

# Final Report

STINT Teaching Sabbatical, spring 2022

AMHERST COLLEGE  
Political Science Department



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## **Introduction**

At the end of December 2020, I was very pleased to find out that I had been awarded a grant from the *STINT Teaching Sabbatical* program. This meant that I would spend the fall semester 2021 at the Political Science Department of Amherst College in Massachusetts. I had some prior knowledge about the institution, and I was delighted with the possibility to be a visiting fellow there for a semester. My family were also thrilled with the idea to live in western Massachusetts, even though some of the younger family members were a bit nervous at the outset. The plan was accordingly that we would move to Amherst in August 2021. The worldwide Covid-19 pandemic would, however, forcefully change the initial plan.

## **The institution**

Amherst College is a top ranked private nonprofit Liberal Arts College, founded in 1821 and located in the town of Amherst in western Massachusetts. The college offers 42 majors in a four-year bachelor's degree with a total enrollment of approximately 1.800 students. The student – faculty ratio is 7:1 and 84 percent of the classes have fewer than 30 students. The acceptance rate is very low, and the admission requirements are demanding, which make the competition among prospective students really challenging. The students are recruited from all over the U.S. and from many other countries (10% are international students). The gross tuition fee is roughly 80.000 USD per year (2022/23). There is extensive financial support available for students through a system of “need-blind admission” for both domestic and international applicants, which means that prospects for admission will never be negatively affected by the student's application for aid or the degree of a student's financial need. In 2020/21 Amherst College provided more than 60 million USD in scholarships, and 61% of the students were offered some degree of financial aid. The overall financial situation of Amherst College is excellent, since its endowment amounts to approximately 3.8 billion USD (2021).

Nearly all students live on campus for four years. Besides excellent academic resources, for example libraries, archives, laboratories, lecturing halls, study rooms, two museums, a theater and a concert hall, there are also very good general facilities on campus, such as a common dining hall, cafeterias, residence halls, many athletic fields, indoor courts and gyms for a great number of sports.

## **The Open Curriculum and Liberal Arts**

Amherst prides itself on offering an open curriculum, which means that it has no distribution requirements and no core curriculum. Instead, students choose courses freely (with the help of faculty, mentors and advisers), and they are encouraged to take on a broad perspective when selecting courses and exploring different disciplines. A wide array of subjects is offered within

the humanities, social sciences and natural science. Amherst College offers more than 850 courses in their open curriculum. Furthermore, together with the nearby University of Massachusetts at Amherst, Hampshire College, Smith College and Mount Holyoke College it is part of the *Five College Consortium*. This consortium makes it possible for the students to choose among thousands of more courses. Many Amherst students opt for double majors, and 80% of the alumni report that they have attended graduate or professional schools.

One of the main purposes of the open curriculum is to ensure inquiring, fully engaged students committed both to the subject at hand and to a wide range of knowledge. The open curriculum also aims at making students more responsible and conscious about their education as well as their future professional and civic pursuits. This is an important part of the general purpose of the Liberal Arts Education at Amherst College, stated as: “It fosters innovative and critical thinking as well as strong writing and speaking skills. We prepare students for many possible careers, meaningful lives and service to society.” Both professors and students themselves place high expectations on academic achievement. At the same time, faculty and the College in general put great effort in actively supporting students in different ways throughout their education. In order to maintain the academic rigor and detect any difficulty the students may experience, there is a system of coordinating “class deans” and an academic support service at the Office of Student Affairs. If a student, for example, miss classes repeatedly or is struggling with a course, the responsible faculty should contact the class dean so that the student can receive the proper assistance as soon as possible. This way students are not left alone if their academic performance is deteriorating. The aim is that potential problems should be actively identified, and resources enabled to resolve them as soon as they appear. This kind of support contributes to ensure a very low level of student failure.

## **Faculty**

The open curriculum at Amherst implies great flexibility and freedom for faculty who are able and expected to adapt courses to new developments in their scholarship, society, and to the changing interests of students. Professors generally enjoy a high degree of autonomy when it comes to creating new courses, syllabi and pedagogical strategies. All faculty at Amherst College is expected to participate actively and continuously in the teaching duties. A normal teaching load for a professor is two courses of 2.5 hours a week per semester. Professors are expected to uphold an engaged academic exchange with their students, frequently establishing individual tutor-like relations with them, which is facilitated by the generally small classes and low student – faculty ratio. The relation between faculty and students is more personal and individual than at Swedish universities. At the same time, a certain type of formal distance is maintained as students always use the title “professor” when addressing faculty. However, I did not conceive this kind of formality as a shallow respect for unquestionable hierarchies, but rather as a symbol for the seriousness of the academic endeavor. There is certainly a point to be

made here about how to create a setting where the common quest for knowledge and critical inquiry are in focus. I did not experience this kind of formality as a barrier to create confidence and interaction in the classroom. I would even say that my Amherst students were more eager to participate in serious discussions than many students at Swedish universities, despite the fact that titles are seldom used when faculty and students interact in Swedish academia.

The focus on a general participation in teaching duties does by no means imply that research is disregarded. Amherst College seeks to adapt the workload to individual circumstances, in order to keep the teaching at a level that allows professors to dedicate considerable time to research and creative work. The teaching load is reduced for professors with administrative and other non-teaching duties, including substantial compensation in time for research when released from non-teaching services. More importantly, all faculty have the right to one semester of sabbatical leave every three years, which is mostly used for scholarly work. The sabbatical semesters can also be extended with the compensation for non-teaching duties, and if internal or external research funding is obtained.

Despite (and perhaps thanks to) the strong involvement in undergraduate teaching, Amherst professors generally maintain an intense research agenda, and publish their work in highly ranked academic outlets. In many cases, the capacity to combine teaching, scholarship and publishing at a high pace is remarkable. When it comes to how to bring together undergraduate teaching and research, there are valuable lessons to learn from Amherst College. One of them is the open curriculum, which makes it possible for faculty to develop courses in close relation to their areas of research and expertise. The educational program at Amherst is not structured around core courses, but rather based on a large number of elective courses designed and taught by professors with a strong commitment to course content and students.

## **Planning and Preparation**

Once I formally had accepted the grant from STINT, I contacted Janet Tobin, the coordinator of the STINT program at Amherst College and professor Javier Corrales, my academic contact and Chair of the Political Science Department at the time. At a later stage, the academic contact would be professor Austin Sarat, due to a change of the department Chair and a sabbatical leave. I also had valuable contacts with the administrative staff at the Department, Theresa Laizer and Stephen Laizer. The responses from the Department and Amherst College were from the very start swift and the communication throughout the planning process were quite effective. We immediately started to prepare for the fall semester, but I was at an early stage also informed that the pandemic restrictions might make a stay during the fall semester difficult. In late February, it was definitively deemed impossible to spend the fall at Amherst College. With the approval of both STINT and Amherst College, we then decided to aim for the spring semester 2022.

The Political Science Department early on expressed the desire that I should develop and teach a course related to my research interests and areas of expertise. The Department furthermore emphasized that I was to feel free to choose the specific topic and content of the course. The first thing I needed to do was to submit a course proposal, which should be approved by a college wide faculty committee. Once the proposal was approved, I started to work on an extensive and detailed course syllabus which should be handed in a couple of weeks before the start of the semester. Since my stay was postponed, I had substantially more time to work on the syllabus and connect it with findings in my recent research. I decided to develop a course with the title “Sovereignty, State and Empire”, placed at an advanced level, open to second to fourth-year students, with previous courses in Political Science as a prerequisite. The Department was throughout the process very supportive of my ideas and proposal.

Some six months before our planned departure, I initiated what would turn out to be a troublesome visa application process. Under normal circumstances the requirements and red tape associated with this kind of applications can be somewhat time-consuming. Under the circumstances of Covid-19 the process was not only time-consuming, but also very uncertain. The main problem was that the U.S. Embassy in Stockholm announced that, due to a severe backlog, it had (almost) no time slots available for the mandatory interview at the end of the application process. This was furthermore the case with most U.S. embassies and consulates in Europe, which made the possibility to book an interview abroad unclear. We remained in uncertainty until October, when the U.S. Department of State declared that the interviews for our type of visa could be waived, which of course came as a timely relief. Our visas finally arrived, and we were almost all set for departure.

In parallel with the planning of my academic activities at Amherst College and the long and winding visa application process, I started to look into questions concerning housing and schools for our children. We decided we wanted to live in town and near the College. To find a house in central Amherst close to campus was really challenging. I learnt that the pandemic had put pressure on the rental market in the area. The supply was lower than normal, and the prices were higher than before Covid-19. However, through friends in Amherst (and Sweden) we were lucky to find a very nice house, a few minutes’ walk to campus, downtown and schools. I actually had everything arranged with the housing several months before we got our visas, which was comforting but also a gamble since we, at the time, did not know if we would obtain the visas in due course for the spring semester.

Schooling for our children was not that complicated, since enrollment in Massachusetts public schools depends on the family residence, and we had an Amherst address really close to both high school and middle school. It was somewhat more difficult to ensure and certificate that our children complied with the vaccine program required by schools in Massachusetts. We managed to solve this smoothly, but I would strongly recommend future STINT fellows to get the proper vaccines and certificates as soon as possible. Another issue to consider was the access

to a car, and we decided to rent a one for our entire stay in the U.S. This option was costly, but it was really worthwhile to have constant access to a car. Without a car, things such as buying groceries, children's sports, visiting friends, getting to know the surroundings and more long distant travel are quite challenging. Public transport in the area does not take you everywhere, and it is in many cases very time consuming.

## **Teaching**

It was early on decided that I would develop and teach a course of my choosing. This course would be my main duty during the spring semester. I did not really discuss the option of co-teaching at the Political Science Department, since the norm for the STINT-fellows at Amherst has been to be individually responsible for one course. I also felt rather comfortable and inspired by this option. I decided to develop a course called "Sovereignty, State and Empire", which was closely connected to my current research.

The administrative support for my teaching was excellent. The course content and readings were swiftly integrated into the Moodle platform. All the texts and books (except for some that were to be purchased) were made accessible through Moodle. The necessary copyright issues were also handled by the administrative support. Amherst College provided me from the start with all the needed service concerning infrastructure and facilities, such as a convenient office, computer equipment and access to IT systems.

The course delved into the theoretical and historical coexistence of states and empires, focusing on how of sovereignty and related political concepts have been used in settings associated with both state and empire. Throughout the course, these settings were *not* viewed as questions strictly confined to the past. On the contrary, the aim was to examine how notions about contemporary state sovereignty and the government of empires continue to share fundamental dilemmas concerning political order. The texts, concepts, problems and examples used in the course were drawn from a variety of contexts, such as the Roman empire, medieval political orders, the modern state, and the expansion (and contraction) of global empires/states.

Since my stay was postponed one semester, I had additional time to work on the syllabus and consider how to best design the content and form of the course. Based on my prior knowledge about the academic rigor at Amherst College, and after some conversations with its faculty, I decided to be quite ambitious about the content and purpose of the course I would teach. The course put rather high expectations on the students' capacities and ambition. The syllabus comprised extensive readings associated with different theoretical perspective across various political and historical contexts. I was thus rather curious (and somewhat uncertain) about how the students would manage and how the dynamics in the classroom would work out.

Another uncertainty concerned the number of students who would finally take the course. At Amherst (and at many other colleges and universities in the U.S.) there is brief course “add/drop” period at the start of each semester. This means that the students formally decide which courses to take when the semester already has started. My course was planned for a limited number of students and designed for an intense interaction with the participants. Depending on the final number of students, I had prepared different options concerning the distribution of time lecturing and seminars. I finally ended up with a handful of students, which I obviously considered to be a privilege, especially in a seminar intense course at undergraduate level. Despite of being small, my class was a rather good example of the plurality of the Liberal Arts Education and the open curriculum at Amherst, since the students were majoring in different disciplines: political science, philosophy and history. Some of the students also aimed for double majors in these disciplines.

At the beginning of the semester, there were quite severe Covid-19 restrictions in place, which meant that the first two weeks were taught entirely online. Staff and faculty were also recommended to minimize their presence on campus. After the first two weeks, the College went back to traditional classroom teaching, but various restrictions remained. One of the most important one was the indoor mask mandate, which were lifted after roughly two months. Speaking and listening to others while wearing a face mask was at times challenging. However, armed with some patience and experience, we managed to understand each other quite well in this pandemic classroom setting.

I started out the teaching period with a couple of lectures in order to introduce the overarching content and form of the course. Once the number of participants were confirmed, I progressively encouraged more interactivity among the students. As in many courses, the students were at the outset somewhat retracted when it came to participate extensively and in depth. However, after the first couple of weeks, they eventually gained in confidence and proved to be interested, knowledgeable and ambitious. I got the impression that the Amherst students place quite high intellectual demands on themselves. This was probably one reason for my students *initially* being too cautious about what arguments they made in class, especially before being familiar with the readings and content of the course. The initial social barrier in the classroom is obviously also important, and particularly crucial to break in such a reduced setting where students inevitably will need to interact intensively twice a week during several months.

Once we all got to know each other better, the dynamics in class got more interactive and the students were eager to discuss the topics of the course in depth. The syllabus was quite dense with extensive readings to do before each class. The students generally made very good arguments related to the readings, and we frequently managed to extend those arguments to other contexts or to current political events. I was also interested in how the students would conceive perspectives and findings from my current research incorporated in the course. I was happy to observe various interesting comments and arguments made by the students, which

certainly will enrich both my research and teaching. It was especially rewarding to see how the students' prior knowledge of different subjects and specialized courses in the open curriculum contributed to the discussions and the papers they handed in. The general principle of the course grading was: 40% active participation in class, presentations and comments; 20% midterm paper; and 40% final paper, including final presentation and discussion. All students performed very well and received high grades. The feedback and evaluation I got from the students were positive. In sum, I was very pleased with the teaching experience at Amherst College, especially regarding the high quality maintained during our seminars and in the texts produced by the students. I will certainly remember and miss my Amherst students.

### **Other Academic Activities**

Besides my teaching duties, I participated in a various meetings, seminars and social events at Amherst College. However, the pandemic restrictions limited many of the normal academic and social events. Several activities at the Political Science Department had been cancelled or restricted. The College-Wide Faculty Meetings, which are an essential part of the collegial participation and governing of Amherst College, were held online. The informal social gatherings after those meetings were subsequently cancelled. Even though the Faculty Meetings were held online, it was really interesting to see how they functioned as large fora for debate and substantial collegial co-governance of the College. Questions both small and large were raised and discussed at length by faculty and academic management. Even though the pandemic restrictions were particularly rigorous the first two months, not all social activities for faculty were cancelled. A College-Wide Faculty reception was, for example, held at the beginning of the semester. This kind of gatherings were of course good occasions to get to know colleagues from across different academic disciplines, not the least from those far from my own field.

Other academic activities I participated in at the Amherst College included, for example, meetings on how to combine teaching, research, career and personal life and seminars about urgent current events, such as the war in Ukraine. When the most severe pandemic restrictions were lifted, the College also arranged a number of large festivities on campus for students, professors and their families. At the very end of the semester, I was also delighted to have the opportunity to attend the commencement ceremony for the Class of 2022.

Throughout my stay, I had many valuable individual meetings with colleagues, especially from the Political Science Department, but also from other departments such as Spanish and Philosophy. These conversations were very rewarding, and they concerned both teaching and research. We identified and discussed common interests, experiences, acquaintances and plans. Through these personal meetings, I got a good view on both individual and institutional approaches to teaching and scholarship at Amherst College. The Amherst professors are generally highly engaged in their own scholarship as well as in the academic development of their students on a nearly individual basis. This is of course facilitated by small classes,



sabbatical leaves and the resources at hand. It is furthermore safe to say that they open curriculum and the Liberal Arts Education encourage more creative links between research and undergraduate teaching than fixed educational programs with strict core curriculum and a very limited number of elective courses.

I had the opportunity to establish contact with a colleague at the University of Massachusetts who works on questions related to my current research (and teaching at Amherst). As a result of our discussions on research and publications, we also interchanged syllabi from our ongoing courses since they appeared to be highly relevant for our recent scholarship. I think this is an example of how rather specific research issues can be more closely linked to undergraduate teaching, and not something that you *solely* can deal with in depth when you manage to buyout from teaching duties.

I furthermore attended the STINT midterm seminar at the University of Texas at Austin, which was both academically valuable and socially enjoyable. It was especially interesting to identify similarities and differences experienced by STINT fellows, from a wide array of disciplines, at host institutions across the U.S.

### **Concluding remarks and lessons**

The teaching sabbatical at Amherst College was truly awarding. Both my family and I had an exceptional semester in Amherst in so many ways. My academic experience was interesting and inspiring, and in various aspects quite different from teaching at Swedish (and European) universities. Just to mention a few of those differences: the strong focus on the undergraduate students' individual progress and achievement, the great number of elective courses, the freedom of developing and teaching highly specialized courses, the low student – faculty ratio, the student engagement in their education, the financial resources, the alumni networks, and the close links between undergraduate teaching and research. The Liberal Arts Education, the open curriculum and the resources available at institutions such as Amherst College enable a quite unique setting, which is very difficult to replicate in Swedish higher education. As mentioned throughout the present report, I think however, that there are some lessons to be learned from my Amherst Experience.

One of the most important lessons concerns the connection between undergraduate education and research. At Swedish universities (and elsewhere), in practice, there is a tendency to strongly separate undergraduate teaching duties from research. This separation implies that professors are supposed to constantly buyout from teaching duties if they want to do research. Substantial amount of time is obviously crucial in order to make progress in research (as well as in teaching), and the pursuit of research funding is necessary. However, the relation between teaching duties and research is not necessarily characterized by mutual exclusion. What Amherst College and other elite Liberal Arts institutions seem to facilitate is precisely a high

degree of *overlapping* between undergraduate teaching and research. I think that this overlapping is something that can be strengthened in many educational programs and courses at Swedish universities, especially in non-professional programs in the social sciences and humanities, where the benefits of a strict closed core curriculum with limited elective courses are not at all obvious. It might be difficult to offer the same number of elective courses as at Amherst College, but a more open, plural and dynamic design of programs and courses would in many cases be both possible and beneficial.

## **Acknowledgements**

First of all, I would like to thank STINT for their generous support and for giving me the opportunity to spend an exceptional teaching sabbatical at Amherst College together with my family. My most sincere gratitude also goes out to colleagues, staff and students of the Political Science Department, and elsewhere at Amherst College, who made my stay awarding in so many ways. Finally, I am truly grateful for all the friends my family and I made during these months in western Massachusetts.