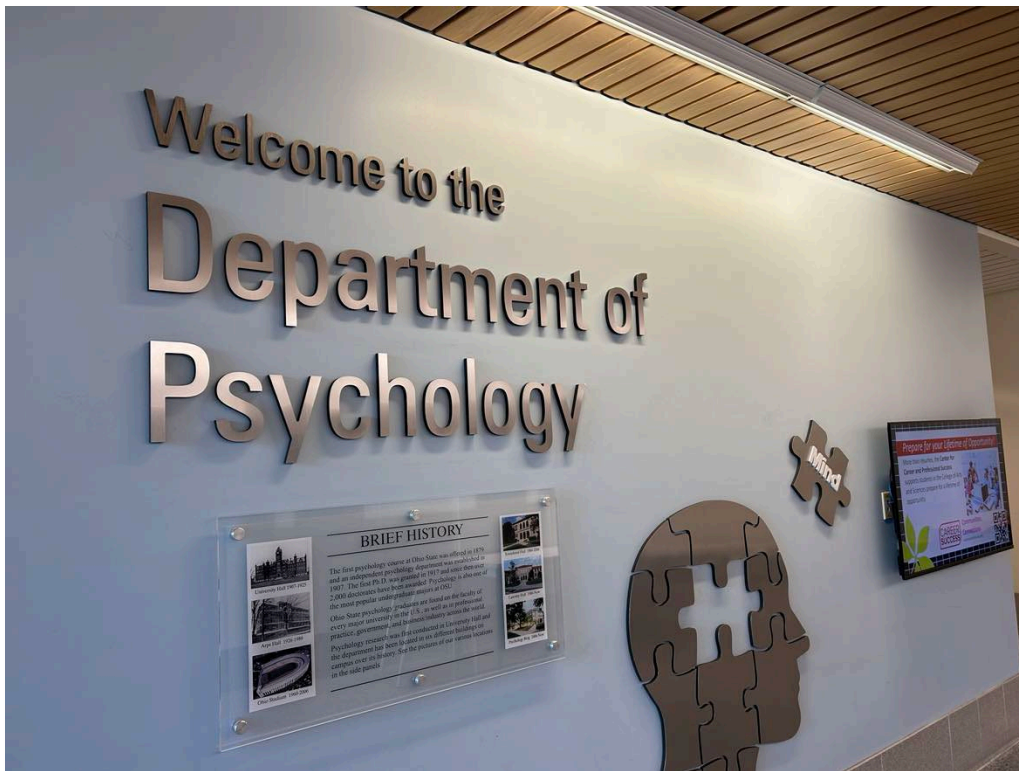


STINT Teaching Sabbatical

Final Report

Fall semester 2024



Sofia Bergbom



Upon returning to Örebro after my semester in the USA, someone asked me what the most obvious difference between Örebro and Columbus, Ohio was. I considered *sports* or maybe the *size* of Ohio State (fourth biggest university in the US and ten times bigger than Örebro University) only to realize that the concept of *midwestern hospitality* has been the most prominent difference. Not only related to work but related to my own and my family's overall experience during the fall semester. Ohio, the heart of it all and a fantastic source of midwestern hospitality!

Being far away from your daily routine typically stimulates reflection. This is very true for this journey and has triggered thoughts about the way we do things at Örebro University. It may not be the only way, and perhaps not even the best way? Spending a semester at another university on another continent has led to changes in the way I think about my subject, teaching in general, and the importance of internationalization in higher education. This report will hopefully give some insight into my perspectives on why and how.

Background

I am Sofia Bergbom, senior lecturer of Psychology at Örebro University and clinical psychologist. Since I graduated with a PhD in 2014, I have spent most of my career in a wide range of leadership and administrative positions, including program director for the Clinical Psychologist Program, Chair of the Education Committee, and Head of the Department of Psychology – all of them at Örebro University. In 2021 I stepped down from all leadership duties and decided it was time to focus on my career and my own development. After careful consideration, I found 2024 to be an excellent time to experience something out of the ordinary. As a result, I spent the fall semester 2024 as a STINT fellow at Ohio State University. Thanks to the generous scholarship from STINT, I was able to invite my family including a husband and two kids to join me in Columbus.



The Bergbom family, just arrived at Newark Airport in July.

The children, 9 and 12 (turning 13) at the time, were enrolled in public schools in the city of Upper Arlington close to the center of Columbus. My husband was a stay-at-home dad. In the middle of summer, we packed our suitcases and arrived in Upper Arlington just in time for Independence Day celebrations on the 4th of July. Arriving early allowed for some exploring before the fall semester would start in the middle of August.

THE Ohio State University

THE Ohio State University is a public land grant university located in the middle of Columbus. What does land grant mean, you might wonder. In the second half of the 1800's, Republican party representatives in Congress funded the establishment of new institutions for higher education. In contrast to the existing liberal arts colleges, these new institutions would focus on Agriculture, Science, Military Science and Engineering rather than Latin, Greek and Philosophy. Real and productive stuff, if you will. THE refers to the identity of OSU of Ohio as compared to the OSU of Oklahoma and the OSU of Oregon – Ohio State University being the biggest (and coolest) OSU of the three of them.

Ohio State University was founded in 1870 as Ohio Agricultural and Mechanical College and has since developed into a big university offering research and teaching expertise in a wide array of subjects including Psychology (alongside Latin, Greek, and Philosophy among many others). Ohio State University hence, in the end, has partly become a representative of the fluffy humanistic subjects it once was a reaction against.

Ohio State University is the fourth biggest university in the United States with around 50 000 undergraduate students and 15 000 graduate students. It has several campuses, the biggest in the center of Columbus which is where the Department of Psychology is found.

The Department of Psychology

While most buildings on the large campus in Columbus are named after prominent (and rich) former faculty members or other important people, the Psychology Department is placed in – the modern and inviting Psychology Building. In terms of psychological research, Ohio State University stands out in Social Psychology, Decision Psychology, and Behavioral Neuroscience. The department offers a competitive graduate program in Clinical Psychology and some of the most popular undergraduate courses across the whole university. Over 2 000 undergraduate students take courses in psychology any given semester, and they have between 140 and 200 graduate students active at the same time. Comparing to the rather small Department of Psychology at Örebro university, everything at Ohio State University seems large scale.

Preparation and planning

Shortly after the decision from STINT was made available, I started the rather complicated process of applying for J-1 and J-2 visas for me and my family – a process

that took all of us many hours late in the evenings and demanded a lot of help from the international office at Ohio State University. Luckily, they were well experienced, knew what was needed and provided all the necessary documentation in a timely manner. It became clear to me that this contact was rather separate from the contact with the department of Psychology – in a large university such as Ohio State there are specific people for everything.

As a parallel process, I was in contact with an education administrator as well as my contact person at the department to prepare and plan for my tasks during the semester. The message that I received, early on, was that they expected me to take on one class of my own and take full responsibility for that class. Topic was up to me – and I chose to go with the topic of my expertise namely Health Psychology. Hence, already in January I knew that I would teach a semester-long class in Health Psychology, on a 4000 level which, I learned, meant that the students would be in their Junior or Senior year of college. I had the opportunity to choose teaching days. During the spring, before leaving, and during the summer I spent time preparing the syllabus and building the content of my class.

In the end of April, when the spring semester at Ohio State had reached its end, I brought my husband and spent a week in Columbus for a planning visit. I met with my contact person and a few others, I spent a couple of days at the department of Psychology to get familiar with the setting, and I had a chance to sit down and ask all questions about my upcoming tasks. After the planning visit, I felt quite prepared for what was coming.

Recommendations for future OSU STINT fellows in the planning phase

First, be proactive! Initiate all contacts with your host institution as soon as possible to get everything started.

Second, trust the process! I was eagerly waiting for the needed documents but realized that the people at the international office were serious professionals. They know what you need and when you need it.

Third, if you travel with school aged children: Look for **housing** in the city of Upper Arlington. It's expensive but worth it. Their public schools are among the best in Ohio, they are experienced with short- and long-term international visitors, and our kids were so well taken care of. We found a furnished house through AirBnb and were able to rent it long-term through a separate contract with the owners, a company called Maki Management. Moreover, make sure to check your children's **vaccination status** and compare to the demands from the State of Ohio. Schools will ask you for vaccination records and we had to get our kids some additional vaccinations that had not been part of the Swedish program.

Finally, you will find it hard to survive in Columbus without a **car**. Even more so if you bring children. It is of course possible, but Columbus like many US cities is not very walkable. To buy a car, which we ended up doing, you will need an Ohio driver's license. It's easy to pass the driving test but more difficult to find a time for it – be proactive and well prepared for that!

Tasks and responsibilities

I taught one class, 4531 Health Psychology. The course started on August 20th and ended on December 3rd. Classes are either given Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays 60 minutes each time or Tuesdays and Thursdays 80 minutes each time. I was given the choice, and I chose to teach my class on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Some days were holidays or days off for other reasons (including the president election day), but all in all I met with the students 26 times during the semester.

At Örebro University (and with experience from Swedish universities overall) I am normally used to combining different teaching formats such as lectures, seminars, workshops, labs, etc. I had to rethink my way of getting the students active. All of them were there for all 26 times which meant between 40 and 60 students that needed to be led and engaged.



Students in class, discussing health care communication with my Swedish PhD student Jennifer that I invited for a short Zoom session

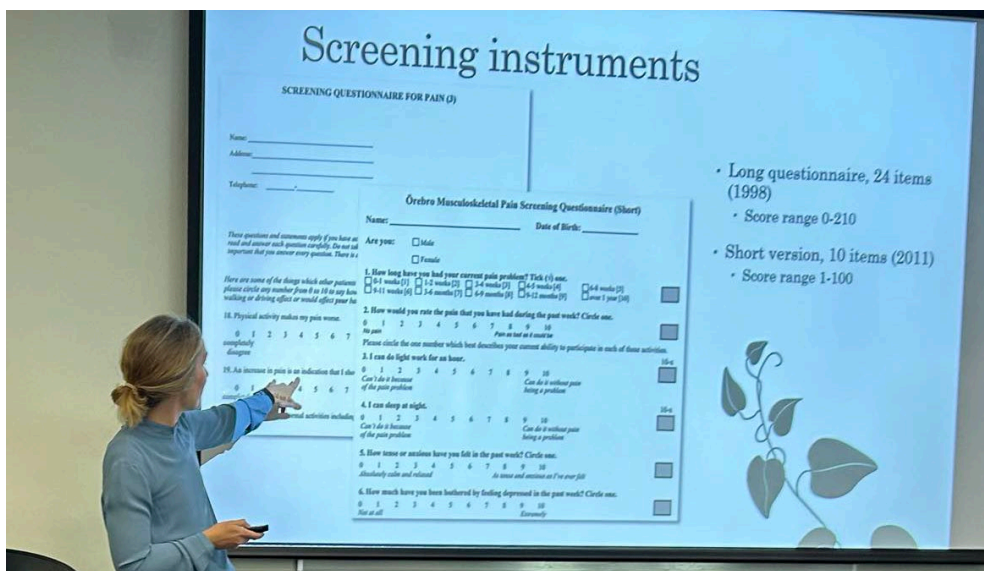
In the end, I normally divided the group into smaller working groups in the classroom to facilitate their own engagement and activity. The physical environment, a plain lecture hall with fixed furniture, did not promote active learning and we needed to get creative. In about half of the class times I included some type of active learning task that the

students had to work with together. We made it work, but I am more thankful than ever for the great physical and environmental opportunities that Örebro University offers. Rumour has it this type of teaching areas are available at Ohio State, too, but unfortunately, I did not have the opportunity to use them.

Grading at US universities (and schools overall) is less about criteria and more about quantitative performance. While European universities, in line with the Bologna principles, clearly determine grades in relation to criteria US universities normally use a percentage point system. I made the simple choice of dividing all tasks during my class into 100 points total: 20 points each for two midterm exams, 20 points for a final paper, 20 points for a total of five reflection tasks and the remaining 20 points allocated to classroom activities of different kinds. Since 20 points of the total (which could determine the difference between a C and an A grade at the end) took place in class, the attendance was significantly higher than what I normally see in Sweden.

Activities during the Teaching Sabbatical

Teaching this class was my main task during the stay at OSU. However, in addition to teaching duties, I was asked to prepare two different presentations for the faculty. First, I held a research presentation directed to the research faculty. The purpose was to give me a chance to share my research background and current projects with the faculty and possibly initiate some collaboration. I hence formulated a broad presentation on pain psychology with specific attention to two ongoing projects at home. I was lucky to have a good attendance at the presentation, and I initiated some contact with researchers in psychology, medicine and dentistry.



Research presentation for the research faculty at the Department of Psychology

Second, I was asked to prepare a pedagogical presentation directed to the teaching faculty. They were curious about similarities and differences between European and American psychology education, and we had an enlightening discussion on the topic. Finally, I was encouraged to participate in any organized research or teaching activity at the department which I did, as much as possible. One example was a seminar organized by the Society of Behavioral Medicine – a chance to meet people from different disciplines interested in topics that I am engaged in.

Finally, I attended all meetings with the teaching faculty and the research faculty throughout the semester – and I was part of a knitting group meeting every Wednesday after office hours. Some social interaction with nice colleagues!

Important lessons

I was surprised to hear how much confidence my contact person and the chair had for my skills and expertise. I was thrown into creating my own syllabus, designing my own class, and publishing everything in Canvas (which is unfortunately not the platform we use in Örebro). I found some major differences in terms of class format, making it difficult to understand what a good layout of a class might look like. The most obvious difference is that the class runs through the semester, in parallel with other classes, and on the same days, times and classroom every week. I hence had to break down my regular classroom activities, designed for 3-6 hours of teaching in big and smaller groups, to 80 minutes long classes for all students. Again, my main take home is to trust the process: You might have no idea how grading a class works, but it will be clear over time. Another important take home is to ask for help: I had to be in touch with the office Student Life Disability Services, repeatedly, to understand how I was expected and allowed to adjust teaching to student with disabilities. I had to ask for help with technology and Canvas. Everyone I reached out to was eager to help and offered excellent examples of midwestern hospitality.



Comparison between the host and the home institutions

At Ohio State, teaching is large-scale, and Psychology is one of the most attractive subjects. Some of the introductory classes enrol 3-400 students. My advanced and eligible class enrolled 60 students – a lot more than what a similar class in Örebro would see. While I recognized the student population from Örebro – they did ask many of the same questions and reflected on the topic in similar ways – there were some differences in approach and experiences among them.

First, the student population at Ohio State was more diverse and with more diverse experiences overall. While the psychology students at Örebro University are normally Caucasian middle class with similar schooling and life backgrounds, significantly more psychology students at Ohio State belonged to ethnic and race minorities. Moreover, the schooling background differed which gave a lot of interesting material to cover in class:

Some had experiences from catholic private schools while some had attended public schools in impoverished areas. This gave rise to intriguing discussions about differences in access to health promotion, sexual education in schools and healthy nutrition – important topics in a health psychology class. Adding the Swedish “folkhem” perspective to all of it gave even more material for discussion. Health is a question of culture and social justice. Sharing lived experiences gives the scientific topic volume and content: A good example of psychological literacy (e.g. Hulme et al., 2015).

School Lunch

	Tremont Elementary 	Almby Elementary 
Monday	Cheeseburger or Hamburger	Chili stew, whole wheat bulgur
Tuesday	French Toast with Sausage Links	Oven baked fish, boiled potatoes and cold yoghurt dressing
Wednesday	Chicken Tenders with Dinner Roll	Chicken stew, pasta
Thursday	Stuffed Crust Pepperoni or Cheese Pizza	Celeriac sticks, baked potatoes and cold yoghurt dressing
Friday	Toasted Triple Cheese	Potato and leek soup with freshly baked bread
Additional	<i>Golden Bear Fun Lunch with Cheerios WOWbutter & Jelly Sandwich Fruit</i>	<i>Veggie buffet Rye crisp bread</i>

Discussing food, eating, nutrition and obesity in class. Comparing the environment for kids in the United States and kids in Sweden and problematizing the obesogenic environment of the United States.

Second, I could identify differences among students in how important performance and grades are. While the students I meet in Örebro have already passed the inclusion criteria to the competitive master’s program of clinical psychology (psykologprogrammet) – the students majoring in Psychology at Ohio State were just about to start applying to competitive grad schools. Being accepted to medical school, law school or a graduate program in clinical psychology is not an easy challenge and you need good grades as well as many recommendation letters from your teachers. Hence, while Swedish students only really need to “pass” their classes, college students at Ohio State were very eager to perform well and get good grades. Attendance in class was higher than what we normally see in Örebro, and student engagement was overall higher. Moreover, American students have clearly been brought up in a context where communication with (university) professors is important and the level of politeness and gratitude that they expressed was far beyond what we normally see in Örebro.

Third, I found it interesting to reflect on the large number of students with disability support – both at Ohio State as confirmed by colleagues, and at Örebro University. This seems to follow the societal increase in diagnosing disabilities, and the machinery of channelling need for support into the mental health field. One third of the students in my health psychology class at Ohio State had disability support such as longer time for exam, special aids when taking exams, note-taking assistance and adjusted deadlines. We see similar patterns in Örebro. Perhaps we, as teachers, need to make a choice. Either we open the floor for all types of special needs at our higher education institutions and follow through with inclusive approaches such as Universal Design (e.g. Cumming & Rose, 2022) – or we stop our attempts at broadening recruitment to higher education and view university degrees as something only obtainable by few.

Finally, I reflected on the discourse of academic freedom. As a university professor at Ohio State, I experienced less bureaucratic restrictions and more freedom in my profession. I was free to develop and adjust class material, I was free to make my decisions, and I perceived a lot of confidence in my professional judgment both from students and from colleagues. Already before this experience I have reflected on the fit between the Swedish governmental agency organization and academia. The time I spent at OSU made me realize that there are indeed difficulties to combine exercising governmental authority with academic freedom. This, however, is beyond the scope of this report and my power and will merely remain a reflection.

Recommendations

When applying for a semester at a university in the United States, I assume that many including myself envision themselves either in California or in Massachusetts. In the end, I chose to open the floor to all different kinds of opportunities and checked all the US host institutions in my STINT application. When I was invited to OSU, I could not place neither Columbus nor Ohio on a map. Upon arriving at Newark airport for the planning visit, the officer behind the window formulated a question capturing our first reflections: “So you are going to Ohio? ...Why?” After the stay I am so grateful that I had the opportunity to see a part of the United States that few Swedes have seen, and I am grateful to have been the recipient of true midwestern hospitality. A warm recommendation is hence to be open to a stay in Ohio (of all places in the world) – it might be a fantastic experience!

Another recommendation, that I got but did not follow during my time at the Department of Psychology, is to knock on many doors. Normally, offices are closed during the days and there is a lack of relaxed collegial time. I think that I would have gotten further with many professional contacts if I had been a little more active at the department. However, my true introverted nature got the best of me, and I was quite happy alone at the office on teaching free days – and it is in the end all a matter of what you want out of the stay.

A third and final recommendation is to attend a Buckeyes football game. The Ohio Stadium takes over 100 000 people and is normally full when the Buckeyes play. And if you don't go for the football, go for the marching band – a surprisingly impressive group of skilled performers.



The Ohio State University Marching Band performing the traditional “Script Ohio” during a game between the Ohio State Buckeyes and the Marshall Thundering Herd in September 2024. The Buckeyes, of course, won the game.

Action plan

This stay has indeed promoted some reflection and perspective taking – while academia seems to be similar across the world in many ways, there are indeed things that differ. I would like to lift two things directly related to my teaching activities that I would like to act on at my home institution. Moreover, I really hope that we can find a good future collaboration between Örebro University and Ohio State University for exchange students.

The first thing that I would like to continue working on is the design of teaching to promote attendance and engagement in class. Over the years that have passed since I entered academia, we have seen an increase in absenteeism from teaching activities. This trend was further strengthened during the period of covid and distance teaching. While presence is not the only way of learning, there are risks associated with being absent from too many of the prepared activities – not the least in a professional education promoting skills training in class. While students may report different reasons for non-attendance such as teaching format, that they don't think that they need to attend to learn, and that teaching collides with other duties such as jobs (Triado-Ivern et

al., 2020), attendance seems related to academic performance (Schmulian & Coetzee, 2011). Moreover, recent findings indicate that the relationship between attendance and performance is mediated by classroom engagement indicating that university teachers can promote success through increasing attendance and engagement (Büchele, 2021). The grading system used at OSU, and most likely at other higher education institutions in the United States, promoted attendance and engagement in a way that we have not succeeded with at Örebro University. While I see the risk of learning becoming instrumental when students are asked to “collect points” through performing small tasks in class, getting the students into the classroom is a cornerstone for promoting engagement in learning. I will investigate how we can implement similar systems at the psychology program in Örebro.

The second thing that I would like to promote at Örebro University is professional communication between faculty and students. While I fundamentally agree that we need to emphasize students’ rights in higher education, we cannot forget the importance of a professional and respectful tone in the communication. American students learn from an early age how to communicate with teachers in a respectful manner and it shows. The first initiative on this line is a beginner’s workshop during the fall of 2025, offered to new students in Psychology at Örebro University. The workshop will be led by a senior student and the topic will be “how to increase the chances of developing good relationships with your teachers”. During the workshop, the students will get to practice perspective taking and how messages and wishes can be packaged in a polite and respectful manner. We will evaluate and see if it makes a difference.

Finally, I have initiated contacts with the central internationalization office at Ohio State University, with the hope of signing a bilateral agreement for future exchange students in Psychology. I am sure American and Swedish psychology students could learn a lot from each other. Though Sweden and the US may seem culturally similar on the surface, there are differences once you start scratching.

To wrap this report up and connect back to the general reflections in the beginning, having the luxury of spending a full semester at a foreign institution and bringing your family is a unique experience. The stay at Ohio State University has given me many ideas about how to promote attendance and engagement among our Swedish students. The Health Psychology topics that I spent the semester discussing came to life through the illustration of my students’ early lives and I understand the topic in new ways after the stay. Following my children’s semester in their public schools has made me think a lot about how kids are raised in Sweden and in the US – without lifting either one as undoubtedly better. Thank you, STINT, thank you, Ohio State University, and thank you, Örebro University for making this possible.

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