

## Teaching Sabbatical at Williams College, Fall 2022

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I spent the fall of 2022 at Williams College. A small private liberal art's college with around 2,000 students located in western Massachusetts. It was founded in 1793 by the estate of Ephraim Williams, whom also the town is named after (by request from Ephraim). At the time the college was founded, Harvard was the only other college/university in Massachusetts and Harvard was strongly against founding another higher-level-education institution in Massachusetts as they considered Harvard to be enough.

Williams College is a highly selective school, with an acceptance rate of eight percent for the Class of 2025.<sup>1</sup> It has been ranked as number one National Liberal Arts College (in *U.S. News & World Report's* rankings) every year since 2004,<sup>2</sup> and holds high-ranking positions in other institutional rankings. In April 2022, Williams transitioned to an all-grants system for financial aid, one of the few institutions of higher learning in the United States to do so. This means that students are accepted regardless of their financial capacity to pay the tuition, currently around \$61,000, and receive grants to cover the tuition.

Williams College is located in Williamstown, a very small rural town in the Berkshires, and right at the border where Massachusetts, Vermont, and New York intersect. The campus is very nice with many old buildings and even though Williams College is not part of the Ivy League, the campus has a strong Ivy League atmosphere. Apart from the college, Williamstown offers great outdoors activities like hiking, biking, golf, and skiing in the winter. The fall is fantastic, and the area gets many tourists due to the stunning colors when the leaves turn.

Part of Williams campus in the Fall of 2022

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<sup>1</sup>"[College acceptance rate lowers to 8 percent for Class of 2025](#)". *Williams Record*. [Archived](#) from the original on March 31, 2021. Retrieved October 24, 2021.

<sup>2</sup>"[U.S. News & World Report Historical Liberal Arts College and University Rankings](#)". *Datasets*. Andrew G. Reiter. July 13, 2017. [Archived](#) from the original on September 16, 2017. Retrieved August 26, 2020.



### Preparation and planning

My first time in Williamstown took place in April 2022 when I visited the college for four days to plan my stay in the fall. This visit was very useful, I was very well taken care of both by the faculty at the Economics Department and by John Gerry, the Dean who is responsible for STINT at Williams. I sat in on three lectures to get acquainted with the teaching style and the relationship between the professors and the students in the classroom. I also had meetings with several faculty members, and they made themselves very available to me and I felt that they went out of their way to make me feel welcome. John Gerry drove me around to show me the area and invited me to his home for dinner. I was fortunate to get to be in Williamstown while two other STINT fellows were there, and had the

opportunity to meet both Anders Hellman, the STINT fellow at Williams in the Spring of 2022 and Tomas Ekholm who had been at Williams in 2019 and happened to visit Williams with his family while I was visiting. Both had very positive experiences of being at Williams. Anders invited me to see the “STINT-apartment” (below). That was very nice, the apartment looked much nicer than in the pictures I had seen, and it helped me to know where I would be living in the fall.

I was pleased that I did the planning trip as it prepared me for what to expect and it gave me a good impression both about teaching at Williams and everyday life there. Overall, everybody, including administration, is very professional and extremely helpful.

My apartment in the School House – Faculty Housing at Williams



### Tasks and responsibilities

I was asked to propose an upper division course that I would like to teach at the Economics Department at Williams. I suggested a course in Public Economics and Fiscal Policies that resembles a course I teach at Lund University. This course, mainly for seniors, was then presented in the course catalog, and students could sign up for the course.

The maximum number of students that could sign up was 25 students, which was the number of students initially enrolled plus a waiting list of students who wanted to take the course. I ended up with 23 students in my class after the first week, which allowed them to shop around. I believe that I scared away a few students the first two lectures. I was concerned not to make the course too easy, as I had been told that William's students are exceptionally smart and talented. I think I initially presumed they knew more than they did, but once they made me aware of that we found the right level. My understanding, and my course evaluations suggested, that the course was well received and at the right level of difficulty.

I was given a lot of freedom in designing the content of the course, but also how I taught the course. In general, the professors had a lot of liberty to do as they see fit. For instance, it was up to me to decide how to examine the students. There were still concerns regarding the covid pandemic and which precautions to take to deal with it, which was also up to instructors to decide, e.g., mask policy and whether to offer hybrid solutions. I was concerned that covid could get worse and chose a hybrid solution where I offered students that were sick to attend over zoom. Most students came to class, and it was expected of them to come to class, as well as being prepared and to actively participate during lectures.

We met twice a week for lectures. The lectures were 75 minutes long without break. Initially, this concerned me, but it was not a problem. I also had three hours of scheduled office hours a week. It is expected of professors to accommodate students and meet them when it fits into their schedule.

Apart from teaching, professors were expected to also be some kind of mentors to the students and actively engage in their academic lives as well as in other parts of their lives. My impression was that the students don't only pay high tuition fees for a quality education but also to get access to the professors' network and connections. Students expect professors to help them with internships or even getting jobs. It is common for professors to meet up with students outside the classroom and office hours. I often had coffee with my students at the local coffee shop, and occasionally I also had lunch and dinner with them. I invited them over to my apartment for a pizza night. This was appreciated. My daughter, the same age as them, was visiting at the time and that became an extra attraction. Students were curious about Sweden and student life at Lund University. A big difference from Lund University is that professors at Williams build up a personal relationship with the students. Personally, I grew pretty attached to my students.

## Activities during the Teaching Sabbatical

The teaching load was heavier than what I am used to from Lund University, as students had weekly assignments that needed grading, midterms, and also frequently visited during office hours for help and further discussion. Apart from teaching I went to department meetings and seminars organized by the Economic Department or the Economic Development Center. The students were encouraged to attend the research seminars and had priority when it came to asking questions.

At Williams there is a “club” called First3. This club is a support group for new faculty, for faculty during their first three years at Williams. First3 met twice a week for lunch at the Faculty Club. During these lunch meetings issues that new faculty dealt with were discussed. Sometimes a speaker was invited to lead the discussion, and sometimes we just talked about whatever we were dealing with at the moment. Grading was commonly discussed, as well as students’ mental health and stress issues. Faculty struggled with how to make restrictions on how much energy and time to spend on teaching and students. Both students and faculty are under a lot of stress, faculty as they are supposed to be top teachers as well as top researchers and under tenure track. I found these lunch meetings rewarding and interesting.

The college as well as the town are small, and as a consequence it is easy to get to know people and vice versa – they all seemed to know that a Swede was visiting. This was nice as I was invited to events in other departments that involved “Scandinavian” issues, such as a seminar discussing the Swedish election organized by the Political Science Department.

## Important lessons

For me it was nice to experience an academic culture where both teaching and research is in focus. Professors are supposed to be able to do both, and both seem to be regarded to be of equal importance. Of course, this is stressful, especially for young faculty that are not tenured. Faculty and students work hard and are very devoted and engaged.

Professors work actively to make the students reach out and seek up the professors. It was not an uncommon practice to make it mandatory for students to come and see the professor for sessions of at least 15 minutes at the start of the semester. The reason for this was to break the ice to make it less hard for the students to reach out once they need help. Williams’s students are not used to asking for help as they are top students from all around the US.

The college pays when professors take out students for coffee or lunch. It is common to also meet for walks and shorter gatherings. I found it very rewarding to actually get to know the students and was very impressed by them in all regards.

### Comparison between the host and my home university in Lund

Williams college sticks out in many ways compared to Lund University. I will try to list some of these differences below.

One major difference compared to Lund is that students at Williams are “required” to be good athletes apart from performing well (at the top) academically. It is a “division school”, which means that sport’s activities are a part of the experience. Students are required to participate in sport’s activities and professors respect and accommodate this. For example, no academic activities can be scheduled between 4 -7pm as that time is blocked off for sports. During the weekends many students travel with their team or have home games and the whole college, including professors and other staff members, are engaged and take part in this. Since its establishment in 1793, Williams has required all students to demonstrate their ability to swim before they graduate.

Related to this are the differences in requirements for being accepted to Williams compared to Lund. Not only grades matter, but students also need to demonstrate that they are overall high achievers and “good citizens”. Apart from being good at sports and music, the students also need to be engaged in community services or having done voluntary work. The students are handpicked and overall, very high achievers. The downside to this is that they are placed under a lot of stress and a major concern at Williams is mental health issues.

I was a little surprised to notice that the students at Williams, given that they are top students, were not very well-trained in analytical thinking. Compared to my students in Lund, my students at Williams were less used to analytical thinking and to think independently. One reason for this could be that they are younger than my upper division students at Lund. Another reason could be that high schools in the US don’t train them as well as the Swedish gymnasiums.

A positive difference was how much more motivated students at Williams were and eager to learn and do well. There are no retakes and a grade below A- is considered failing. As they only have one chance to do well on exams, they study hard and do well. They are also extremely polite and courteous. Students in Lund are nice as well, but on more equal footing to the professors.

The college takes great part in introducing students and new faculty to Williams. My first week at Williams was spent learning different systems and being introduced to the college and the culture

there. They went out of their way trying to make you feel welcome. In Lund students take a much larger role in introducing new students to Lund, and new faculty are on their own. Students at Williams are also involved with incoming students, but it is the college that is in charge. There is a strong community feeling and students at Williams become tight and stay connected and attached to the college after graduation. There is a so-called “William’s spirit”. It is not uncommon for alumni to donate money and many also return for the homecoming event that takes place every fall and centers around a football game. Many alumni have summer houses in the area or even move to Williamstown once they retire.

Inclusion is key at Williams and the student body and faculty is much more diverse than what I find in Lund. Discussing inclusion is something I have never done in Lund, but something I think we should do. The college works hard to make everybody feel included and part of the college. At the start of the class students can sign a “community learning agreement” that states rules that the class should follow to make everybody feel welcome and included. This could deal with language usage, how we address each other, how long students can talk in class, and how long others should wait in order not to interrupt. I never used this agreement in my class.

Being a student at Williams is not just about performing well academically but also participating in sports and other activities. Afternoons are blocked off for sports. Williams does well in sports which they take great pride in. It is quite competitive and something they take seriously. Many of my students got injured and needed accommodations to be able to follow the course. Professors are expected to accommodate students in general and for sport activities as well. Many students also participate in voluntary work, mentor students and coach sport teams, and other social activities. As a result, students are very busy and scheduling everything in is a big challenge. Compared to my students in Lund, Williams students work harder and are much more devoted and strategic in planning their lifepath.

The football team – purple and gold are the Williams colors.



An obvious difference between Williams College and Lund University is that Williams is an affluent private college and Lund a public university. Despite this, the standard of living for the students is much lower than in Lund, e.g., sharing small rooms in dormitories and limited access to showers. It almost seemed to be part of the experience that the students should suffer a little to demonstrate that they can handle that.

### Recommendations

Even though I did not co-teach and liked the independence of designing and teaching my own course, I think that co-teaching with a professor at Williams would have made for a more rewarding teaching experience for me and taught me different ways to teach. On the other hand I had full responsibility and more pressure to develop a course and teach it well on my own. And I did still learn a lot from my semester at Williams, but I quickly reverted back into my old way of teaching. However, that worked out well and my course and teaching methods were very appreciated by the students. This is also valuable information to me.

The biweekly lunches with First3 were inspiring and useful. I would recommend attending these meetings, both to get to know people but also to learn and discuss teaching issues.

I would also recommend future STINT fellows to take the time to get to know the students and interact with them, both in- and outside the classroom. For instance, I found that they appreciated when



professors also were engaged in the students' sport activities. I am happy that I was able to build connections with my students at Williams. It is a great opportunity to get to know these brilliant young minds in the US.

Williams has a lot of resources and I think it is wise to use them. There are all kinds of academic seminars but also art and music performances, book clubs and language labs. There are also several top art museums in Williamstown. All these are free to visit for Williams faculty.

### Action plan: topics to address and if possible, introduce in Sweden

I would like to see that teaching was of higher priority in Lund and that professors were encouraged to be more involved in the students. Obviously, this is partly a question of finances and a small private college with almost endless resources cannot be compared to a large public university with limited resources and many very big classes. But I still think there is a lot to learn and things to strive for when it comes to the teaching part at Swedish Universities. Especially, that publicly funded universities should be more concerned about the quality of teaching and teachers more accessible to students.

I am also a little concerned by how little support new faculty receives at Lund University and that the university is not able to accommodate better meeting arenas for interdisciplinary meetings and collaborations. In addition, maybe it is unwise to give students such a large role in introducing new students to the university. It is great to involve students in this process, but to almost entirely rely on them demonstrates that the university and faculty don't really care.

Sunrise over Williamstown

