

## Teaching Sabbatical at Williams College 2018

Report by Maria Udén, Luleå University of Technology, Luleå

In the spring of 2017 I applied for a STINT Teaching Sabbatical stipend. I was happy when the following fall I received the message that I was a candidate, and finally indeed was selected for a position at the Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies (WGSS) at Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts, USA. This is the obligatory stipend report to STINT and, as it is stipulated that it shall be written in English I assume that it shall benefit Williams College as well as STINT staff and stipend fellows. The structure is built around the points of interest that are highlighted in the STINT communication regarding this report.

### Preparation and Planning

Besides the short conference type of stay I am not an experienced traveler and had no routines to rely on, for living abroad. So, for my preparations for the Teaching Sabbatical I followed the guidelines prepared by STINT by the letter, and they included getting in touch about preparations with the college. In sum, relying on the STINT and Williams College guidelines and routines became a good choice for me – and us – I travelled with my husband Dag Udén.

I would not say preparations asked nothing of us. Of course, preparing for a thing like the Teaching Sabbatical, occupies one's mind and, at times requires more dedicated focus. But, it is absolutely fair to say that these preparations did not hinder my daily work at LTU or, create upheaval in my personal businesses. I value this, and attribute it to the know-how in the STINT and Williams College organizations, which was demonstrated in their guiding the process from start to finish.

Our preparative visit was made just after Easter 2018. My husband and I spent something like a week additional to the actual visit at Williams, driving around in as much of Massachusetts we could reasonably squeeze in, and somewhat in adjacent states. Early April apparently is not considered the prettiest season there, but it did not hinder that we absolutely fell in love with Williamstown and Williams College as such and, this particular corner of USA.

In hindsight, the preparatory visit was an extremely effective way to make the most out of the fall semester once it started. I started to think about it as the semester was going towards its end: How I, and we, had instantly been able to get into all the things that took place, once we were in place in August 2018.

My husband and I experienced the welcome at the College as very kind and, and the routines for taking care of the practicalities as being of high quality. At the Dean's Office, and support functions as the Facilities Office, and last but not least WGSS, one was met as a unique individual at the same time as it was clear that people knew what they were doing and, for the most part probably had gone through the procedure more than once.

### Tasks and Responsibilities

I had very few responsibilities as a visiting scholar at WGSS. The plan was that I would give one course from the set of courses I give at home, and adapt it to an "American college format": *Innovation, gender and sustainable development*. Besides rethinking the course plan, there are of course certain tasks associated with announcing a course, and so forth, that are more or less unique for each college or university. In the end, I did not get students. This disrupted the expectations I had had, about how my days would be spent.

## Activities During the Semester

Williamstown and the college premises are beautifully located. What became my office had large windows with a view over a college square, with a big lawn surrounded by buildings of various age and purpose. A view perfectly catching the atmosphere of the college. This office on the second floor of Hollander House – or the corridor, to be precise – came to be important both socially and in certain ways, also for the more scholarly matters. When I arrived at Williams in August it had been arranged for me to lend this office, from a professor who was herself on sabbatical during the fall.

A typical expression of the kind of informal discussions that took place among the mixed disciplines group of corridor neighbors, the neighbor in the office to the right commented regarding my course being cancelled that “It might show to be a blessing in disguise”. Perhaps this assessment contained a grain of truth. The situation gave lots of time to “shadow” and sit in with several courses, taught by different teachers: three WGSS courses, two English department courses – one of them cross-listed with the WGSS major – and one Geo Sciences course.

Arriving when the year 2018-2019 was about to begin meant that I could take part in the intense first weeks of introduction events. Williams puts a lot of efforts into getting new teachers integrated in college life. When this introductory period was about to conclude, a new President was installed. Lunches on the lawn, music and dance, barbeque buffet dinner on an Indian Summer Saturday evening. During the following months I attended the “First three” lunches rather regularly, that pick up the thread from the introductory weeks. The name refers to them being open for Williams teachers during their first three years of employment. I got friends here as well and, the secluded format made very open discussions possible.

Next, a few weeks into the semester I was invited to attend a sort of course for a select group of teachers, on the topic of “How the college works”, and the lunch presentations that the science-technology-maths units arranged weekly. Last, but not least, I attended a faculty reading group (on the topic of Feminist technoscience).

Around mid term I started planning and then made a few interviews. With WGSS teachers – the reason for that choice are probably given; the Prefects for respectively Mathematics/Statistics and Computer Science – the reason being the success they have in attracting women students and staff; two of the teachers whose courses I regularly visited. Just before the examination weeks commenced, I gave a speech organized and announced by the WGSS Chair. Students and faculty from different majors and subjects came to listen.

On top of all, my husband and I very much enjoyed the possibilities to attend a never-ending flow of open lectures and speeches, music and dance performances, exhibitions, film screenings, book launches, sports events. Williamstown is a small place and we lived at Linden Street, a comfortable walking distance from the college and Williamstown city center i.e. Spring Street. Usually we took our bikes. We also cycled along narrow country roads, admiring the landscape. To Vermont, it takes fifteen minutes. It looks the same but it is fun to cycle by the sign. Sometimes we rented a car and drove around in Massachusetts and the surroundings again, as we did in spring. We got to know charming Shelburne Falls, the grand silhouette of the Catskill Mountains, the traffic lights in Pittsfield and the fantastic quaint wood houses in North Adams. Yes, we also got to know the road to the nearest grocery stores, mostly by bike and in sun, rain and snow.

By the way, Maud S. Mandel is the first woman on the post as Williams’ President, the first in a row of hundreds of years of males. Her inauguration reminded of the three times the arrival of the first female professor has been announced at my home university. And no, it was not the same person

coming and going. Different individuals each time. I suppose keeping track of presidents is easier. Well, it is better to live in a time of firsts than lasts. On second thought, it is now also a time of lasts, though not at Williams College. So, let us see where we are going.

### Notes on the Teaching Experience – the General Comparative Level

Williams College and Luleå University of Technology operate in completely different modes. When entering LTU, students have applied and been admitted to programs that lead to definite degrees. Years before, the course plans have been set in detail, down to the level of the order in which even unrelated courses are to be taken. At Williams, in the Liberal Arts tradition, choices are continually made by the students.

This makes that topics not only can but must, be formatted in ways that differ quite a lot from our system. I am exaggerating a bit, there is a large core of courses organized with the respective “subject basics” in mind. However, much of the course subjects are formulated to speak more directly to the students, so to speak meet them where they are in the present, as very young people, in their current thoughts about the world and their futures. Writing this I realize that the statement can be taken as implying that the teaching gets tendentious, as easily as it can be taken as me being jealous. The latter is the correct interpretation. The Geo Sciences course I followed, to take one example, was called “Climate changes”. It equipped the students with abilities to understand the scientific methods that allow us to make statements about this matter. Besides the importance of the topic as such, it struck me what a fantastic pedagogic platform the course provided, for conveying to students a notion of the most painstaking details of scientific rigor, how it is achieved and, what reasons we may have to trust it or not. Inspiring, indeed.

Returning to the overall level of comparison, I have not yet mentioned the pedagogic idea that most profoundly makes Williams College a different institution as compared to LTU: the “well rounded” ideal. To put it simply, our pre-defined programs contain as little diversion as possible, while at Williams the students literarily cannot avoid, even if they would want, to diversify. I belong to the Faculty of Natural Sciences and Engineering at home. Thus, when my experience of these differences, in a not too distant future will be discussed, it is most likely in connection to engineering programs. Therefore, I asked about this profile and its’ effects, in the interviews with Williams teachers in the sort of subjects engineering students will take.

### Important Lessons – for me as teacher

The instrumentally most important lesson I had as teacher, concerns use of literature and media. How exchangeable the different forms can be, pedagogically speaking – video, film, music recordings, computer programs, paintings, pictures, informative text, poetry, etc.; the different roles they can have – as illustrations, expressions, actors in the classroom; the ways to stage the students’ engagements and interactions with literature and media. While literature and media are rather exchangeable, the formats for engaging the students in their use are not quite so.

I’m not sure if this all appears old news. Considering how often one has heard about media and what not in the classroom, one should have learned all about it by now? I’m thinking that perhaps, as a collective competence at a first class Liberal Arts college, people feel at home with arts and media, know some things about their capacities and, are ready to take them into use. In any case, I had the opportunity to observe first hand how different teachers, in different courses, handled this dimension of their teaching and, it awoke my curiosity. Gender, race (what we in Sweden prefer to call ethnicity), liberation, love, respect, knowledge, poverty, oppression, threats and danger, all can be summoned with different effects. I suppose I knew this, but now I know it better.

## Action Plan

Speaking of “instrumental”, in January 2019 the concept of having an action plan seems far fetched. Yes, I got friends over there. Yes, I have talked with some colleagues about them visiting in their professional capacity, perhaps with students. Yes, during the three weeks or so that the university businesses have been running after the holidays, I have talked with the program manager at our division, chatted with one of our university pedagogics people, and sure, I had a conversation with the band of young, radical lecturers, about homophobia, racism and such. Being trained as an engineer it might be that my perception of “action” is too demanding, compared to what was intended, when the template for our reports was composed. Yet, I would emphasize that I took it very seriously that I was in Williamstown, to experience Williams College and its’ context. Therefore, any kind of real action plan must be discussed with my colleagues, starting from now.

Come to think of it, perhaps it is in place to simply conclude that, as did one of the faculty interviewees, by being well rounded, the Williams graduates are ready to take on the unforeseen, the unpredictable, what does not fit into the commonly expected. I am not sure to have passed that exam, just by spending a semester as a WGSS faculty guest. Who knows, when the moment of truth arrives? Or, does the answer emerge, not as one moment, but in the shape of many little moments of decision?

## Summary and Conclusions

Summing up, Williams College changed the perception I have of my subject in a direction that is at the same time more radical, and more compassionate. “Because I’m worth it”, says the famous slogan of a famous cosmetics brand. Williams used to be for men only, white men. The fundamental issue with that is not that only white men attended but that, only they were considered worth being there. Moreover, it is not a matter of being worth to be there alone but moreover, to be there and to feel good about oneself. There were many discussions on that point at Williams, from which I learned a lot.

Maria Udén