

STINT report 2019

Teaching Sabbatical - Williams College

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Williams College

Williams College is a top liberal art college located in the northwest corner of Massachusetts, USA. The number of students is about 2,100 and the tuition, fee, room and board are about \$70,000/year. It is one of the oldest colleges in the country, founded 1793. The school was originally a men's college and women were first admitted in 1971. Williams College has three academic branches – arts and humanities, social sciences, and science and mathematics – and graduate programs in the history of art and economics. Williams has small class sizes, with a student-teacher ratio of 7-to-1. About 10% of the students that apply to Williams are admitted.



The department of Computer Science where I was situated consisted of 13 faculty and 3 staff members, me excluded. The number of majors in Computer Science was about 100 students this year. The Computer Science courses are very popular.



About teaching a course at Williams College

My teaching

I taught the course CS343 Functional Programming that I created myself. It was a semester long course like every other course at the college. I didn't do much advertisement of the course, but with such an interesting topic the course was full, that is 23 students. I myself attended a course in Principles of Programming Languages in order to get the experience of how another teacher structured a course and interacted with the students. I also participated in all department related questions, meetings and colloquiums and had the possibility to sit-in on many classes. I wanted to take the opportunity to actively reflect upon my experiences together with my colleagues continuously during the semester.

Planning, administration and grading

Rules, practices and standardizations tend to limit people's creativity. Rules and practices are often ways to try to control quality. But, as a professional teacher I would like to be given the trust to use my judgment to determine what to do and how to do it. At Williams College I had that opportunity.

The administration for a course at Williams is very small. Some months in advance you register a new course with a name and a brief description of the course in general and the topics included. At the first lecture you need a complete Syllabus of the course and the format of this document is up to you. A low level of control opens up for creativity, enthusiasm and inspiration. At KTH it is not that easy to change the contents, or even the name, of a course because of a much higher level of administration and control.

Regarding grading, the praxis at Williams is to shortly state in the Syllabus to what extent the different course activities contributes to the final grade, i.e. class participation 5%, midterm exam 25% etc. Also this is up to the teacher to decide. This is quite far from the current Swedish system, and especially far from where the Swedish system is heading regarding grading. Grades based on specific goals make the process of examination and its interpretation very complicated and administratively heavy, as opposed to a grading based on the teacher's judgment and authority. In all cases, the important thing is that the students are aware of what is expected from them in the course.

Course shopping

The first two weeks of the semester is the course shopping period. During this period students can come and go in your class and change courses for the semester. The students take four semester long courses. My course wasn't really suitable for course shopping. In my course the students are given a code base from start that might be very unfamiliar to their previous experience in programming. Since they are a bit lost in the beginning of the course I was afraid that they would change my course into a more familiar course. However, I only lost one student and gained two. This thing of selling the course during this shopping period is not a good idea. We should optimize for student learning from the beginning of the course and not be afraid that it could scare students. I think it is a good thing that we do not have this activity in Sweden.

Teacher-Student relationship

In the classroom

At Williams it is mandatory to attend classes and that is great. I really want my students in Sweden to attend my lectures and often they do. My students in Sweden often complain about their own discipline and I think that attending lectures would help them realize what effort are needed and expected.

Even though the students at Williams worked hard in the course it was difficult to obtain a dialogue with them in class. This was quite a surprise to me, since I am used to be able to keep a dialogue going with a much larger number of students in class at KTH. I tried a number of strategies to encourage them to communicate more in class, but it was surprisingly hard. Their attitude towards studies seemed to be "Tell us what to do and we'll do it!" whilst my course is built upon the concept of sharing ideas and experiences with each other.

It was interesting to experience that the students generally showed a lot of respect for their professors. This seemed to be the case also in the Elementary School where our son was enrolled in 2nd grade.

Encouraging student development

Williams College encouraged close contact between students and their professors. For instance, the college always paid when teachers were having coffee and donut or lunch together with students. The professors really had a chance to get to know their students, especially the gifted students that were most active during class. In many ways, the teachers at Williams focused on the gifted students and gave a lot of their time to them. In Sweden, we focus a lot on the students that are close to fail the course. We might need to revise our way of thinking regarding this in Sweden if we want to promote a strong academic development. Future development is more likely to arise from the most gifted students, so we should make sure that we don't fail to give them our attention during their education. Also, many students could benefit from a higher level of education, if they get inspired and led by the gifted students.

Student commitment

The students at Williams College take their studies seriously. They are committed to work hard in every course. Maybe this follows from being given the opportunity to be admitted to Williams College, which gives them a sense of pride and belonging. I wish my Swedish students in general had the same level of commitment and that they too realized that they have received a great opportunity.

As humans, we often use rituals in order to embrace and interpret important changes in our life, such as weddings, funerals etc. At Williams College all new students participate in a vocation march together with faculty members. This ritual helps the students to obtain the mindset of being a student at Williams and enhances the sense of belonging and commitment.

I think that some Swedish first year students are unsure about their choice to study at the university. If you are occupied thinking about whether this is the

right thing for you or not, it is hard to be committed enough to manage a difficult course. The purpose of a meaningful ritual for a freshman would be to help the students to take an active stand for being a committed student. At KTH most of the welcoming is organized by older students and is more focused on social activities and parties. I think it would be good to also have an introduction that focuses on enhancing the academic commitment.

Students with problems

Williams College has a network for support to students on their way of failing a course. It was clearly communicated to all faculty members to report to the dean's office if any signs of problems arose in your class. Since classes were mandatory and students had to tell the teacher if they were to miss a class it was easily noticed if a student started to struggle. At KTH it is impossible to notice if a student is heading in the wrong direction unless they are looking for help themselves.

Teacher-Teacher relationship

Faculty members were very friendly and positive. However they were busy and I really missed all informal coffee breaks and lunches with colleagues that we value so much in Sweden. Most people at Williams had their lunches by themselves in their offices and they didn't have coffee break the way we do. It was therefore hard to find time with colleagues to discuss whatever we had in mind. I was lucky that the faculty member Duane Bailey had his sabbatical and thus was free of teaching during the semester. He was an experienced teacher and I received many tips and advices from him.

Teacher-College relationship

It was clear that the college really wanted you to succeed. There was a lot of support for various problems that you could encounter. The First3 program was designed for new faculty members and it is a place where they can meet and discuss different topics related to their professional activities at the college. I was welcome to join and we met twice a week for lunch at the Faculty House. Every third meeting was open for a general discussion, otherwise the agenda was given in advance and often a speaker was invited from the college.

The First3 program, and especially that it lasted for such a long time, was great. As a new member of the college you got to know many other faculty members from other disciplines. You had a chance to connect to people you might never have met. I seemed to me from these meetings that many tenure faculty members were scared about the evaluation process that follows such a position. Instead of focusing on the work we do, we often talked about the way we are evaluated. This was interesting to take part of and also a problem for universities to handle.

Suggestions to upcoming STINT fellows at Williams College

Williamstown is small and surrounded by mountains and brooks. However, you will need a car since there is no grocery store in Williamstown and some social activities are located outside of town. The closest airport, 70 minutes drive, is in Albany in New York State and there isn't any public transportation to Williamstown. It is about three-hour drive to New York and Boston.

With a car there is a lot to see around the town. Close by is North Adams where some faculty members live and where MassMoCa, the famous contemporary art museum, is located. If you sign up for a library card in the public library in Williamstown you can borrow museum passes for free. In Vermont, the state north of Massachusetts, there are skiing facilities and nice small towns with famous breweries and great cheese.

Use the planning trip to organize housing and a solution for the car unless you are willing to rent a car from the rentals for the period. This will cost you around \$6000 including collision damage insurance. Williams College has a deal with Enterprise in Pittsfield where you can get some discount. Many faculty members are on sabbaticals, since this is a natural part of their employment. If you are lucky you might be able to rent a house and/or car from someone. There is also a digital announcement board within the college where you can ask questions of this kind.

Our son was enrolled in 2nd grade at Williamstown Elementary School, which was very good. They admit children from Kindergarten, Preschool and up to 6th grade. Mount Greylock High School is located south of Williamstown. School buses are available for both schools.

As a spouse, staff or faculty member of Williams College you get access to a lot of sports and culture facilities. My family regularly visited the pool to exercise. All of these things are for free and many faculty members used it.



Thoughts about improvement of the program

It is a bit unclear what is communicated between the STINT program and Williams College. This makes it hard to figure out what to expect and suggest. The computer science department was very busy with a lot of students and apart from me there were four new faculty members. I had an office far away from my colleagues, next to faculty members of biology and chemistry. This was not good for the interaction with the department. If this is not already stated, I would suggest that the hosting universities should integrate the STINT fellow in the core of their activities. The office location plays a central role for informal dialogs and conversations, especially if the coffee breaks and lunch gatherings are missing.

Another question that I have is the level of interaction that is expected from the host university. My department was very busy during the semester and if it isn't clearly stated that they should interact with the STINT fellow it is less likely to happen. As a STINT fellow you are not really in position to change the host department mindset regarding having a STINT fellow. In other words, it might be good to communicate that the receiving faculty should be willing and prepared to invest time and interest to make the most of this exchange.

Everyone at Williams College was very friendly and helped me whenever I asked for support or advises. When the course went on well the department was happy and did not disturb me.

The STINT-contact John Gerry at Williams was very helpful and professional.

Takeaways

There are so many takeaways from this teaching sabbatical. One of them is the insight regarding balance between administration, control and trust and its relation to creativity and enthusiasm. I think that the most important thing with this experience is that I will continuously relate new experiences to the ones I had at Williams College.