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## **Final Report on STINT TS at Amherst College, Amherst Massachusetts USA, Fall 2024**

### ***Preparation and Planning***

My preparation and planning for my time in Amherst started already in January of 2024 with a series of Zoom conversations with Janet Tobin, an assistant to the Provost of the College, and Caroline Theoharides, the chair of the Economics Department at Amherst College. Janet was very helpful with practical matters and even connected me with a faculty member at a nearby college (Brad L.) who frequently rented his home to STINT TS Fellows. In the end I did not rent Brad's home, but he was truly generous and helpful in answering many questions and making helpful suggestions about arranging our stay. There is a deep well of experience at Amherst in welcoming STINT Fellows and I was impressed by the help I received not only from faculty at Amherst, but also nearby universities and colleges such as Smith and UMass-Amherst.

In the end, after agreeing to rent Brad's home, I was contacted out of the blue by a faculty member looking to sublet a home that was just next door to the Amherst College campus. Brad was extremely gracious and insisted if this home was better for our family he would be happy if we rented it, even though we had a verbal agreement to rent his home. This led to much last-minute rearranging of travel details from Boston (where we arrived in the US for a conference in mid-late July) to Amherst for move-in on August 1<sup>st</sup>. In the end it worked well, and given this I think it was almost for the best that my family and I did not take a planning trip to Amherst in the Spring of 2024. With many other travel commitments in that Spring, tacking on a visit to Amherst after a trip to Palo Alto in May just wasn't possible, and fitting in another trip in before the move was difficult.

Opting not to take a planning trip, Janet declared me to be the most independent STINT scholar she had ever known. That said, I think looking through ads on sabbatical homes, or just going straight to Brad would be fine. From my end spending the month of August in Amherst and getting acclimated to the town, registering our kids for school then (after making sure we had all the vaccination/medical records arranged per the Crocker Farms website) and meeting their teachers was a better use of time and resources.

Part of the difficulty in finding time for a planning trip may also have reflected the difficulty we had getting permission from my children's school for them to have leave to come to Amherst. This was a real fight, with the rector allowing my older daughter to have leave and 'saving' her

space in the school, while insisting my son in F-class could not expect his spot to be available and would just have to reapply with 'syskonförtur' and hope a spot would open for him. This struck us as inconsistent and rather upsetting. In the end, after many meetings we were able to arrange for leave for both of them for the term, but this was an unexpected roadblock which absorbed quite a bit of energy and attention.

### ***Tasks and Responsibilities***

With regard to planning my course at Amherst, the school and Department of Economics was extremely hands off. In my application I had expressed a desire to teach a course that had a significant quantitative component so it could fit either an advanced Bachelor to even a PhD topics course. After my first discussion with Caroline I realized this was too much to hope for at Amherst College, as there were no quantitative methods courses in the Economics course offerings. I quickly changed course, contacting Claudia Goldin at Harvard University who kindly shared her syllabus for her senior seminar course. In the end I developed a course that built on her book and syllabus but included several applied empirical lectures close to my own research. I think this class could also be slotted at different levels from BSc to PhD, and might be a good first course on 'The Economic of Family and Work' with a second course closer to the one I originally planned being a more challenging follow-up course. Caroline handled the formalities of getting the course approved, but didn't offer much feedback in terms of how to structure things, or input on content. Luckily, I found a helpful colleague once on campus, but the chair and department secretary were too busy to offer much constructive input.

The need to retool the course was made easier and a bit more inspiring by multiple information sessions in July and August for new faculty on the multiple resources the school makes available via the library, art museums and community outreach office as well as the philosophy behind syllabus design. It was a bit overwhelming and over the top in some ways, but I was determined to push my boundaries beyond the 'typical' economics class, so I resolved to try to incorporate these resources as best as possible. In the end I really did more than I imagined was possible, racking up a list of firsts with respect to bringing Economics out of isolation and embracing the Liberal Arts ethos at Amherst. For example, I even brought in an art historian and had a lecture at the Mead Art Museum (the first time an Economics class visited the Mead!). If time had allowed, I think we could even have taken a trip to the Radcliffe College or Smith College archives to do primary source research. The resources and emphasis on primary source research were truly amazing and even this brief exposure really challenged me to think about how to bring more active research into the classroom not just through fixed problem sets but also immersive activities like a guest lecture I arranged with a leading female economist (more later).

My course met two times a week, from September-December for a total of 26 meetings plus three one hour office hour sessions per week. This allowed for a high degree of student interaction which started already before the course with students sending emails with questions and several meetings with students during the first week to discuss research ideas and even life experiences and research/career opportunities. In this regard students were highly engaged from the beginning, and this seemed to be the case throughout the course.

Beyond the classroom, Moodle is a digital platform for posting course information, readings, etc. I was on my own learning Moodle, and I will admit my course Moodle was somewhat rudimentary. On the upside, we did have an active course discussion page. This allowed students and myself to post articles from newspapers/periodicals which we came across that were related to class discussions. This was a bit slow in the beginning, but over time became more active and really did contribute to better in-class discussions and a natural way to bring our conversations back to earlier topics and extend our in-class discussions. Students were encouraged to share their critical reading evaluations on the course discussion forum, and I think this really did help to create a supportive learning environment where students could engage with each other on the questions they were interested in.

### ***Activities During the Teaching Sabbatical***

In addition to my teaching activities, I also participated in all Econ Department meetings, which happened often. It was nice to be included, but I am still not sure what the point of these meetings always was. Topics such as how many questions they should be allowed to ask at seminars were on the agenda.

In the realm of research, I gave a department seminar and arranged to have a colleague from Boston come and give a talk during the semester. I attended all other seminars that term and met the speakers. This was fun and turned into invitations to give talks at Wellesley and Tufts. I also gave several talks at the University of Massachusetts (Econ and Natural Resource Economics) and even travelled to the University of Kansas over the Thanksgiving holiday for a talk.

I also arranged for a highly regarded faculty to come and give a guest lecture as part of my course, in conjunction with another faculty in Economics. This was great, we had a large room filled with interested students and faculty, at least three times more attendees than a usual seminar. Although this general interest econ talk was popular, and colleagues from fields as far ranging as epidemiology to sociology raved about the event, few econ faculty participated. I'm not sure why, but think that it may be hard to fit peoples' schedules.

I also played an active role in Center for Teaching and Learning events as well as the Provosts AI and Education Committee. The AI group was fun and dovetailed well with topics from the STINT midterm meeting. I even made a presentation to the group about some course materials and pedagogical strategies related to establishing classroom/community standards surrounding the use of AI in the classroom.

I had lunches/coffees with most faculty to meet and chat about the department and my interest in attracting more women to the field of economics. This was mostly good, but it was hard to make in-roads with some macroeconomists, despite the fact that I am a macroeconomist. Everyone is quite busy and often eat lunch in their office, so it can be hard to just chat over the lunch table. That said there were some faculty that I did hit it off with and will hopefully continue to interact with over research projects of mutual interest in Economics, Math and Statistics, and Sociology.

### ***Important Lessons***

I think one lesson which came across after talking to students about my inexperience in holding discussion-based classes in Economics was that they also lacked experience with actively discussing economic models and papers as almost all courses in economics were lecture based. This was exceptional as all other fields seemed to have much more room for active learning and discussion among students than the courses in Economics. This was a bit surprising as most students in my class were seniors and had joint majors in other fields and noticed the distinct style of lecturing in economics relative to other disciplines.

In the end students really liked the class and raved about being able to write their own research papers that applied the same methods we were reading about to answer their own questions. Some students really excelled in this regard and wrote fantastic papers. Although I tried to find a balance between lectures and discussions, some seemed to want more lectures, while others liked the chance to discuss. I'm not sure what the right balance is, and it did seem one student was too anxious to contribute to class discussions and too stressed by interacting with others to even come to class in the end.

I think the cards are stacked against the econ faculty who deviate from the lecture format even in a school like Amherst. I don't have any clear-cut lessons on this front, except an observation that even in a school like Amherst that prides itself on small classes and interactive/discussion-oriented classrooms, economists hold fast to the traditional lecture format. I'm not sure why this is, as my experience suggests that making space for students to explore the literature and methods with their own research questions in hand enhanced learning.

## ***Comparisons***

### *Pedagogy and its importance*

The similarity in this regard between my Swedish institution and Amherst was that both schools purport to care about pedagogy and have pedagogy faculty or centers, but that when it comes to the operations of the departments there is very little support, help or guidance. Occasionally someone might suggest a trick or two for getting a discussion going if students were reticent, but in the end faculty were silent about pedagogy, and happy to leave it to students to be the judge of pedagogy.

### *Curriculum and courses offered*

There was interest in opening a line to hire someone to teach a course similar to 'The Economics of Family and Work' course I designed in the near future (2025/26). This is promising as this course is something I can only wish would be offered at my institute. I think there is a willingness to experiment with courses and try new offerings, unlike Sweden. Although Amherst promotes interdisciplinary courses, this is very uncommon in the Economics Department.

### *Use of technology/IT in education*

Moodle seems a bit more flexible than Canvas at the SSE, but in both circumstances, you just have to learn on the fly. There is surprisingly little discussion of the use of genAI in either Econ Department. I used both chalk board and the PC projector/slides for lectures. Unfortunately, the room I had was not well suited to going back and forth from slides to blackboard so it was hard to make slide lectures interactive.

### *Forms of examination*

Having undergraduates write a paper is highly unusual at the SSE where students often have never written a paper until the thesis. I was impressed at the quality of the work students undertook and think this type of examination would be a good addition at the SSE. I think most classes in economics relied on written

exams as there were recurring discussions about who had booked the calculators for what times for various exams so as to avoid conflict. In this way Amherst was probably quite similar to the SSE.

*To what extent educational programmes conform to labor market needs*

I think the Economics students were more well rounded at Amherst than at the SSE. I had a sense that students exercised a great deal of agency in designing their course schedules and degrees. Amherst students were also included in seminars and encouraged to meet seminar speakers, unlike at the SSE. Students at the SSE have predetermined courses and less leeway to choose courses. My colleague from Boston who gave a seminar had been a faculty at Oxford where courses were similarly limited by field and he really promoted the idea that students should use their time at Amherst to read literature and expose themselves to new ideas beyond economics, while acquiring the minimal math/stats training to advance in Economics. Of course, he was a Literature major who then earned a PhD in Economics.

### **Recommendations**

I highly recommend the experience. My main advice is to go to every event or meeting you can and chat up faculty from every department. People were happy to talk and it was a very collegial environment. On a personal level, I think the public school (Crocker Farm) was excellent. My institution declined to cover the travel insurance for me and my accompanying family members. I am waiting for words from STINT if they can cover this cost, for now I have covered the insurance from my pocket.

### **Action Plan**

My personal action plan will involve seeking out an opportunity to teach the course I developed at Amherst here in Sweden. I will maintain contact with several Amherst colleagues as we continue to discuss joint research. I will attend a seminar in the AALAC network (a liberal arts college network) in March, an outgrowth of my time at Amherst. As with regard to my home institution, the SSE, I have little hope that they will have interest in offering the course I developed, nor hearing or implementing strategies for increasing female representation in the school or field of economics.