

Fall 2022 at the Department of Sociology, The University of Texas at Austin

**Tobias Samuelsson
School of Education and Communication
Jönköping University
Sweden**

The University of Texas at Austin, College of Liberal Arts, Department of Sociology

I spent the fall semester 2022 as a STINT fellow at The University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin). The University of Texas at Austin was founded in 1883, and it ranks among the 40 best universities in the world.¹ During my stay at UT Austin, I taught a sociology course on globalization through the Department of Sociology. This department is one of 25 in the College of Liberal Arts. According to the UT Austin web presentation, the College of Liberal Arts is the college at UT Austin that offers students the largest number of majors.



The Department of Sociology at UT Austin is located in Patton Hall (RLP) and is among the largest sociology departments in the United States.² At present, the department has 80 graduate students and more than 600 undergraduate students majoring in sociology.³

Preparing for the Teaching Sabbatical

I received the news that I had received the fellowship from STINT in late December 2019. This was not the first time I had applied, and my family, including my partner and two children, and I all looked forward to leaving for Austin the following fall. However, during

¹ <https://www.utexas.edu/content/about-texas>

² <https://liberalarts.utexas.edu/sociology/>

³ <https://liberalarts.utexas.edu/sociology/about/>

spring 2020, Covid-19 began spreading around the world, and we soon realized we would have to postpone the sabbatical. At first, we thought there would be a possibility to leave for the U.S. in 2021, but as time passed it became clear that this would not be viable. During this period, I had continuous contact with the STINT office as well as with the university in Texas. Everyone was very understanding and helpful with the postponement. My home university, and in particular my head of department, were also flexible and adapted to the changing situation when I suddenly had to change my plans, remaining at home and needing work assignments.

Given the pandemic, we had to cancel a planning trip to Austin in the spring of 2020 and after a couple of months we managed to get a reimbursement for the cancelled flights. We did, however, lose some money we had already prepaid for housing for our planned stay in Austin in 2020. During this time, I had several email contacts and Zoom meetings with UT Austin. Of course, it was a bit disappointing to postpone the STINT visit, and we felt somewhat hesitant to restart the whole process with housing, visas, arranging schools for the children, course planning, etc. again in early 2022, knowing that things could quickly change again. Now, looking back, we are all very happy that we did restart the process and finally were able to travel to Austin. In the spring of 2022, we resumed the visa application process and began looking for a place to stay and for schools for the children. I also resumed work on preparing the course that, in our contacts two years earlier, before the pandemic began, my academic contact and I had decided I should teach.

In our initial discussion, I inquired about opportunities for co-teaching, having understood from previous STINT participants that this could be a great way to work with a colleague and to get deeper insight on how faculty at UT Austin approach course planning and teaching. However, it soon became clear that co-teaching was not an option at the Department of Sociology. It was suggested I should teach a course on globalization, covering all facets of the phenomenon (economic, political, cultural, technological, and environmental). In Sweden I teach in an interdisciplinary Global Studies program, and given this, the choice of course makes sense. However, in courses in the aforementioned program, I usually co-teach courses with a group of co-workers with different academic backgrounds (a political scientist, scholars from religious studies, human geographers, etc.). In those courses, scholars from different academic backgrounds cover areas connected to the course relevant to their backgrounds and research. In the course I taught at UT Austin, I had to cover all areas. This was a challenge, but also a learning experience as I had to update my sometimes-superficial knowledge on some of the topics covered. Having to cover the areas myself, I got a great overview, and I could help the students make connections among the different areas and show how, for example, processes of technology, economy and culture intersect and change the world. As mentioned, in Sweden I am used to working in a course team, where you can collaborate with colleagues working on the course to discuss the course outline and ideas. Here I had to handle such questions more on my own, with some help from other faculty (in the preparation process during spring and summer of 2022, my academic contact and I exchanged numerous emails, which was very helpful) and from my teaching assistant. When I started to prepare the course in the later part of the spring and in summer of 2022, it felt challenging to handle the whole field of globalization; however, now in hindsight, I think this was a perfect

course to teach for someone like me, with my interdisciplinary background, and I am glad I had the opportunity.

Visa problems

The visa application requires substantial work to provide the required information. The Covid-19 situation interrupted our first attempt to apply for a visa, and after the two-year postponement, the whole process had to be started anew. We had received DS-2019 documents from UT Austin, making us eligible for J-1 and J-2 visas in 2020, but these had to be renewed. We began this discussion in early 2022, but it still took us some time to receive the needed papers from the university, and the visa application process was stressful and not finished until the summer. To finalize the application online was difficult and time consuming. Many different documents were needed, and the digital visa system appeared somewhat outdated. One problematic aspect in the application process was the fact that my partner and I are not married. I had mentioned this to my contacts at UT Austin. However, to be eligible for J-2 status, one must be married, and we did not understand that this was the case until very late in the application process. To make matters worse, my partner is a Swiss citizen, and given this, she needed to travel to the American Embassy in Stockholm for an interview. To get an appointment at the Embassy was difficult, and she was not able to book an appointment until mid-June. For the children and me it was sufficient to send the papers, and we received our visas via mail in the beginning of June (after a three-week wait). When my partner arrived at the Embassy, and the Embassy staff realized we were not married, it became clear that she had applied for the wrong kind of visa. Fortunately, the staff at the American Embassy in Stockholm were very helpful and handled the situation quickly, changing her application to one for a B-1 visa. Nevertheless, this delayed her receiving the visa by a couple more weeks, and we were afraid she might not be able to join us in Austin in late July. All ended well, and all our visas arrived in time, but a good tip for future STINT fellows is to begin the process early so as to receive the visas in time.

We arrived in Austin on August 1, and the university course did not begin until August 23. These first extra couple of weeks were very useful. When we arrived in Austin, we of course suffered some from jetlag, and it was around 40 degrees Celsius outside. Naturally, it took us all a couple of days to acclimatize. Also, my preparations for the upcoming lectures were far from finished. Furthermore, there were surprising amounts of administration left to handle at UT Austin, as well as some at the children's schools. Finally, we also needed some time to rent a car, to arrange internet service and phones and so on. All and all, with the above-mentioned in mind, I recommend that future STINT fellows arrive a couple of weeks before the semester commences.

Insurance

STINT fellows and their accompanying families should be insured by Kammarkollegiet. My home university in Jönköping is, however, a private university and thus not part of this system. Unfortunately, Jönköping University does not have a coordinated procedure for how to handle this, and different fellows have had to negotiate different solutions with their

heads of department when it comes to insurance. At times, fellows have themselves had to pay for insurance for their accompanying families. This was not a problem for me, as my head of department was very helpful and signed us up for insurance from *Europeiska* to cover the period of our stay in the U.S. UT Austin requires that faculty and their family are insured, and they have a preferred insurance, but they accepted the insurance from *Europeiska*.

Housing

As mentioned, we began preparing for our STINT period in spring 2020. We found an apartment and had signed a contract. When the pandemic arrived, we had to cancel everything, and we had to restart the process in 2022. The second time around, we directed our search to sabbatical.com and found a house to rent in the Hyde Park area, a part of town recommended by previous participants. Hyde Park is a great area, close to the university and city center, with great bus connections and biking distance from the university. It is still a quiet, family-friendly neighborhood with a community swimming pool, a couple of restaurants, and lots of family activities, such as the Fire Station Festival, movies in the park, Polkapocalypse, Historic Hyde Park Homes Tour, and a widely renowned Halloween celebration that is out of this world. Our landlords, Frank and Margo Carrico, were very friendly and helpful and provided information on the neighborhood and activities. They provided bikes, helped us try to lease a car (unsuccessfully), and provided decorations at Halloween and Christmas. I highly recommend future STINT participants stay at Frank and Margo's place.



Having found a place to live, we immediately contacted two schools that had been recommended to us. In this process, we found previous STINT participants' suggestions helpful. The schools they had suggested, Lee Elementary and Kealing Middle School, turned out to be perfect, and the children really enjoyed their time at school.

Tasks and responsibilities at UT Austin

Teaching

My main task was to teach the class SOC 340C/ EUS 346 Globalization, a course with 75 students. We met twice a week for 1.5-hour lectures. Similar courses had been taught previously at the department, but it appears that was a couple of years ago. I was presented with the opportunity to create and design my own course, but I managed to obtain two syllabi from previous courses from some years back to use as a guide. I was informed that the course should be a lecture course and that I could decide the content, exams, and required reading material. I decided to format the class as a mixture of lecture and discussion. In discussions with my academic contact, I decided to use multiple-choice exams. My contact gave me the impression that the students would be used to and appreciate this form of exam. I had never used, and I am not strong believer in, this form of exam. However, the number of students in the course, paired with the fact that my academic contact suggested that this type of exam was standard in courses taught by her colleagues, encouraged me to try it out. Using a Scantron (a type of standardized testing tool that uses optical mark recognition) for grading the exam reduced the time needed for correcting the students' exams to almost none. However, creating good multiple-choice exam questions turned out to be exactly as difficult and time consuming as I expected. Nonetheless, using multiple-choice exams was an interesting experience, and I might try it again back home.

Deciding on the reading material turned out to be somewhat difficult. In Sweden, or at least at the universities where I have worked, I would argue that we have a common understanding of the approximate number of pages students are supposed to read in different courses, depending on the number of weeks they cover. At UT Austin, students tend to take four courses per semester, and courses run in parallel over the whole semester. The course I was to teach could, given this, possibly be seen as a regular Swedish 7.5 credit course. In discussions with my academic contact as I was designing my course, it became clear to me that no department standard existed when it comes to the number of pages of reading material students are assigned. To try to help give me some direction, my contact sent a small questionnaire on this question to her colleagues. She informed me that this was something they usually did not talk much about and that she also found it interesting to get an overview of her colleagues' ideas on the matter. Overall, I had good support in the process of designing and planning the course from my academic contact and the department administrators.

All undergraduate degree programs at UT Austin must contain a number of Skills and Experience Flag courses. These are courses on cultural diversity in the U.S., ethics, global cultures, independent inquiry, quantitative reasoning, and writing. According to the UT Austin web presentation, these kinds of courses are intended to provide the "enriched education" that the university perceives all students need to handle themselves in a changing, future labor market. The globalization course is one of the courses at the School of Liberal Arts that carries the Global Cultures flag. Global Cultures courses are taught in

departments all over campus and cover many different topics. Such courses are designed to increase students' knowledge about cultural groups outside the United States.⁴

When deciding on forms of examination, I noticed older courses had a mix of exams and papers, and this is also how I arranged the course I taught. I also noticed that students had been given grades for participation in class discussions and attendance. Unsure of how to keep records of group discussions (given the size of the group) and of what space I would have for discussion in my lectures, I decided to not include these elements in the grading. I also chose not to include grades for attendance. In hindsight, I perhaps should have included them. From the first lectures, where the lecture hall was full, over the weeks, the number of students attending lectures shrank. I was informed by colleagues that this was a usual phenomenon, and this may be why lecturers include grades for attendance. When I discussed the issue with some students, they informed me that some had jobs outside the university, and others mentioned that they were on the verge of finishing their degree and were going to job interviews, while others noted various activities conflicted with lecture attendance. Nevertheless, during exams, all the students except one showed up, and a high proportion of the students performed well on the exams and the course paper.

As one part of the course, I arranged a cultural exchange with my home university in Jönköping, Sweden. Together with a colleague in Sweden, I scheduled a digital cultural exchange between students in my globalization course at UT Austin and students from Jönköping University's Global Studies program. In the exchange, we divided students from the universities into mixed groups, and they discussed questions about globalization, to highlight and give them a taste of how different this phenomenon can be perceived and experienced in different parts of the world, from different perspectives. The seven-hour time difference between Austin, Texas and Jönköping, Sweden was somewhat challenging to handle, and the exchange ended up occurring during the later part of the Swedish students' workday. Perhaps due to this, some of the Swedish students opted out of the exchange. However, the students who participated were very excited about the opportunity. Several Texas students mentioned that they had really liked the exchange, that it was interesting to speak with the Swedish students, and that they had learned a lot. One American student wrote:

I'm emailing to thank you for planning the event we had for the lecture today. It was amazing to talk with international students about globalization, politics, the differences between our cultures, and so much more. This is the first time I've ever done anything like this, and it was amazing!

Additionally, during later parts of the course I was approached by other Texas students who asked if we could do this again during the course, given that it had been such an interesting experience. If this globalization course is taught again at UT Austin, a continuation of this cooperation is possible. My intention is to stay connected with the Department of Sociology to try to arrange a similar session the next time this course is offered.

⁴ <https://ugs.utexas.edu/flags/students/about/global-cultures>

Faculty meetings

I mentioned to my academic contact at the department that STINT fellows are often invited to take part in faculty meetings to get a better understanding of the department, and that I would be interested in this. I was informed that I could take part in such meetings if no hiring/personnel issues were to be discussed, and that the faculty would be fine with having an observer at a meeting that consists just of announcements and routine business. Unfortunately, no such possibilities arose during my stay at the department.

Observations of colleague's lectures

To get a better understanding of the department's courses and teaching styles at an American university, I contacted several co-workers and asked if I could sit in on their lectures in different courses. For a period of time, I did this twice a week and enjoyed lectures in courses on "Law and Organizations," "Intro to the Study of Society," "The Sociology of Gender" and "Social Research Methods." Taking part in my co-workers' courses was very interesting. The different courses varied considerably in the number of students (ranging between 15 and 150), and consequently the lecturers could use different teaching styles and have/demand different levels of discussion and interaction. As mentioned, the courses also covered very different areas. Consequently, it is hard to make comparisons and draw definitive conclusions when it comes to similarities and differences in teaching styles in the U.S. and Sweden.

I also attended a lecture in one of the UT Austin signature courses, "Two to Tango: The Sociology of Interpersonal Relationships." The concept of signature courses is very interesting. These courses are intended to introduce first-year students to the university's academic community and give them the "opportunity to engage in college-level thinking and learning".⁵ The students are encouraged to choose courses outside their planned major or college when choosing signature courses. Faculty from all over the university teach these courses, and the result is presented as "a common intellectual experience for all first-year students".⁶ Jönköping University and other Swedish universities are trying to better handle broadened recruitment to higher education, to enable students to complete their education regardless of their background. UT Austin's model, with signature courses, could be an interesting concept to look into and get inspiration from in Sweden.

I was invited to make a presentation in the course "Supervised Teaching in Sociology," a seminar for graduate students who will be teaching a course of their own as they advance in their doctoral studies. In the seminar, I presented material on life as a graduate student and the transition to life as a postgraduate student in Sweden, to add a comparative perspective to the course. It turned out to be an interesting session, and the course participants had lots of questions and were intrigued by the differences in the systems in Sweden (or at least at the two universities where I have worked) and the system at the Department of Sociology at UT Austin.

⁵ <https://ugs.utexas.edu/sig>

⁶ <https://ugs.utexas.edu/sig>

At first, I found it difficult to fully grasp how the degrees are organized at UT Austin. To get a better, more in-depth grasp of this, I organized a meeting with Dr. Daniel Dillon, the undergraduate advisor for the Department of Sociology. In the meeting, Daniel explained the many ways students can combine various courses to obtain a bachelor's degree. Daniel also explained the system of Flag Courses and signature courses at UT Austin.

Research seminars

During my time at UT Austin, the department held recurring Sociology Colloquiums, as well as a book release, with invited guest lecturers, and I participated as often as possible. Furthermore, as UT Austin is a big university with multiple departments and various research fields, the university appears to be very good at attracting renowned scholars for seminars and lectures. Many of the departments offer high-quality seminars weekly. Given that I have an interdisciplinary background and spend most of my time teaching an interdisciplinary program in Sweden, I also found several interesting lectures and seminars (digital and physical) outside my department to follow. During my time at UT Austin, I participated in activities at the Centre for European Studies, the Department of Slavic & Eurasian Studies, the Clements Center for National Security, the Strauss Center for International Security and Law, and the Department of History. Overall, this was a great opportunity to educate myself and deepen my understanding of important issues connected to areas I usually touch upon in my teaching.

During my stay in Austin, I was informed by an old Swedish colleague from Linköping University that a conference, "Children and Crisis: Trauma, Epidemics, and Children's Well Being in Cross-Cultural and Historical Perspective," would take place at the UT Austin Department of History in November 2022. Fortunately, I was able to participate in a couple of sessions at the conference and interact with local and international participants.

Lessons learned and comparisons with my home institution

Before leaving for the U.S. and UT Austin, I had met international students and had taught some in English and had done some supervision of international students. To teach an entire course in English on a weekly basis is however something else entirely. It is challenging, and it is an enriching learning possibility. Consequently, I feel my confidence when it comes to teaching in English has grown, and this is something I will be able to use back at my home university. While I did not find the student-teacher interaction overall to be that different from what I am used to in Sweden, there are still some aspects that are different. In general, I would argue that the students I meet in Texas are somewhat more focused on form than content when it comes, for example, to papers. Another notable difference is that the student-teacher relationship is, in one way, more formal at UT Austin, where students refer to the teacher as "Professor" and use the lecturers' last names. However, at the same time, I would argue that the students seem closer to their teachers than I am generally used to at Jönköping University. I also got the impression that UT Austin lecturers are expected to pay more attention to and help the individual students more than I am used to, for example by providing flexible exam times, grading on a curve, etc. During the course, I had office hours twice a week, but over the whole semester, only one

student used this opportunity. Instead, students tended to linger after the lectures to ask questions on concepts from the lecture or on practicalities. If more students had taken the opportunity to visit during my office hours, I might have more insight concerning similarities and differences between student groups in the U.S. and Sweden. Although only one student used the office hours, I nonetheless like the fact that lecturers have set hours when the students are explicitly welcome. At my home department in Sweden, we do not have office hours, and students are generally welcome to drop by whenever they like. Faculty generally work with open office doors, and while students have access to the corridors where the faculty offices are located, the doors are locked. The locked doors might signal that visitors are not welcome. Also, the students might not want to disturb their teachers. Having official office hours could more distinctly mark when students are welcome to contact their teachers, and that they even are recommended to do so. This could create a closer student-teacher contact and hopefully help students in their learning process.

One obvious difference between my home university in Sweden and the Department of Sociology at UT Austin concerns social interaction. In Sweden I work at a small university, and at the School of Education and Communication we have a shared lunchroom where many colleagues show up for coffee breaks and lunch daily. A large number of co-workers come in to work at the office. The lunchroom is a great hub of interaction where co-workers relax together and discuss the nitty-gritty of the everyday life in academia as well as private life. These interactions also give rise to new pedagogical inventions, new courses and new research projects. The Department of Sociology at UT Austin is a very large department, and many lecturers work from home. I spent almost every workday at the department from the beginning of the semester until Christmas. On average, I worked around eight hours per day. When it comes to other faculty members, I was told that there were some who had worked from home pre-pandemic, but that this number had since increased dramatically, given that most faculty members had figured out a way to work from home and had not switched back to working on campus. Many tend to come in to work the days they teach, but they otherwise work from home. There is also no dedicated social area where people can meet up or sit down to interact. The department had a welcome reception and a holiday party, and I attended both. Additionally, during part of the semester the department arranged a weekly sociology snack social, where we were offered various kinds of refreshments and a chance to meet up with co-workers. I attended these, and I think the intention from the department was great. However, I could not help but notice the level of attendance among the faculty was somewhat limited. Most of the people who did attend were graduate students, and it was interesting to use these socials to interact more with them, to get a better understanding of how research education is organized, of their research directions, and of course of the work-life situation in general for PhD students. Other, more senior faculty participated more seldom in these snack socials, and when they did, they often only participated for a short time before excusing themselves to go back to work. This could possibly be an indication of the heavy workload of faculty, who are trying to balance research, teaching and administration in the U.S. university system. Concerning the difference when it comes to social interaction, and the positive conversations about research and education that can come from socializing, I assume these kinds of conversations are handled in other (more formal) forums at the Department of Sociology, given that the department's researchers are highly successful in both research and education.

One procedure that strikes me as different at UT Austin compared to Jönköping University concerns course planning and the designing of course syllabi. In Sweden, at Jönköping University, course design is often a lengthy process that has to be initiated about a year and a half before a course is set to begin. Arguably, this tends to hamper spontaneity and the possibility to adapt to changes in the surrounding world as well as precluding rapid design of courses that address such changes (for example Covid-19, the war in Ukraine and similar world events). This also hinders designing courses around visiting scholars. The process at the Department of Sociology at UT Austin strikes me as less strict concerning the syllabus, with a higher degree of flexibility, and thus increased possibilities to add courses connected to, for example, visiting lecturers' research and to societal changes. Courses and their content are not decided a year and a half in advance, and as a lecturer, I was able to work on the design of my course syllabus up until the day my course started. I believe Swedish universities could benefit from an at least somewhat more flexible system, but I also imagine it would be difficult to transfer this flexibility to Sweden, where regulations are stricter when it comes to these matters.

Ideas to bring home and possibly try to implement

One direct consequence of my experience as STINT fellow is a new course on American politics that a Jönköping colleague and I are developing, to be offered in the fall of 2024. The course may include collaboration with a scholar from the Department of Sociology at UT Austin in the form of a guest lecturer. The course is still under development, so it is too early to tell how it will turn out. As mentioned, during my time at UT Austin, I taught a course on globalization. Another direct consequence of my stay at UT Austin is that I am considering offering this very same course at my home university in Jönköping.

UT Austin has an impressive outreach program, and I think Swedish universities could benefit from similar activities. For example, the university and student associations offered an impressive Halloween program for employees and their families on campus, the weekend before Halloween. Moreover, UT Austin has activities around holidays and often invites the surrounding community to take part in them. UT Austin also has many sports teams to support, and concerts and performances often take place on campus, making the university a central part of the Austin community.



Recommendations for future STINT fellows

Overall, my family and I had a very pleasant stay in Austin. At first, the weather was extremely hot, and some days almost insufferable, but over the semester, starting in October, this changed for the better. Austin was a good place to bring a family, and our two children aged 10 and 12 were very happy with their schools, Lee Elementary and Kealing Middle School. Although the new school system and the new language was a challenge, they both found the experience exciting, they had a great time and would have liked to have stayed longer in Austin. One of my children is a member of the Scouts back in Sweden, and we managed to sign up for the Cub Scouts during our stay in Austin. In Sweden, parents almost never take part in the Scout activities. However, in the U.S., parents, and often the whole family, are supposed to take part in the activities. Being part of the Cub Scout group Pack 28 was a very enjoyable experience and something I would highly recommend for other STINT participants with families. During weekend activities with the Cub Scouts, for example on three campouts, we met and made friends with many other parents, had a chance to have many enlightening discussions on life in the U.S., and got to see more of surrounding Texas while travelling to different parks, places we would never have found if it had not been for the Cub Scouts.

UT Austin has appointed Lena Suk as coordinator for STINT fellows. Kamilla Skarström Hinojosa (my fellow STINT participant at UT Austin) and I met with Lena at the beginning and the very end of the semester for informal discussions. The International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS) at UT Austin also had recurring activities for international students and scholars. Their Social Hour, Thanksgiving luncheon event, Scholar's Coffee Break and Meet a scholar, where I made a presentation on my home university and research, were great places to connect with other international students, scholars, and ISSS staff. I highly recommend future STINT fellows in Austin take part in these activities.



Final words

I want to thank the University of Texas at Austin and the Department of Sociology for receiving me during fall 2022 and the academic faculty and administrative staff at the department for their support.

I also want to thank my course teaching assistant, Chyi-Rong Tsai, who assisted me in the course work throughout the semester and answered many, many of my questions in a helpful way.

I am grateful to colleagues and supervisors at Jönköping University in Sweden who introduced me to and nominated me for the Teaching Sabbatical Program.

Finally, I want to direct a warm thank you to STINT for this great and enriching opportunity.