

Final Report Teaching Sabbatical at Williams College, Fall 2023

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Brief Information about the College

Williams College is located in the Western-most part of Massachusetts, in an area known as the Berkshires. It is a small, elite, liberal arts college with approximately 2000 students. It has been ranked as the number 1 liberal arts college in the United States since 2004 by U.S. News and World Report¹. The acceptance rate was nine percent for the class of 2027.² The college has a small student to teacher ratio of 7:1. There are approximately 350 instructional faculty members (with a right to vote on college-related business). Although it is a small college, it has 25 departments. While it is mainly an undergraduate institution, Williams also offer two Master degree programs.³ The academic year is divided into a fall semester, a short Winter Study period (January), and a spring semester. Teachers typically teach two courses per semester and none during summer. Students typically take four courses during the fall and spring semester. During the Winter Study, they typically have one course. When they reach their Junior year, it is time to declare their major area of study. Many students have double-majors and even a concentration in a subject (a minor). On top of a rigorous academic schedule, many students are also engaged in sports, music ensemble, theater, or dance. Approximately 35 percent of the students participate in intercollegiate sports, which includes travelling to other parts of New England (and sometimes further) to compete.⁴



My sons and I on campus.



Picture of the stairs leading up to what was the original college building. Today it is a dormitory.

Williams College is an old school, dating back to 1793. It was the second higher educational institution in Massachusetts after Harvard. The surrounding town, Williamstown (population approximately 5000), is named after the founder of the college, Ephraim Williams. He has also inspired the concept “the Ephs”, which refers to members of the Williams College

¹ <https://www.usnews.com/best-colleges/williams-college-2229>; <https://andyreiter.com/datasets/>

² <https://toptieradmissions.com/williams-colleges-acceptance-rate/>

^{3,4} <https://communications.williams.edu/media-relations/fast-facts/>

community. The school mascot is a purple cow named Ephilia (pictured below), although it is not clear whether there is a connection to the founder more than the name.

Interestingly, in 1821 the president of Williams College was dissatisfied with the school's location, funding and enrollment and decided to relocate, together with some students, to what is now known as the Pioneer Valley. He ended up starting a new school, Amherst College, since then a life-long sports rival of Williams College.⁵



Williams College is the first institution for higher education in the United States that offers all-grant financial aid. This grant ensures that students on financial aid do not have to take any loans, work part-time during the semester or the summer.⁶ Furthermore, admission is need-blind; as long as a student has the merit, they will be able to attend, no matter whether they have the financial means. The college will meet 100% of the students demonstrated needs. This aid has made it possible for students of less affluent backgrounds to attend the college that has a yearly tuition of \$64,540 (not including room and board). More than half of the student body receives financial aid. At the core of its mission, Williams do extensive work to attract a diverse student body and faculty. The thought is that diversity will *"contribute positively to educating, engaging, and supporting all members of our community so that they are poised to thrive as citizens of an increasingly global, interconnected, and ever-changing world."*⁷ There are several committees and groups on campus that work with issues of diversity. There are approximately nine percent international students.⁸

Preparation and Planning

The preparation began as soon as I received the good news that I had been matched with the Psychology Department at Williams College. I initiated contact with the head of the department, Professor Noah Sandstrom, and we met over Zoom at the beginning of January to discuss the different options for teaching in the fall. I am glad this contact was established early on, as it turns out there were a few important deadlines during the spring, including submitting a course description for the fall course catalog.

⁵ <https://ephsports.williams.edu/sports/2020/7/7/Why-Ephs-Purple-and-Purple-Cows.aspx>

⁶ <https://www.williams.edu/admission-aid/>

⁷ <https://diversity.williams.edu/diversity-at-williams/>

⁸ <https://communications.williams.edu/media-relations/fast-facts/>

Together with my husband, I also went on a planning trip to Williamstown in early April. This was a great opportunity to see the town, meet with colleagues, and see our future apartment. Dr. John Gerry (the dean assigned as contact person for STINT at Williams College) gave me a tour of the campus and surrounding areas and told me about the college. I also met with Professor Sandstrom and his wife Marlene, a fellow professor in the Psychology Department, and continued planning the course. Apart from discussing my course, Professor Sandstrom was also very helpful in setting up appointments with the elementary school principal and the leader of the after-school youth center (for my children), lunch with faculty and students, as well as showing me around campus. Even though we were only there for a few days, I felt that I got a good sense of the town, the college, and what life would be like in the fall. I left Williamstown feeling very excited for the fall!



The Southworth Schoolhouse, our apartment building.



View of the Clark Art Institute from Stone Hill

I continued to be in contact with Dr. Sandstrom and Dr. Marlene Sandstrom during the spring to discuss ideas. It was nice to be able to discuss the syllabus, different forms of assignments, and general questions about teaching practices at the college. I also had a great deal of help from the department administrator, Christine Russel, who kindly answered all of my questions about syllabi, ordering books, scheduling the class, enrolling students, and so on. Taken together, the help that was provided by faculty and staff at Williams made the transition to life in Williamstown and teaching at the college quite easy!

Tasks and Responsibilities

During our first contact in January, it was decided that I would design and teach my own upper-level psychology course. Because I am a clinical psychologist and work clinically part-time, I thought it would be fun to design a more clinically oriented course. This was a lot of fun, but also challenging, as the structure of the psychology education differs a great deal between the U.S. and Sweden. In Sweden, all students in the Psychology Program follow the same curriculum each semester. As such you know at what level to target the information when designing a new course. At a liberal arts college, the students design their own degrees and majors. They are also required to take courses from other disciplines than their major (which is at the heart of a liberal arts education) and therefore one student's academic background can be entirely different from another's. To me, this was a fun challenge because it forced me to think about how to present the material so that it was interesting and tangible no matter the pre-existing knowledge base. Because I chose to

create a clinically oriented course, I weaved in practical exercises where the students got hands-on experience with the different activities that encompass a neuropsychologist's work life. My hope was both to make the material more tangible, but also make them curious about pursuing a clinical degree once they graduated.



Students working in small groups learning different cognitive tests (left) and presenting their own neuropsychological test (right).

My course was a 300-level course (300 is at the Junior-level) in clinical neuropsychology with a cap of 19 students (I ended up with 20). The classes were 75 minutes long and held twice per week. I mixed traditional lecturing with seminar-style discussions, practical exercises, and student presentations. I was encouraged to invite guest lecturers and I was fortunate to have American and Swedish colleagues in my field that were able to give talk to my students.

The students were intelligent, ambitious, and seemed to enjoy working with the course materials. It quickly became evident, however, that they were not keen on raising their hand and speaking in front of the class during the lectures. This was quite different from how Swedish psychology students behave. In the beginning of the semester, I was puzzled by this behavior as I had hoped for a great deal of class discussions and questions so that I could better target the information to their level. In discussing with other teachers, one possible explanation that was raised by several people was that the students do not want to feel as though they are being evaluated in front of their classmates. Another possibility was that they felt less comfortable talking in front of the group as they did not know each other, or me. Although it was initially stressful, it made me redesign some activities and plan my lectures differently. Instead of doing whole-class discussions, they were first broken into smaller groups to talk over the information or discuss a question. This seemed to help them to later discuss the different topics in front of the class. As the semester went on, they became quite comfortable raising their hands and asking questions. By the end of the semester, they held class presentations and led their own discussions with great success. I think this initial challenge helped me develop a great deal as a teacher, and I am grateful for that opportunity.

Activities during the Teaching Sabbatical

At Williams, they offer new and visiting faculty a program called the First3. You are allowed to attend the First3 meetings during your first three years as a teacher at Williams. There are informal weekly lunches (twice per week) where there are presentations by newly tenured faculty or campus organizations on topics pertinent to new employees.⁹ The focus is pedagogy as well as professional support with the tenure track process I attended the First3 gatherings almost every week and found it a nice way of interacting with teachers from other departments, networking, and making friends.

Other tasks included attending inter-disciplinary luncheons (together with the Biology, Mathematics, Geoscience, and Computer Science departments). I unfortunately was scheduled to teach during the Psychology Department's own meetings. It was, however, not difficult to catch up on information by talking to the faculty. There were also frequent informal gatherings where departmental business were discussed. There is also an opportunity to attend the campus-wide faculty meetings where different issues are discussed and voted on. The Center for Teaching offered several workshops on different topics (e.g., working with AI, student group projects), which I attended.

There are opportunities to do something new almost every day at Williams College and in the town. For a small school, they have a surprisingly packed calendar of events. Every day there is a daily events email that presents what is going on around campus and in the town. The college attracts musicians and artists and there are weekly concerts to attend.

Williamstown is an excellent place if you love the outdoors. It is surrounded by large hills, with Mount Greylock being the highest peak. There are many hiking trails, ranging in level of difficulty. If you do not enjoy walking uphill, the town is picturesque with New England style-houses.



View of Williamstown from the top of Pine Cobble Hill.



Walk around our neighborhood.

⁹ <https://faculty-networks.williams.edu/first3/>

Important lessons

The most important thing I take with me is that teaching at Williams occurs in an environment where this activity is highly valued in and is not considered subordinate to research. I found this to be inspiring and fun! The faculty seem to genuinely enjoy teaching and help each other succeed. I think rather than having an entire change of perspective on teaching, I mainly enjoyed being in an environment that solidified my ideas about good and effective pedagogy.

There is also a value placed on connecting with the students and be available in a more informal manner than is customary in Sweden. The “social fund” that is allotted each faculty member every semester is helpful in creating opportunities to get to know your students. I used the money to take students out for a “fika”. In the picture below, the students from my class came over for a pizza lunch and informal lesson. Connecting with the students outside of class increased my own commitment to teaching. This is something I will take back.



The department also provided opportunities for the students to chat in a more informal manner with their professors. For instance, they offer a “Walk-n’-Talk” where faculty and students take a break from their busy schedules and get some fresh air and exercise!



Picture obtained from the Department's Instagram account.

Comparison Between the Host and the Home Institution

As mentioned above, I think teaching is valued equally (if not more) important to research at Williams. There is an interest from department in the courses that are taught (even though

the content is mainly up to the instructor) and it is encouraged for new faculty to visit lectures by other professors to gain pedagogic input and ideas. The value placed on teaching results in a sense of pride in the pedagogical work that is contagious. I think it is somewhat different at my home institution. Even though teaching is an important part, research typically comes first and is prioritized whenever there seems to be a financial bind. At my home institution, there is also a difference in the type of position one holds and the required teaching load. As such, many of the professors in the department prioritize research and have less of a teaching demand, compared to Williams. I think this holds true for most of the Swedish higher education. In the Swedish system, research is the merit and the means to move on in your academic career, not your teaching history. Despite this, we place a value on having teachers with formal pedagogical training at my home institution and most teachers are required to complete courses in pedagogy.

Another difference (although not a likely option in the Swedish educational system) is that faculty at Williams are allowed a semester of sabbatical every three years of teaching. They still receive pay from the college but do not have to be involved in any teaching practices during this time. This is an opportunity to develop one's teaching and research. Some version of this is also allowed the tenure-track faculty. That break from the everyday academic duties seemed as a good opportunity to gather one's thoughts, think about new ideas and develop new courses. This is what the STINT-fellowship allowed me to do, and I wish that more of my colleagues were allowed this type of invaluable opportunity!

There are a lot of resources available for teachers at Williams to help them develop their teaching skills, courses, and knowledge base. One of the biggest differences that I noticed was that these resources (e.g., Writing Center, Center for Teaching and Learning, etc.) are introduced to the new faculty right away during an orientation week before the academic year begins. They also promote their services in emails, newsletters, and gatherings around campus. There is a genuine interest in helping new teachers succeed. In talking to some of my colleagues at Williams, I think these resources helped them gain confidence in their teaching and helped them problem-solve learning activities. I found my interactions with the Center for Teaching and Learning as well as the Office for Information Technology very helpful. Although these services exist at my home institution, they are not flexible and not always helpful. For instance, our Writing Center does not help students with writing that is not research related. As such, for our psychology students who have a great deal of clinical writing, there is no formal help offered apart from feedback from the instructor.

I also learned that there is less bureaucracy in terms of course development and changes to the syllabus, compared to KI. Because of the challenge I encountered at the beginning of the semester (as stated above), I was glad that there was flexibility and that I could redesign and rearrange activities and lectures to better fit the students' needs. This was especially helpful for me as I was hoping to find a student actor to play a patient for the students' final assignment but was not sure that would work out until it was already mid-semester.

Another difference is that Williams College offers a structured way of introducing new faculty to the college. Both the orientation week as well as the First3 weekly meetings provide information as well as a platform for interacting with newer and older faculty. It provides a sense of community that is not confined to your department. It also helps you

feel welcome and that your contribution to the college is valued. I wish we had the time and opportunity at KI for informal discussions about teaching practices with other departments.

Furthermore, diversity is at the forefront at Williams College. The school tries to have a diverse student and faculty body. I believe this made for a great learning environment and I was very glad to be part of that atmosphere during present times when nations close borders and send away refugees. In talking to students who are not from the majority culture, I learned that there are still a lot to be done at Williams to make the education equal and inclusive for all. Similarly, in speaking with faculty from the non-majority culture, they noted that the school's location in a small, rural area, presents a challenge for inclusion. At my home institution, we have a desire to increase diversity in our student body but have not yet found a good way of making this happen. Part of it is structural problems, stemming from political decisions and enrollment policies. Part of it is the lack of time and opportunity for outreach in parts of the community that do not host the average psychology student. Regardless, I think we could do better in terms of discussing topics of diversity and making it a bigger priority in our department.

In terms of the students, I have already mentioned one major difference in terms of classroom behavior. Because the students at Williams are the very top students at their high schools, they are used to being the best. This seems to be an issue when they then come to Williams, where everyone is high achievers. The result is that there are few that are willing to show that they do not understand course content or instructions, and therefore are less willing to raise their hand in class. They also place a lot of pressure on themselves to perform well. I spoke with the head of the student mental health services who described that stress-related problems are a common referral problem to their facilities. Despite the potential negative aspects that come with being a student at an elite school, the positive aspects are many. The students are highly motivated to learn and often go above and beyond what is being asked of them. Many students stayed after class to ask questions, stopped by my office to discuss ideas, asked for my help in connecting them with professionals outside of Williams, and wanted letters of recommendation to pursue summer internships.

Recommendations

Williams encourages faculty to interact with students. I wholeheartedly recommend taking the opportunity to get to know your students outside of the classroom. I was fortunate to be invited to my students' sport events, theater plays, dance performances, and athletic practices. I was so impressed with my students who not only are performing well academically, but are also well-rounded in terms of athletics, arts, and music. I think the student also seemed to appreciate this closer connection, as this is a means for them to gain access to networks outside of the college. For example, I connected some of my students with my former post doc mentor in New York to explore potential summer internship opportunities.



Learning how to catch during the Women's Softball practice. The woman to the left was one of my students.



The men's football team.

I got the good advice from a previous Stintonian to treat the move to the U.S. as if you were going to move there permanently. I took that advice to heart and decided to treat our family adventure with that mindset. As such, we used the planning trip to familiarize ourselves with the area, visit our apartment, meet the principal of our sons' school, talk to the leaders of the after-school program, and start planning for what the kids might want to do. This helped us prepare our children and make the moving process smoother. I also think it helped us adults immerse in the community. We were avid Ephs fans from the beginning and went to a wide variety of athletic events during the semester.

I also recommend taking advantage of all the different activities that are going on in Williamstown and the neighboring towns. It is a nice way to meet local people (not only employees of Williams). There are several farms nearby that arrange seasonal activities and have small shops where they sell organic produce. During the fall, there are pumpkins everywhere and it is well worth a short drive to visit some of the larger farms where they have corn mazes and pumpkin picking.



Even though it is a small town, they have a packed calendar of activities and seasonal events. One thing you cannot miss during the fall is the celebration of Halloween (October 31st). We

happened to live in the epicenter of the town's Halloween celebrations. The lengths people go to in terms of decorating houses or dressing up are extraordinary (I am not sure I have fully recovered!).



Action Plan

I will continue to hold a relationship with the host institution. I am working on having Williams' students audit courses in the Psychology Program at the Karolinska Institute. I have already invited two students from my course at Williams, who are in Stockholm for their semester abroad, to come and visit KI. I am also discussing the possibility for faculty from the Williams' Psychology Department to come and spend their sabbaticals here in Stockholm and teach an elective at our department. I hope my sabbatical was the beginning of a long-term collaboration between our two institutions.