STINT Teaching Sabbatical Final Report

Alireza Behtoui, Professor of Sociology, School of Social Sciences
Södertörn University
Visited Sociological institutions, UC Berkeley, California US

Preparation and planning

Immediately after receiving the news that I was placed at UC Berkeley, I contacted the head of the Sociology Department, Professor David J. Harding, to discuss potential courses I could teach. Initially, a lower-division undergraduate course with three sessions per week for 15 weeks was suggested. However, after making several suggestions and discussions, we agreed on a higher-division undergraduate course scheduled for one session per week over 15 weeks. The course, (*Can Schools Make a Difference? Education and Improving Social Equity*), required quick preparation due to the imminent deadline for the autumn course catalog. This included drafting a short course description and creating a preliminary reading list. I was then introduced via email to several colleagues, including a member of the administration and the director of undergraduate studies, from them I received valuable information about the students' backgrounds and guidance on developing a syllabus proposal and a complete reading list.

At the same time, I contacted the US Embassy in Stockholm to apply for a visa. Despite holding Swedish citizenship, I needed to apply for a tourist visa due to my birth in Iran—a process that is done digitally for Swedish-born applicants but was significantly more time consuming for me. In parallel, I contacted the Berkeley International Office (BIO) to obtain the Certificate of Eligibility for Exchange Visitor Status (J-Nonimmigrant), which was required for my work visa application. Only after obtaining the tourist visa, I could apply for a work visa, which was relatively quicker and more straightforward than the first one. This process (applying for two kind of visa) also took considerable time. During this period, I organized my housing and various other logistical matters.

When I arrived in Berkeley in August 2024, I met the Administrative Manager of sociology department to gain access to my office. I then tried to get some information about their administrative systems, such as CalCentral, the course communication platform (bCourses/Canvas), my email account, and the process for obtaining my Cal1 card. These steps were crucial for my transition into my role as a visiting scholar at UC Berkeley, though acquiring the necessary information and completing the processes proved to be long and not so straightforward, as I did not have a specific contact-person within the institution. For each part, I would seek information from different people who I guessed might be helpful.

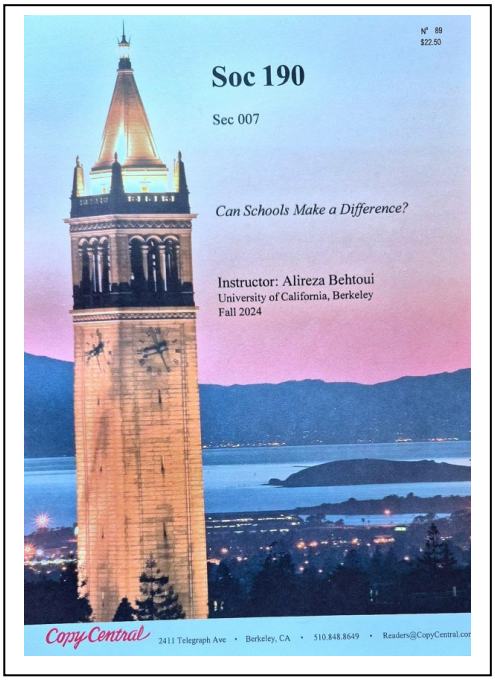
Tasks and responsibilities

My main task was to design, organize and lead one of the so-called 190 courses which are elective courses for students at the end of their four-year bachelor degree in sociology.

More specifically, this meant lecturing once a week for 15 weeks and examining the students' final report, which is actually their degree project, as well as having two hours of 'office hours' which are quite effectively used by students writing their essays during the course.

The number of students in 190 courses varies but for my course there were 24 participants (which was more than all the other 190 courses in that semester).

At UC Berkeley, instructors provide students with the full set of course literature to save them time searching for materials. For my course, I uploaded several academic articles (which were in digital format and available via open access) to Canvas. In addition to these articles, the course reading list included 12 book chapters. I sent scanned copies of these chapters to the university's printing house (copy central), where they compiled them into a booklet (sold to students at a relatively low price) as a course compendium (see picture on the right). What I found interesting about copying book- chapters was that I initially thought publishing them in a compendium would lead to a major legal dispute due to publisher's rights. However, staff at the "copy center" assured me that since their work is non-commercial, therefore, not considered an infringement of these rights. Such a practice would be impossible in Sweden, where some publishers rely on students purchasing books for their courses.



In each session of my course, I lectured for an hour, followed by a one-hour seminar on that week's topic.
Each week, a third of the students wrote assignments reflecting on the course material and proposing discussion questions. These assignments were sent to Canvas one day before our meetings. I reviewed these assignments and structured the second part of the session around their reflections and questions.

Activities during the Teaching Sabbatical

In addition to teaching my course, I was invited to attend the regular meetings of the department, about 1 meeting every two weeks (which I attended on a few occasions). I also actively participated in the department's higher seminar/guest lecture series.

Furthermore, I was invited by the Institute for European Studies to deliver a public guest lecture in November 2024 titled, "Once Upon a Time Swedish Schools Were the Best in the

World, but Not Anymore: Why Not?". This lecture was advertised across campus and attracted a relatively good audience. Additionally, I was invited by the Program of Iranian Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) in December 2024 to speak on the topic, "Left, Democracy, and Authoritarianism," which was attended by approximately 100 people.

During my sabbatical, I regularly attended lectures and seminars led by two professors and one lecturer in the Department of Sociology to observe their approach to course organization and their way of teaching. This experience allowed me in addition, to build professional relationships and receive information and support from my colleagues.

In addition, I interviewed the head of the Sociology Department, administrative and academic staff responsible for undergraduate education in the Department of Sociology to deepen my understanding of how they organize various aspects of their activities, such as diversity programs, course evaluations, examination formats, and the grading system.

Important lessons

The entire autumn term has been dominated by my teaching responsibilities. With a relatively large group, weekly lectures and seminars, assisting students with their theses, examining their work, and providing individual feedback, my workload has been substantial. Additionally, open office hours (at least two hours per week, often more) and frequent student interactions have required significant time and personal commitment.

The teaching load for social science students at an institution like UC Berkeley is about three times higher than that for equivalent students in Sweden. Therefore, I made an effort to learn each of my students' names, which is relatively uncommon in courses in Sweden. There is also a notable difference in the focus on student learning, particularly in supporting students as they overcome challenges. When for example it comes to writing their degree work, instructors play a much more active role in guiding students. This includes helping them formulate research questions, identify relevant studies, and choose appropriate theoretical frameworks. Students' progress is monitored at three key stages throughout the writing process, ensuring continuous feedback and development.

Lecture and seminar attendance is significantly higher in Berkeley than in Sweden. Several factors contribute to this, but a key reason is that attendance is mandatory.

In Sweden, students take one course at a time before moving on to the next, whereas at UC Berkeley, they take four courses simultaneously. This requires them to divide their focus across multiple tasks. As a result, the learning process is slightly less concentrated but overall, more intellectually stimulating and challenging.

Throughout the course, both in lectures and seminar discussions, I frequently compared their education system and youth experiences in the US with those in Sweden. This made my lectures more interesting for them. At the same time, I gained valuable insights into the American system as they presented their responses during seminars, when they connected

the taught topics to their own experiences (both during their student life and now when they work alongside their studies with young people in different contexts).

One important lesson I learned at UC Berkeley was the significance of course evaluations. While in Sweden only about 10–15% of students participate in course evaluations, at UC Berkeley, the participation rate is significantly higher—typically around 65–80% (in my course, 70% participated). Evaluations are taken much more seriously there. Before distributing evaluation questionnaires digitally, each teacher is asked whether they want to include additional questions beyond the standard ones. Then, during the final teaching session, instructors are encouraged (by e-mail) to allocate around 10 minutes—usually during a break—for students to complete the evaluation questionnaires. Notice that this process takes place before grading, ensuring that students' assessments are not influenced by their final grades. The evaluation results for individual courses are then compared with the institution's average, providing a broader context for assessment.

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

UC Berkeley is a long-established institution, founded in 1868, and has built up a large endowment over the years, partly through a very successful alumni program. They also charge high fees for paying students (around $17 000/year for California residents and $51,000/year for Non-Residents). Total Estimated Cost of Attendance for Residents: Approximately $48,638 and for Non-Residents: Approximately $82,838. But about half of the students are on various forms of support (scholarships, grants, loans, and work-study opportunities). This means that UC Berkeley students face significantly higher costs for both their education and living expenses. Many students must work to support themselves. In contrast, students in Sweden do not pay tuition fees and receive financial support in the form of grants and loans, which can cover their living costs. As a result, they generally have more time and possibility to focus on their studies.

In general, UC Berkeley students, like those in Sweden, prefer to read fewer texts and seek more easier ways to complete their assignments. While each group has a few standout students, most are at a similar academic level to Swedish students. However, some students who have transferred from community colleges to UC Berkeley tend to have lower skill and knowledge levels.

In Sweden, following the Bologna Process, a bachelor's degree takes **three years** to complete, whereas in the U.S., it still takes **four years**. Each year, approximately 675 students have their major in sociology at UC Berkeley. Graduates pursue careers as teachers, social educators, project managers, market analysts, human resources professionals, and related fields.

At UC Berkeley, about 5% of students in their final (fourth) year participate in an 'Honors Program,' which is designed to provide high-achieving undergraduates with opportunities for advanced study, research, and academic recognition. Honors programs include specialized courses, seminars, and research opportunities that allow students to explore subjects in greater depth, creating a more rigorous academic environment. Participants often receive

personalized guidance from faculty advisors, enhancing their academic and professional development. Successful completion of an honors program is noted on transcripts and diplomas, distinguishing graduates in applications for employment or further study.

Unlike Swedish universities, UC Berkeley does not have a fixed program for social science students, where all students are expected to follow a set path with many mandatory courses. Apart from a required first-year seminar, which often has a broad focus, students can typically choose to specialize in one or a few main subjects (Majors) from the start. However, most students seem to take advantage of the opportunity to study a wider range of subjects. Once a student declares a Major, they are required to complete three core courses in sociology (one method and two theory courses), a number of elective courses, and a thesis in that discipline. Because the number of required mandatory courses is relatively small, faculty members have the flexibility to offer courses aligned with their areas of interest, and students benefit from greater opportunities for interdisciplinary studies.

At UC Berkeley, there are two types of faculty:

(1) tenure-track faculty, who have competed against many candidates for their positions,

(2) non-tenure-track faculty (lecturers), who are not in permanent employment.

The **first** category faculties are much more privileged compared to us in Sweden. Whether newly appointed or full professors, they typically teach only three courses per year, with approximately 65% of their time automatically allocated to research (compared to our in Södertörn, where only professors have only 20% of their time automatically allocated to research). If they take on administrative responsibilities, (e.g. organizing higher seminars), their teaching load is reduced accordingly. This structure provides them with substantial freedom for research. When they require funding for large projects, such as a big survey, they apply to external sources, and securing research grants is relatively easy compared to our system, where securing external funding requires significant time and effort in Sweden. Senior researchers at UC Berkeley often prioritize publishing books over submitting articles to peer-reviewed journals.

The **second** category, non-tenure-track faculty, teaches three courses per year but receives a significantly lower salary. Their employment is highly insecure, as they do not have the same job stability or research opportunities as tenure-track faculty. This means they carry a heavier teaching load, while their salary and job security are significantly lower than those of the first category of employees.

It is important to emphasize that for both categories of UC Berkeley sociology faculty, teaching holds significant value. This is partly because it is fee-based, necessitating the delivery of a high-quality education. Additionally, faculty members are keen to uphold their reputation as among the best in the world and to maintain the prestige of their institution's brand.

Higher seminars play a crucial role in the activities of the Sociology Department. The department organizes a well-funded seminar series, which takes place almost every week and invites lecturers from other universities. Additionally, various sociological fields (e.g.,

sociology of race and ethnicity or labor market) hold monthly seminars in collaboration with other disciplines within the humanities and social sciences. Furthermore, there are research networks focused on specific methodologies. All can apply for funding to support their activities.

It is important to note that all students, including undergraduates, are welcome to participate in these seminars, which are therefore well attended—unlike in Sweden, where seminar audiences are sometimes very small.

Another noteworthy aspect is the presence of undergraduate students within the institution's corridors. In addition to participating in various activities, they have their own designated space (a big room), where they can sit, read, converse, and engage in discussions. The goal is to make them feel that the institution's environment is an integral part of their daily lives. This is quite different from our experience. At Södertörn, employee offices are completely closed to students, and if they have a supervision session with a teacher, they must call for the door to be opened for them.

A key difference is that the Department of Sociology at UC Berkeley does not offer a Master's program. Most Ph.D. students apply directly after earning a bachelor's degree. Unlike in Sweden, the number of Ph.D. students is not as restricted. A significant portion of Ph.D. students receive financial support through specific stipend, scholarships, either from external sources or the department. Doctoral program is approximately six-years. They work as well as Graduate Student Instructors (GSIs), which typically hold a 50% appointment, equating to 20 hours of work per week. Their responsibilities include leading discussion sections, holding office hours, preparing and grading assignments and exams, and performing other tasks assigned by the course instructor. Each professor has normally between 5-7 PhD candidates. However, professors do not receive additional time or salary for supervising doctoral student (since their PhD students help them with their teaching).

Ph.D. students have an assistant supervisor (*biträdande handledare*) also; however, these supervisors do not attend the collective supervision meetings that professors hold with their 5–7 Ph.D. students. Instead, assistant supervisors may read students' texts or provide consultations when needed.

UC Berkeley does not offer a formal pedagogical course for staff. The only available training is a brief session for Ph.D. students teaching for the first time, supplemented by discussions on practical teaching challenges. Otherwise, the approach is primarily learning by doing.

One major difference is the significantly lower level of bureaucratic processes for instructors responsible for a course. In Sweden, we must submit our syllabus and course literature to various bureaucratic bodies a year in advance. These materials undergo at least three stages of review before we are allowed to proceed with the approved syllabus and literature. It is safe to say that the individual instructors responsible for a course have a much deeper knowledge and understanding of its content and structure than those overseeing the approval process.

Why such bureaucratic hurdles exist, I do not know. Considering the autonomy of universities in Sweden, I have been thinking of proposing to our new rector to streamline such a process and eliminate all these checkpoints for reviewing each course material. This way, a lot of money and time can be saved, and teaching can be made more efficient by trusting the instructors responsible for a course.

At UC Berkeley, while I consulted with the undergraduate program director about my course outline, syllabus, and literature, I had full autonomy in designing it. I could even modify it during the course without external interference.

There is another significant difference between the role of social sciences and humanities institutions in Higher Education system of Sweden and the United States. In the U.S., all students enrolled in engineering or medical programs must take one year of optional social sciences and humanities courses. The goal is to provide them with a well-rounded education (***bildning***) that broadens their perspective and prevents them from becoming overly specialized in a single field. This approach also helps them become more knowledgeable and responsible citizens.

In Sweden, no such system exists, and students in technical or medical programs are not required to take these courses. As a result, at UC Berkeley, undergraduate sociology courses often include students from technical and medical disciplines. For instance, in a course on "race and racism in history of the United States"—taught by one of my colleagues that I attended—about 80 percent of the 100 students were from technical or medical programs.

This system also means that the sociology department receives funding from other institutions, allowing it to support its activities more robustly. Consequently, teacher-led instruction is significantly more prevalent there than in Sweden. In Sweden, social science students typically have one lecture and one seminar per week, requiring them to be on campus at most twice a week. In contrast, a student studying the same subject at UC Berkeley attends teacher-led classes daily and is on campus every day of the week.

These differences are partly rooted in the historical roles of universities. Swedish universities were traditionally established to meet the state's need for trained professionals, such as priests, lawyers, and medical doctors. In contrast, American universities have a stronger "revolutionary heritage", serving as spaces where societal values are both tested and reshaped. The Jeffersonian belief that universities are essential to a thriving democracy remains influential in the American system, as Thomas Jefferson strongly advocated for public education as a foundation for democracy. Many American universities uphold this vision, and the notion that universities should critically examine and redefine societal values. This became especially prominent during the 1960s and beyond, driven by student activism and academic freedom movements. This tradition has deeply shaped the professional ethos of many American university educators. Such environments foster adaptability, allowing institutions to evolve with changing times.

At my host institution, the **administrative** operations of the sociology department are organized separately but in close cooperation with the academic division. A key difference is that the head of the administrative section is not an academic but a professional with

leadership experience in the bureaucratic sphere, referred to as the 'manager.' In Sweden, such responsibilities are often assigned to academics, even though they lack the necessary practical and professional experience for the role.

Another difference I observed was in the **social aspects** of academic life, particularly opportunities for informal interactions with colleagues. Unlike in Sweden, where colleagues can sit together in shared lunch and coffee spaces, my host institution does not offer similar areas for faculty to gather and engage in informal conversations. Instead, everyone eats lunch alone in their office. The only opportunities for social interaction that I observed during my sabbatical were two major gatherings at the beginning and end of each semester, as well as social events following weekly higher seminars, which included some refreshments. I believe such shared spaces foster a creative research environment and strengthen collegial relationships.

Recommendations

When I compared my position and relationships with colleagues in the sociology department to those of other Swedish scholars at UC Berkeley who were on different fellowships and had no teaching responsibilities, I observed the following:

I became much more involved in the institute's daily activities compared to my Swedish colleagues. I was essentially a source of free unpaid labor, which they utilized while also appreciating my contributions to their teaching activities. This level of involvement made me feel more integrated into the department.

At the same time, my initiative to participate in other colleagues' courses and observe their teaching methods was highly rewarding. It fostered closer professional relationships that will continue in the future.

However, the downside of this arrangement is that when the host institution identifies a free and unpaid teacher, there is often a tendency to overload them with additional responsibilities, including courses that require significant time commitment. My experience suggests that it is possible to negotiate and choose to teach a course aligned with one's specialty and interests—one that is not overly time-consuming—allowing room to observe other instructors' teaching styles while avoiding excessive stress.

Connecting with other Swedish colleagues who are also there with you are at the same time, provides valuable perspective on their experiences.

During preparing your sabbatical, don’t hesitate to reach out to those who have previously been in the same city, attended the same university, or been part of the same institution. They can offer useful tips on finding accommodation, renting a car, choosing worthwhile places to visit, accessing sports facilities, and setting up a bank account. This makes things much easier and saves you a lot of time.

Another important point is that most colleagues in the host institution are busy with their routines, families, work, and personal lives. They may not have the time or possibility to engage with a visitor who stays for only a semester and then leaves. Therefore, it is crucial to take the initiative—knock on their door, ask for a moment of their time to have a conversation about their research, teaching, latest book, or recent developments in the institution or community. They often appreciate such initiatives but rarely take the first step themselves. Thus, it is the guest's responsibility to reach out.

As STINT fellows, we are covered by Kammarkollegiet's insurance, but in practice, the process is managed by a private company (Falck). I had many negative experiences with this process, both during an emergency medical visit (*aktumottagning*) and subsequent examinations, as well as once at a health center in Berkeley.

Seeking medical help is a lengthy and time-consuming process. In the U.S., medical facilities provide care for us only after receiving authorization from Falck in America, which is responsible for confirming our insurance coverage. The process begins with that at vi contacting Falck in Sweden, which determines which medical center we can visit. They then instruct their colleagues in the U.S. to forward the case to the United American insurance agency, which ultimately approves the care. This approval process takes time, requiring patience and sometimes follow-up calls to Sweden.

Regarding hospital cost payments, Falck informed me that they needed access to my medical records for assessment by their expert doctor before covering the expenses. Meanwhile, I was repeatedly harassed by the hospital's finance department with text messages (SMS) stating, 'You owe X amount, which has not been paid.' When I raised this issue with Falck, they simply responded, 'We have our procedures, and we cannot do anything about their messages,' which was extremely frustrating.

I am sharing my experience to highlight the challenges of accessing healthcare under this insurance system.

Last but not least, I would recommend keeping contact with your institution in Sweden to a minimum. After all, you are on sabbatical and should not be disturbed.

However, that is easier said than done when undertaking a sabbatical. I had two PhD students—one who was scheduled to defend her thesis in February, requiring me to read her manuscript for publication, which was time-consuming, and another who had his final seminar a month after my arrival, meaning I had to review his draft beforehand. At the same time, the colleague covering my teaching responsibilities back home needed assistance with certain practical matters.

It is extremely important to say, 'No, I can't do this,' to additional tasks that may arise. Otherwise, your sabbatical time there can become fragmented and stressful.

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

The networks that I have created during my sabbatical at UC Berkeley have great potential for growth, and I will continue to stay in contact with my colleagues there. Pedagogically, I can apply some of the teaching methods and course administrative techniques that I have learned from them in my job here.

I have already booked time at our next staff meeting to share my experiences with my colleagues in the Sociology Department at Södertörn. Afterwards, I plan to meet with the responsible persons in the ISV (Department of Social Sciences) to discuss my experiences.

Every fall semester, we hold a two-day kick-off for all social sciences staff. I have contacted the event organizers to present my experiences in a session.

One simple measure that can be implemented immediately in our institution is arranging designated 'office hours' for meeting students. This may be challenging at first, as our students are not accustomed to it, but they should be encouraged to visit our offices during 'office hours' and take advantage of this opportunity.

It is also crucial to revise our course evaluation procedures. Currently, after a course has ended, the teacher of the following course encourages students to participate in the evaluation of the previous course. This system is flawed because the recommending teacher is not as invested in ensuring thorough feedback as the instructor of the evaluated course. More importantly, students who have completed the course and received a grade either lack motivation to participate or may be influenced by their grade.

A more effective approach—like the system at Berkeley, which I have done there—is to allocate ten minutes at the end of my course for students to complete the evaluation forms. This ensures higher participation and more reliable feedback.

I have already highlighted one crucial reform: drastically reducing bureaucracy in the approval of course plans and literature. Why should these documents be reviewed at multiple levels by individuals who have little to no understanding of the course content? Bureaucracy often reinforces itself, and this is a clear example.

We can streamline the process by allowing the responsible teacher, in consultation with the education officer in each institution, to design and draft the course, including the syllabus and literature. I will raise and discus this suggestion with those responsible in our college.