

Teaching Sabbatical at Williams College 2021 | Final report

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I have now concluded my teaching sabbatical at Williams College during the fall semester of 2021. The original intention was to do the sabbatical during the fall of 2020, but due to the Covid19-pandemic the stay was postponed for a year. I am grateful for have been given this opportunity and that it finally did happen, despite the administrative hurdles and many uncertainties met.

Preparation and planning

A long journey

A planning trip was scheduled for April 2020 but got cancelled when Covid19 was declared a global pandemic. Uncertainty whether the stay at Williams College would be possible lingered until June until it was decided to cancel. I was in communication with the Dean's office at Williams about the decision and they were supportive and welcomed me back any time in the future, suggesting to try in the coming year.

Before the decision to postpone, I had contact with prof Amie Hane who was heading the Public Health program at the time. She asked what I wanted to teach and explained that I would be assigned to have one class of maximum 16 students, even if prof Hane anticipated that maybe 6-8 would be reasonable. I then saw the opportunity to develop my own proficiency within the field of health equity, something that I have long had the intention to do but never had the time to at Uppsala University. Prof Hane, who is a psychologist focusing on early childhood development was positive, even if I suspect that she had maybe

anticipated something more clinically oriented. I was asked to send a few sentences about the course content that could be included in the course catalogue. No further information or preparation were needed at this point. The following text was sent and included in the course catalogue:

Equity in health has been defined as inequalities in health outcomes based on irrelevant social characteristics. In the Sustainable Development Goals and Agenda 2030 it has been highlighted as a main focus and key to achieving social sustainability. This course will introduce students to the concept of equity in health, and discuss the theoretical underpinnings of the pathways to unequal health outcomes. The social determinants of health and how they translate to uneven outcomes will be explored and discussed. There will also be a special focus on gender and gender-based violence as a driver of ill health. How to reduce inequity in health will be discussed and debated. Readings will involve some of the classic texts on health equity as well as recent explorations of the area.

During spring 2021, prof Hane was herself on a sabbatical and prof Tara Wilson was appointed temporary head of the Public Health program. I declared my intention to try to visit during fall 2021 and prof Wilson was supportive but referred to prof Hane about details and suggested that we resumed planning where it was left off during 2020. Hence there were no new discussions about the course or my teaching responsibilities. Due to the Covid19 situation, no planning trip was done.

All throughout the process I have been well supported by all required documents for the visa process by the Dean's office. To finally obtain the visa for myself and my family we had to go to Warsaw and have the visa interview at the US embassy there.

For practical issues around housing, I was in contact with the housing office. Williams College has a housing lottery every semester and I could sign up and was offered an apartment that fitted our needs. It was a smooth process and worked out well in the end, even if the 'lottery' set up gave an impression of uncertainty. Now, I am a quite laid-back person when it comes to practical issues, having a lot of travel experience, but I can imagine that this uncertainty could be quite stressful. Maybe the situation would have been different if I had been able to do the planning trip.

When it comes to transportation, both on how to get to Williamstown, and how to get around once being there, I received very little information, and no real solutions were presented other than sweeping reference to car rentals. Same thing with schools for our children. Assurances from the Dean's office that it usually works out and that I could contact the local schools. Given that the STINT program now has been running for some years, I would have expected these things to be better organized and taken care of. Yet again, this might have been taken care of during the planning trip that did not happen.

Arriving in Williamstown

As it turned out, it was me and my youngest son Zacharias who arrived first in Williamstown. We booked a Peter Pan bus from New York City (scheduled once a week) and arrived early afternoon on August 26th. Despite having sent a number of emails to announce our arrival, we were not received by anyone, but eventually managed to find our way to the security

office to get our apartment keys and then also found the apartment. Once there we unpacked our bags and walked to a local store to fill our suitcase with food and other necessities, just happy that we did not arrive later during the day.

The following day we explored the college on our own, and eventually found the office building where I would have my office. It was situated in a newly built complex housing the psychology department. Luckily, we met with the department administrator Christine Russell, who took us under her wings and showed us around. I am immensely grateful to Christine for all the support we got, especially during that first week but also throughout the stay. She took us in her car to the regional high school, managed to get a physical exam need for Zacharias to be enrolled there and helped us investigate possibilities of getting a car for private transport. Christine also helped to get me through the course registration process, providing me with transcripts of students and explaining the whole procedure.

Tasks and responsibilities

As a visiting professor I was assigned to lead one course, whereas employed teachers are usually required to lead two courses each semester. After my initial discussions with prof Hane I continued to develop a course on health equity as described above. After arriving at the college, I had two weeks to prepare the syllabus and readings. Prof Hane sent me some other syllabi for benchmarking, but there was a lot of freedom to develop the course however I seemed fit. My suggestions were not discussed or approved, something that would later be shown to be detrimental.

My course was part of the Public Health curriculum, and was classified as a 300-level seminar course. Public Health is considered a 'concentration' at Williams College, meaning that there are no coherent program and that the course offerings are complementary to other programs. The PH concentrators are usually pre-med or psychology majors. There is one full-time teacher employed for the concentration and an additional 10-15 teachers from various departments who are affiliated and give courses on a rolling schedule. All teachers are spread out over the campus, and during my stay there was only one meeting for all faculty within the concentration. Overall, there was very little interaction between faculty at the college in relation to course work, and I was basically left to my own device.

Coming to a new learning environment can be challenging, especially when it comes to understanding the culture and capacity level of students. The college has a program called First3 for all new faculty. During the first three years you are invited to take part in discussions and meetings twice a week to discuss everything from practical issues on how to survive the winter months to how to handle cheating and mental health problems of students. This was helpful on a general level and also the only faculty interaction available.

Activities during the Teaching Sabbatical

Teaching

My course was given two time slots each week, in total 25 sessions of 75 minutes each. I had the early shift from 8.30 to 9.45 on Tuesdays and Thursdays. After some initial debacle with registration, I ended up with 18 students. This was a bit more than I had anticipated, but I had to adapt and figured it would be possible.

The Covid19 situation put some restraints on teaching, and a face mask mandate resulted in an option to teach outside. Later during the semester, we were forced by the weather to be inside, and thus teaching with face masks. This was not the only new element to me as a teacher. I early on decided to take this opportunity to develop my own teaching and try out new ways. One thing was to skip PowerPoints, which was facilitated by not having that option in the outdoor tent. To have the responsibility for all teaching during a course is also something novel to me, since at home you rope in other teachers for most of the sessions when being responsible for a course. I looked very much forward to this since it provided an opportunity to engage more with the students. However, the students took three other courses at the same time and the depth of engagement in each course was unfortunately hampered by this work load. To balance readings and assignments was a difficult task. I consulted with some colleagues about the work load, and got the impression it was adequate, but later it turned out that it was too much and that the theoretical level was too high, and I had to cut and reschedule a substantial part of the planned teaching.



The first half of the course worked out pretty well. I was encouraged by STINT and my home institution to write a blog about my experiences, and so I did. To have a blog was a good way to reflect and conclude my initial experiences and I had hoped that it would be a source of discussion. However, as events turned out, it became a liability and part of the failure to come. Sometime at mid-term things turned sour. I was called to the Dean's office and was made aware that there had been student complaints about my course. One of the complaints was about the blog, students felt like they were guinea pigs and did not want me

to write about the teaching experience. I thought I had not disclosed any personal details that were not openly discussed and the material was properly anonymized. The dean however asked me politely to shut the blog down, which I did. Another complaint was about how I handled the issue of race/ethnicity and an assumption that I had asked students to disclose personal sensitive information in different assignments. In the course evaluation one student described it thus:

At the beginning of the semester, I was really excited for the course content and the opportunity for class discussions. I think in the first half of the semester I was following relatively well on what we were going over in class but I believe there was a disconnect as the course went on. Overall, I think Professor Malqvist was genuinely invested in the course content he was teaching and I appreciate that he did want to have an open dialogue when there were things not going well in the course. I wish that the college would have encouraged or allowed him to address it with the class earlier on so that changes could have been made mid-semester and we could have diminished class tensions.

After this, the course never really recovered and in the end many students expressed frustration and disappointment in the course. Further reflections below.

Faculty interaction

Apart from teaching the course I had no other duties. There was no seminar culture at the department, but through the administrator Christine Russell I was invited to have a '**60s Scholar seminar**' which was announced to the whole college. I chose to present some of my experiences from field work in Eswatini and some 30-40 faculty and students attended.

I sat in on some other courses to get a feel for the teaching environment, but in general there was no interest in what I thought or what experience I could bring to the college. Conversations with other visiting professors confirmed the notion of being recruited/hired to fill a spot in the schedule rather than contributing academic or intellectual capacity and experience. This was to me a bit surprising, given that Williams College is ranked highly I had expected more interaction and conversation.

As part of First3 I was invited to a **support group on teaching issues**. Williams College is currently in the process of establishing a pedagogical development unit, and the support group initiative was part of this process. A group of five teachers met once a week to discuss issues related to the teacher role and share experiences. Discussions were confidential and surrounded by a lot of secrecy. I never really understood why it would be problematic, or even shameful, for teachers to take part in this activity, in Sweden it would be a merit to put on your CV. However, here the course leader explicitly asked us not even to disclose names of other group members to other colleagues, or not pretend we were in the same group if meeting under different circumstances. The discussions were however very productive and enlightening and a highlight of the week.

Important lessons

The US political climate is today extremely polarized, and this was notable in both the assumptions and thinking of students as well as in how the college handles sensitive topics. Williams College is considered a progressive institution, affiliated with liberal and left-wing idea, while at the same time having a long and solidified tradition of being an all-male, all-white school. This contradiction is addressed through out-spoken policies of diversity, inclusion and equity, with a clear trait of identity politics. Gender is addressed through the stating of gender pronouns (he/him; she/her; they/them) and a large focus and visibility on the transgender population. At the same time, students gave testimony of rigid gender roles and expectations between male and female students, giving rise to a high burden of gender-based violence. This was not at all discussed or addressed by the college. In a similar fashion there was a lot of focus on ethnicity/race, with clear divisions between “people of color” and those presenting and identifying as “white”, while there was little or no discussion about other apparent and problematic divisions in campus life, such as between athletes and non-athletes, between students on financial aid and those not on financial aid. The athletic divide can of course not at all be compared to the historical and ongoing oppression based on ethnicity/race in the US, but by not acknowledging some apparent imbalances in the everyday life of students, the efforts directed towards ethnicity/race felt more politically driven than oriented towards problem-solving. The neglect of income inequality as a driver of social injustice in the US is very strong, and is further hidden in identity politics addressing horizontal inequity. The current radicalization of the public discourse on these issues has caused a climate of fear of being branded as belonging to the opposite side if questioning or problematizing certain issues.

To teach health equity in this climate was more challenging than I could have imagined. The injustices that can be addressed academically and theoretically in a Swedish environment were open wounds of personal trauma. To look beyond the own experience or belief and reflect on an opposite standpoint was not possible for many students. Being a white middle-aged male, I was many times put in the box of representing white supremacy ideas when trying to encourage reflection. Trying to address the issue of ethnicity/race from a Swedish/European perspective caused students to label me as ignorant and non-receptive. When seeking advice from colleagues on how to proceed, I got the advice to co-create understanding of race/ethnicity with students and ask for their input. This was however immediately perceived by the students as me being incompetent and racist rather than an attempt to unpack the phenomena for further understanding. Along the same lines, assumptions about assignment prompts came out in unanticipated ways among students when my own assumptions about students’ capacity to address an issue academically was incorrect. One student wrote in the evaluation:

The situation was worsened by the following section, focusing on race and ethnicity, which was incredibly awkward and unhelpful. I understand that Prof. Målvist comes from Sweden, where the context is different and where there are different conversations surrounding the topic. However, I found it difficult to learn or even participate when Prof. Målvist's personal views on race/ethnicity were so obvious hanging over us during discussion...

In retrospect, I realize that I was not at all prepared or equipped for this political or academic climate. I also over-rated the academic maturity of the students, having been told repeatedly that the Williams' students were the best of the best, and that they read everything that is assigned. This was my mistake, having previously mostly taught at Master's and doctoral level, but there was also a distinct difference compared to Swedish students in capacity for theoretical reasoning. Surprisingly, despite students being on junior or senior level, to many it seemed a new thing to discuss an issue through different theoretical frameworks.

Another short-coming brought forward was my perceived lack of empathy and responsiveness to students' opinions and requests. Here I must have failed miserably, because I really tried to explain instructions and address concerns, and even went over certain assignments over several class sessions. That this was then perceived as a justification from my side, or a repetition of the same thing over and over again, can only be attributed to my inability to get my point through or adequately being able to read the situation. I must confess that I at some different occasions was utterly thrown off by the suggestions and opinions expressed by students, and my disbelief might have shone through. For example, when discussing consumerism students claimed that it is a human right to buy things, and that campaigns to raise awareness about the detrimental effects of our over-consumption of limited resources are oppressive against the poor. Or to be faced with students' strong sense of disadvantage and offence despite being students at one of the highest ranked schools in the country was sometimes provoking. To be exposed to such a different cultural landscape when assuming that we share a basic ideology and outlook is confusing and a valuable lesson. Then it is of course a rather heavy blow to my self-esteem as a teacher to get among the lowest grades of all courses, and being considered one of the most ineffective teachers naturally affects one's self-confidence, even if you have some feasible explanatory models to moderate the response. Hopefully I can pick myself up for the coming semester at home, and use it as an illustrative example of societal structures.

On a positive note, there were a couple of students in the class who had no problems delivering thoughtful and sometimes brilliant analyses on the assignments and who gave continuous positive feedback on the teaching. One student wrote in the evaluation:

This course really did important work in making the invisible visible. Making inequities visible is incredibly difficult as they tend to be deeply rooted in social structures and Prof. M did an excellent job to show us these things.

Comparison between the host and the home institutions (in Sweden)

Some of the main differences compared to teaching in Sweden have already been mentioned above, such as the polarized political climate and the high degree of freedom and trust in individual teachers. Another major difference was the teacher-student relation. In Sweden the hierarchies are not very much pronounced, with an informal interaction between teacher and student, whereas in the US I was repeatedly called 'Professor' and there was a polite subordination by students. At the same time the college encouraged a mentorship atmosphere between teacher and students that bordered what in Sweden would be considered quite inappropriate. Teachers were expected to have 'office hours' when students could meet one-on-one to ask questions and be mentored. Special funds were set aside for teachers to be able to buy coffee or lunch for students and even to throw parties in their own homes. These 'office hours' were spent on the local cafés and had two main purposes. In the beginning of the semester students asked for office hours in order to present and promote themselves. Later during the semester, contact was sought for clarification and discussion on assignments. It was a selected group of students who signed up for office hours and even if the intention of this set up was to foster an open and mentoring climate, it rather reinforced inequitable structures.

A major difference was that I was expected to teach my course by myself. In Sweden, being a course leader most often means to engage and coordinate other lecturers to come in and teach on their speciality. I have myself previously taught health equity (among other things) as part of different courses, but never more than the equivalent to six lecture hours (6x45 minutes), and maybe one or two 90 minutes seminars in total. Now I had 25x75 minutes to plan. This was both an incredible opportunity and a great challenge. Given the developments and the fall out of the course it goes without saying that I would make quite a lot of adaptations if ever to teach the same course under the same circumstances.

As mentioned above, the administrative routines were quite different compared to Uppsala University (UU). Some month in to the semester I decided to try to teach the course that I had now developed also in Sweden the coming fall. I contacted my department at UU to announce my intention. First, I got to know that the budget for 2022 was already decided, so if I were to teach a new course in the fall I would have to fit it into my work hours pro bono. Then the syllabus would have to be approved in three separate committees before it could be included in the course catalogue. Given that I had just started to think about this it was not sure I could make the deadline for inclusion in the catalogue for fall 2022. The stark contrast to submitting a syllabus for my course at Williams two weeks before course start, without any formal approval or scrutiny, could not have been greater. Compared to two weeks at Williams College I would have to have two years at UU. There are of course pros and cons to both set-ups, and maybe a middle ground would be preferable. Another major difference in the academic environment is the set up with tenure-track positions for junior faculty. This would be equivalent to assistant lecturer positions (Biträdande universitetslektor) in Sweden. It is a six-year appointment that will be evaluated, and if favorable will lead to a permanent position at the college, tenure. Among the junior faculty there was a lot of anxiety connected to the coming evaluation, with outspoken as well as unwritten rules of what was appropriate and how to interact. Colleagues disclosed

that they were sleepless due to course evaluations and when I talked about my interactions with the Dean's office they froze with fear.

Part of the tenure-track system is to produce research outputs. However, the emphasis on research was much less prominent compared to how things are at my home institution. It was clear that for the college, teaching came first-hand and research was more up to the individual professors. Maybe I got this all wrong, but given that I was not once asked about my ongoing research and that there was no research seminar culture this was the lingering impression. I even invited two different professors from the statistics department to join in a research project with the potential to authorship, but got very lukewarm responses. I also tried to initiate collaboration with the Sustainability Centre, without success.

How to upgrade and merit teaching in Sweden is problematic. Emphasis is clearly on research and as a researcher you are expected to be a teacher without any pedagogical evaluation. Pedagogical development is many times considered something extra that you can engage in if you have an interest. In this respect I really appreciate the focus on teaching as a main task at Williams, even if the support structures were weak and hampered by a culture of "effortless perfection" also among teachers. The secrecy surrounding the pedagogical support group is for example a mystery. As if needing support is a sign of weakness.

Recommendations

Given today's political climate in the US, and also within academia, precautions must be taken when both inviting and sending scholars from a different context. There is a non-neglectable risk that scholars might end up in the cross-fire of political positioning. Of course, the risk is more pronounced if giving a course on politically oriented topics like health equity, but after discussing with colleagues at Williams it is clear that all teaching is subject to these circumstances. Stories of adverse student reactions and rushed counter-measures from management were given first-hand, and a culture of caution was present. **It might be worth considering to pause the programme exchange with Williams College and evaluate.** Anyhow, there is a clear need for dialogue between STINT and the receiving institution in relation to this new polarized landscape. How this situation is at other colleges or universities within the STINT programme I don't know, but I suspect that it is a general trend in the US society at the moment, which needs to be taken into consideration for the STINT programme as a whole.

One recommendation is that **STINT scholars should always co-teach** and not be left to their own device. This would be more beneficial for the experience, both for the fellow and for the receiving institution, since it would promote dialogue around different teaching traditions and mutual learning. As it was for me, I gained a lot of experience the hard way, but there was no forum for me to transfer experience to the college.

Circumstances did not allow for me to conduct a planning trip, something that I note from previous reports has been very beneficial. Thus, it might have been better organized if I had been able to go to Williamstown before arriving at the start of the semester. Currently the

practical assistance was kept at a minimum. Luckily, I found the department's administrator after some days, who took me under her wings and sorted many things. This ad hoc solution was of course not optimal and could easily have been avoided with **more clearly communicated responsibilities**. One such practical thing could have been to let the receiving institution book and arrange transport to and from the college. Williams College is remote and without frequent public transport. Booking the arrival would also secure a better reception.

Given that the STINT programme now has been running for some years, and that there is **an obvious need for a car to get around**, this is something that maybe could be arranged by the college. To be able to lease a car for the duration of the stay should not be that difficult. To rent a car cost about 600 USD a week, which is not feasible, and to buy a car for a short time period is quite an administrative challenge. We did not have a car during the stay and managed by biking, sporadic rentals, ZipCar and merciful acquaintances. It worked out, but was stressful when having to pick up at school and limiting when not being able to participate fully in social activities.

Action plan

The sabbatical has been an excellent opportunity to get a break from the many administrative duties at UU and focus on gaining knowledge and experience that there is usually little time to do. To develop a curriculum, going through literature and reading some classics, has been very rewarding. It is my intention to teach the course at UU as an undergraduate course (25% speed, evenings) during the fall of 2022. I am very curious how the course will be received by Swedish students. Of course, I will make some amendments, shorten the reading list and assignment requirements, but basically, I intend to have the same learning objectives.

In relation to Swedish bureaucracy, I don't know how much can be achieved, but encouraged by the considerably lesser burden of administration in the US system I will continue to keep a pragmatic stand when coming back to my regular duties in committees and boards.

I doubt that I will have a continued relationship with Williams College. Not that I don't want to visit again, I would love to, but there has been no interest from the college to develop research collaborations, and given the disastrous course evaluation I doubt that I will be invited back as a teacher.

Personally, I will need to process the experience from my time at Williams College for some time, we will see what comes out of it. It has not been a wasted time, on the contrary, and I am very grateful to STINT for giving me this opportunity.

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