Department of Economics](#) at [Williams College](#). Economics is one of the most popular majors at the college, and with around 25 faculty members the Econ department is among the largest at campus. I made the move to Williamstown together with my family (wife and two children).

Beyond providing some thoughts on my professional development and gained teaching insights, I will also try to provide some practical tips for Stint fellows with accompanying children moving to Williams. Although some of it is probably also relevant for families visiting similar non-urban colleges (e.g. Amherst).

#### **Williams College and the Williamstown Community - the Basics**

Williams College was established in 1793 and is generally considered to be among the best liberal arts colleges in the US (together with e.g. Amherst and Pomona). The college has a substantial endowment, and relative to its size it is among the wealthiest colleges & universities in the US. The college is divided into three divisions; Languages and the Arts (Div I), Social Studies (Div II), and Science and Mathematics (Div III). The college is (more or less) a pure undergraduate institution that offers a 4-year bachelor's degree (the exception are two masters programs: one in Development Economics and one in Art History). In line with the liberal arts tradition, each student must complete a number of courses in each division irrespective of chosen major.

The college is located in Williamstown, which is situated in Berkshire County in Western Massachusetts. Williamstown is (quite frankly) a very rural and quite isolated place. It is approx. a 3-hour drive to Boston and 3.5 hours to NYC (Manhattan). The population is around 8,000 and the "city" more or less equals the Williams College campus. There is one "shopping" street (Spring Street) with restaurants, some cafés, a bookstore, a wine store, and a small cinema. Not much, but very charming and the campus is very beautiful! But, it should be mentioned that the number of restaurants/diners per capita is likely much higher than in almost every Swedish city and you can find small restaurants and diners scattered all around the community.

My family's view? We really enjoyed Williamstown! It is a **very** friendly community and we found it to be very easy to move to and to live in Williamstown. The surrounding area also offers plenty of opportunities for outdoor activities. The summers (and autumns) are substantially warmer than in Sweden and Mount Greylock and other surrounding hills and mountains offer many spectacular hiking routes. The winters are, on the other hand, typically colder than most parts of Sweden and (often) with plenty of snow. Cross-country skiing is popular and there are also a number of ski resorts for downhill/alpine skiing in the area (within 15-45 minutes you can reach Jiminy Peak, Berkshire East, and Stratton). It is also a fairly reasonable drive (1.5 to 2 hours) to excellent downhill places like Killington and Stowe.

#### **Preparation and Planning: Professionally and Family-Wise**

My initial contacts were via e-mail with the chair of the Econ department, to whom I suggested that I teach a class on "Cost-Benefit and Cost-Effectiveness Analysis" with a focus on health care applications. This course strongly relates to my teaching and research at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden. The chair was happy with my suggestion and asked me to write up a syllabus and structure the course in the way I saw fit. Co-teaching was really never an option, and generally

something they did not do at the Economics department (although some other departments at Williams have multiple teachers per course).

I visited Williamstown and Williams College in April 2017 and was given a very nice reception. The visit included the standard tour of the campus, and I met with the assistant to the dean of the faculty, the department chair, the housing office, and visited the Williams College Children's Center. The meeting with the assistant to the dean of the faculty was very important and I got a great overview of the Visa application process and the necessary paperwork and how Williams assists in the process (which they certainly did!). As a Stint Fellow you should typically apply for a J1-Visa and accompanying family will receive J2-Visas.

At the Housing Office I met with [Roberta Senecal](#), which currently (as of early 2018) is the main contact for [College housing](#) and assists new faculty in finding housing. The College owns many residential properties in Williamstown, which it rents to faculty. Each semester there is a "housing lottery" where faculty can apply for available houses and apartments (the lottery for faculty arriving in the fall semester typically takes place in April). There is a great demand for college properties, primarily because college housing is relatively inexpensive and the college is a reliable property owner. Hence, not all entrants in the lottery will be offered a house. However, Williamstown also has a reasonable private rental market (short- and long-term rentals) and the Housing Office assists by forwarding available private rentals. We were able to rent a furnished College house conveniently located on campus (4 bedrooms and 3 bathrooms for a cost of \$1,250 per month; relatively cheap for the Williamstown market).

During the campus visit we also met with the head of the Williams College Children's Center (WCCC) since we wanted to enroll our youngest daughter in daycare. The WCCC is a daycare owned by the College with in- and outdoor facilities located at the edge of the campus (but everything on campus is walking distance). The group sizes are definitely smaller than the typical Swedish daycare (in our daughter's group there were 9 children and 3 teachers). Since the daycare is not tax-funded there is a substantial fee, which will vary with the age of the child (and obviously on how many days per week you sign up for).

We also visited the public high school (my son attended grade 9). There is only one public high school in Williamstown, shared with the neighboring community Lanesborough, called [Mount Greylock Regional High School](#). The school is located approx. 5 km from the "center" of Williamstown (i.e. Williams College) with no bike lanes, so using the school buses (free of charge) or a car is necessary (more about the car issue below).

Most children to College faculty attend the public school and it is (I believe) regarded as a relatively good public high school. Public schools are funded via property taxes, so as long as you can show that you rent (or own, but probably less likely as a Stint Fellow...) a house/apartment in Williamstown the school is free of charge. My son was generally happy with the high school, although the amount of homework was slightly shocking at a start (expect a couple of hours of homework per day, although it depends on the chosen courses).

Visiting Williams with a family I would say that it is quite essential to have a car. As said, considering the size of Williamstown there are surprisingly many restaurants and cafes with generous opening hours. But, supermarkets (Stop & Shop is the closest of the larger supermarkets, at least as of 2017/18) are quite far from the College (approx. 5-6 km). Public transportation exists, but in a very rudimentary form. And, if you have children that will attend the regional middle and high school (Mount Greylock), it is as mentioned located approx. a 5-10-minute drive from Williams College and Main street. There is an excellent school bus system, but if your children would want to take part in one (of

the many!) extra-curricular activities offered (sports, theatre/music, language clubs etc), there may be happenings and activities taking part outside of the school-bus hours.

We solved this by buying a car, which made sense since we were (or are, as I am writing this) staying at Williams for a full-year (I combined the Stint fellowship with being a visiting professor directly employed by the College during the spring semester). Please note that you must get a Social Security number/card (SSN) if you are buying a car (the closest Social Security office is in neighboring North Adams). It may take some time to get a SSN card, so it is a good idea to attend to this early on if you plan to buy a car (it took around 4 weeks from my application until I received my SSN). It is possible to use your Swedish license for up to 12 months.

### **Activities during the semester**

My main task during the semester was to teach a “200-level” course in the Economics department (required that the students had taken the 100-level intro courses in Economics) on Cost-Benefit and Cost-Effectiveness Analysis (formally called “Public Policy Evaluation”). The course had 16 students, which was quite standard for Economics courses (with exception for the principles/intro courses, which typically have between 20 and 40 students per class). The department was very open to me designing the course the way I saw fit.

I had (as everyone) the choice to teach either twice a week (75 minutes per class) or three times per week (50 minutes per class). It was possible to submit preferred days and times for classes. If you decide to have class three times per week teaching takes place on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, whereas courses that meet twice a week have some more options (e.g. Monday-Thursday, Tuesday-Thursday, or Tuesday-Friday). I was assigned a Monday-Thursday schedule and taught from 14.35 to 15.50. Apart from the classes, it is also expected that you have formal “office hours” for at least 4 hours per week. I had office hours on Tuesdays and Wednesdays between from 10 to 12.

One interesting phenomena compared to home is that the students will be very strict about the time (especially when the class should end). At my home institution, I could perhaps from time to time spend five minutes extra etc. This will typically not work at Williams; the students leave at the minute! There are good arguments for this, since they may have quite a tight schedule; if a student has two classes after each other there is often only 10 minutes to get from one classroom to the next. In my class, around 50% of the students were also active in one of the athletic teams at the College, which is more or less what to expect (approx. 40-45% of the students are active in one of the teams). This meant that they were expected to meet up (typically) at 16.00 for practice, every day! I had several students that were in the crew team and they practiced between 16.00 and 19.00 Monday to Friday (with races on the weekend). This was a rather typical time commitment for the athletes. This also relates to scheduling restrictions often discussed at the college, where no classes are allowed to schedule meetings between 16.00 and 19.00 as not to interfere with the athletics schedule. However, it should be noted that the athletes at Williams are not recruited primarily as Athletes (as at some large universities that compete in the so called Division 1 university leagues), so they have all gone through the regular application process and my experience was that they were extremely qualified students.

Apart from teaching my course I was also active in the Public Health concentration. There is no Department of Public Health at Williams, but there are several courses from different departments that make up what is called the Public Health concentration (similar to a “minor”). My course was selected to be one potential course to count for a concentration in Public Health. In total, there were about 20 students that, apart from their major, also were concentrating on Public Health. The concentration is directed by a faculty member (a colleague to me at the Econ department) and a steering group consisting of faculty that teach courses that are part of the concentration. There were several activities directed to the Public Health concentrators throughout the semester (e.g. career days, seminars and

get-togethers).

Additionally, I was also part of the “First3” group (more about that later on) that met twice a week for lunches, and I participated in research seminars and talks in the Econ department (gave 2 research talks myself).

## **Comparison between the foreign and the home institution (in Sweden)**

### Student population

Williams is a very competitive school and admitted students are (almost) exclusively high-achievers. It is a “pricy” college, the tuition is around \$55,000 per academic year (around \$70,000 including room and a full meal plan). However, admission decisions are “blind” with respect to the finances of the applicant’s family income, and around half of the student population receives financial aid from the college.

My experience was that (on average) the students were much more ambitious compared to students at my home institution. They did the assigned reading before each class, they came prepared to tests and quizzes and they expected to be challenged. The students were not necessarily “smarter” or had more knowledge from their high school studies compared to Swedish students (although they were clearly better in math), but they worked much harder and did so expecting nothing else. Hence, the “social norms” regarding the time commitment is very different compared to at my home institution. Obviously, this is far from only a “student issue”, but rather very much something that stems from us as university professors and what we expect/demand from our students and how that impacts the norms.

### Forms of examination

I used a range of examination forms, including problem sets (“homeworks”), midterms, class quizzes, final exams, but also partly graded based on active participation during class discussions. This differs from my set-up at my home institution where I typically grade a course based on 1-2 assignments/papers and a final exam. I would say the approach I used for my course at Williams is clearly to prefer (which is standard at Williams and in the US). Teaching is feedback! And having (almost) weekly graded assignments implies that students continuously throughout the semester are given feedback on their progress.

Why am I not using the same approach at my home institution? The primary reason is that it becomes very burdensome and difficult to administer. The Swedish examination rules imply that for every graded assignment we must (generally) be prepared to offer re-exams/assignments for students that failed the initial assignment. It becomes very burdensome to have 10-15 graded assignments for a course if you have to be prepared to also give 1-2 re-exams on each assignment. Further, in Sweden it is quite common that a student passes only parts of the graded assignments, and returns one (or several) semesters later in order to complete missing assignments. This implies that it becomes difficult to change or adjust the type and form of examinations (at least non-marginally) between semesters. At most universities outside of Sweden this is not the case, i.e. a student passes a course during the semester or not at all. And if the student wishes to complete a previously non-completed course, he/she will have to take the full course again.

In my view, the Swedish system sets too strict boundaries on us as teachers, and implies that any substantial change from one semester to another in the forms of examination may lead to substantially increased workload in order to accommodate exams for both the current cohort as well as for previous cohorts. In the end this rigid system hurts the students in the form of less dynamic forms of

examination.

### The student-professor relationship

Early on I was told about the hierarchical but also close relationships between Williams students and the professors. For example, students will almost exclusively refer to you as “Professor” and be very courteous to you. At the same time, there are clearly more interactions between professors and students outside of the classroom compared to Swedish institutions. It is common practice at Williams to meet up with students and discuss their work over coffee at one of the cafes. Student organizations also invite professors to “get-to-know-each other”-dinners, and sometimes professors invite students home to dinner. As a professor, you can bring up to 3-4 students for lunch or coffee and the College will reimburse everyone’s costs. Also, the departments arrange different events during evenings (e.g. open talks and seminars, film screenings, informational sessions etc.) with free pizza, ice-cream etc. where students and professors mingle. The frequency of such event differs between departments, e.g. the Mathematics and Statistics department had such events on a weekly basis, whereas the Economics departments did this maybe once a month.

All this was slightly uncomfortable for me at first, and something that really differs from my experiences from Swedish institutions. But in most aspects, this is a very nice culture. Our family hosted a few dinners where we invited students to our house and it was certainly nice, also for my family!

However, it should be mentioned that there is huge variation across professors and students. Many professors never have lunch with students or invite students to their home, and only meet students in their office.

### The relationship between research and education and the importance of teaching

Williams College primarily prides itself on offering one of the world’s best undergraduate educations, and does not strive to compete research-wise with the top research universities. There are no master programs (with the two exceptions mentioned previously) and no PhD/doctoral students.

However, it is still expected that faculty members are research active and contributes to their field as a scholar. The Economics department has an active research environment (seminars, workshops etc.) and (more or less) everyone is striving to publish in the top general or top field journals. Although, considering the higher teaching load compared to top research universities and the stronger focus on teaching, the expectations on the volume/quantity of research outputs are lower compared to top research universities.

One feature that was a testament to the focus and importance placed on teaching was the course and teacher evaluation system. The evaluation system had three parts:

- “Standard” student surveys at the end of each course (with very high response rates)
- The department chair interviews a number of students to receive more “qualitative” feedback
- Senior colleagues (from your own department) sits in on classes and provides a written reflection

Based on these evaluations every faculty member receives an assessment at the end of the academic year with feedback and potential aspects to improve. The teaching evaluations are also very important in the tenure review process at Williams.

Assistant Professors are typically hired straight out of graduate school (or maybe after a post-doc) as “tenure track” members. The tenure system implies that they have a 3 + 3 year contract before they

are up for “tenure review”. The first 3 years are spent at the college doing teaching (2 courses per semester is the standard “teaching load”) and research. If nothing very unusual happens the contract is renewed for another 3 years. The first year of the second period (i.e. the 4<sup>th</sup> year from the start of employment) everyone receives a “Sabbatical year”, where they have no teaching at all. The idea is that this year should be used to consolidate research and prepare for the final 2 years of teaching and research before the tenure review (the sabbatical can be spent at some unit at Williams or, preferably, at another academic institution). After 6 years there is a tenure review (starts early in year 5), and if the outcome is positive the faculty member gets a tenured position (if not, they have to seek employment elsewhere).

Most high-ranked research universities in the US will base the tenure decision almost entirely on top research publications. At Williams, the requirements for research output (both in numbers of publications and in terms of in which journals you have to publish) is lower, but on the other hand it is necessary to perform well as a teacher in order to receive tenure.

### Recruitment and welcoming new faculty

One aspect that impressed greatly was how Williams treated new faculty (not only tenure-track assistant professors, but also visitors and guest professors). Before moving to Williamstown I received several informative e-mails and was contacted by HR staff at Williams that helped me (and my family) with many practical issues. I was also offered to take part in a web-based course on “Instructional Design and Teaching at Williams” (which I did). The course was perhaps mostly designed for new assistant professors that came directly from graduate school, but it was still helpful and focused on many practical aspects of teaching and grading (very unlike Swedish courses on “pedagogy” that I have had to endure).

When I arrived to Williams the following is a selection of activities offered for new faculty:

- The 1-2 weeks before the start of the semester there were plentiful events arranged for new faculty including campus tours, library workshops, instructional workshops on the web-tool Canvas (used under the “Glow” name at Williams) etc. There were also several social events (cocktail parties and dinners) where new faculty (and their spouses) were invited to meet and mingle.
- The First3 group: For faculty in their first 3 years at Williams College there were free lunches offered twice a week (Mon and Thu) at the faculty club. Each lunch had a specific topic and speaker from the College. Topics included e.g. “grading at Williams”, “how to deal with students with mental health issues”, “how to apply for research funds from Williams”, “how the faculty meetings work” etc. Hence, it was a smorgasbord of topics that made you very well informed about practical issues at Williams (and it was also nice to meet your fellow new colleagues...and...well, free lunch...).
- Office space: Months before my visit I was informed about my office, was asked about my desired computer and computer software, provided small video demonstrations on how printing worked, and many similar “small things”. Upon arriving everything was installed, set-up and working properly. This may seem as the most natural thing in the world, but this has not really been my experience when starting new positions at Swedish institutions...small details that make you feel welcome.
- Support for joining family: My wife (and oldest son) were also supported in terms of e.g. provided access cards to the library, the athletic facilities (gym and pool) etc. They also helped us with e.g. car insurance issues (which may be a bit tricky when driving on your Swedish license).

In sum, the administrative support at Williams is truly exceptional (my US colleagues also described that it was exceptional compared to other US institutions) and it was clearly a nice feature of being a faculty member at Williams. You were really taken care of and could focus on teaching and research.

### Use of technology and distance education

The use of technology was probably quite similar to my experiences in Sweden, if anything professors at Williams were less keen on using technology in their teaching. The brand of a “Williams education” is very much about the close relationship between professors and students and the “seminar-style” of teaching. Distance education is, to my knowledge, not something that is offered at Williams at all. It is clearly not in line with their brand and what they want to offer in terms of higher education. I think this is a wise decision for Williams; distance education, MOOCs and the similar is most likely not where they have their comparative advantage and is not the market segment where they should compete.

### **Action plan - topics to address and if possible introduce in Sweden**

Williams College offers undergraduate education that is superior to my home institution and to (I believe) any institution in Sweden. I am very thankful for the opportunity to visit Williams as made possible by the Stint foundation.

The excellent education is not particularly surprising given the financial resources Williams dispose. This implies that it is not altogether obvious how to emulate this and “transfer” insights to my home institution, which in comparison to Williams has less impressive resources (albeit still very strong resources in an international perspective).

At a department level back home in Sweden, there are a number of things that I think would be possible to improve without requiring any significant increase in financial resources:

- Strengthening the importance of teaching
  - By using a combination of “peer-reviews”, student interviews, and standard course surveys, it would be possible to track the development and strength and weaknesses of courses and teachers. It is also important to use this information for promotion decisions and in development talks.
  - It is my view that junior positions should be in the form of post-docs or (more importantly) “biträdande lektorat” (i.e. in a sense tenure-track assistant professorships). The latter is a 4-year position that may turn into a “lektorat” (tenured position) after 4 years. It is very important to have very explicit guidelines on what factors should determine the tenure decision and not have these positions to automatically turn in to tenured positions (promotion decision to a “lektor”). The criteria should include both strong research and teaching accomplishments. Today it is all too common to only see formal criteria regarding research accomplishments.
  - Strive to a situation where all faculty members teach and do research. The current system where faculty that are successful in attracting external grants can “buy-out” of teaching should be revised. At many (most?) Swedish institutions, it has developed into a norm that it is a “right” to “buy” yourself out of teaching duties when winning external grants. This is not a “right” and nor should it be. The norm should change such that it becomes a possibility if the department can accommodate it without affecting the quality of education. Further, in general it should not be possible to “buy out” from all teaching. Department chairs should be very open and transparent about this, which will also facilitate better long-term planning. Of course, it is important to attract external grants, but when this happens, it should lead to a discussion of how

and when these can be used without substantially affecting planned teaching. A university should be about doing teaching and research at the highest quality.

- Introductions for new faculty
  - When I got my position at the University of Gothenburg (and before that in Örebro and Karlstad) I was very much left to myself to figure out how everything worked. The introduction program at Williams may be difficult to “copy”, but certainly it would be possible to emulate parts of it. In general, these “soft issues” should be dealt with more professionally at Swedish institutions. It is an important aspect in building a positive work place norm and creating a sense of shared responsibility for the quality of the university.

At a national level, there are many regulations and laws that should be changed to facilitate increased quality of our universities. Here I will focus on regulations regarding recruitment since differences are very apparent, and as a former chair of my unit in Gothenburg the limitations and drawbacks of the Swedish system were very visible.

The use of external reviewers to evaluate job candidates at Swedish universities combined with the bureaucratic internal organizations lead to excessively long recruitment periods. At the most senior level (full professor level), it is not uncommon for recruitments to take around 1 year. This is astonishingly slow in an international perspective and substantially reduces the opportunities to compete in international recruitments of top teachers and scholars.

- The underlying argument for the use of external reviewers to rank job candidates is sound (i.e. to provide a fair and neutral evaluation and not bias the process in favor of internal applicants). The problem is that it does not work! Institutions that wish to recruit an “internal candidate” can easily navigate around this process by writing very specific and “tailor-made” positions for a specific candidate (very common throughout the Swedish system).
- We should scrap the use of external reviewers and instead use internal recruitment boards that rank and interview candidates. Further, it is important to reduce the delay caused by the fact that the typical process includes one or more internal board(s) (“lärarförslagsnämnder” and/or “institutions/fakultetsnämnder”), albeit this is a university issue rather than a national regulatory issue.
- Change legislations such that it becomes very clear that candidates should be eligible (having a PhD) for a junior position (post-doc, “biträdande lektor” and the similar) when taking up a position and not at the time of application deadline. We have a very strange system at my home institution where labor regulations are interpreted such that a candidate must have earned their PhD before being eligible to apply for a position. In the US (and most other countries) this is not the case, it is merely required that a candidate has been awarded the PhD when starting their post-doc or tenure-track position. Most promising international candidates have already signed contracts for positions 3-6 months before their PhD defense, when Swedish universities HR departments may not even consider them eligible to be evaluated for a position (although they may be good enough for Stanford etc.). This is obviously unreasonable.

In sum, the regulations concerning recruiting must change. I find it immensely important to move away from the (still too common) practice of recruiting internal candidates. But this is not solved by the use of external reviewers (as outlined above). Without similar rules in the US, it is more or less never happening that departments recruit internally (e.g. hire their own PhD students to tenure-track positions); it would violate strong social norms to do so. We need a similar change in the social norms in the Swedish university system, and this will have to come from within departments and universities. It should be noted that many Economics department in Sweden are moving in this direction (e.g. have

developed norms not to recruit their own PhD students etc.), but this trend needs to continue and be spread to more departments and faculties. At the Sahlgrenska Academy it was recently decided that only externally recruited candidates (from the level of "biträdande lector" up to the level of full professor) will be given faculty starting grants. This is one (of many) decisions that hopefully will give incentives to change social norms regarding recruitment. But much more is needed!