

# Teaching Sabbatical Report: Williams College, Fall 2024

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## Introduction

Williams College, a leading liberal arts institution in the United States, is located in the picturesque town of Williamstown, Massachusetts. With a history spanning over two centuries, the college is renowned for its academic rigor, small class sizes, and emphasis on fostering critical thinking through interdisciplinary exploration. The intimate learning environment, characterized by a 7:1 student-faculty ratio, offers students and faculty unparalleled opportunities for intellectual engagement.

During the Fall 2024 semester, I joined the Department of Psychology as a visiting faculty member, teaching the seminar-style course Psychology 353: Family and School-Based Interventions. The course explored the complex interplay of risk and protective factors influencing child and adolescent development, with an emphasis on designing effective interventions within family and school settings. My sabbatical responsibilities extended beyond teaching, encompassing mentoring, collaboration with colleagues, and participating in the college's vibrant intellectual life. This report reflects on the preparation, execution, and outcomes of my sabbatical, incorporating insights gained from my teaching experience and participation in the Williams academic community.

## Preparation and Planning

### *Establishing Communication*

Preparation for the course began months before the semester's start, with extensive discussions between myself and the Department Chair at Williams. These meetings focused on tailoring the course to fit the liberal arts framework while aligning with departmental goals. The resulting syllabus for Psychology 353 reflected a comprehensive exploration of the factors influencing child psychopathology, focusing on applied interventions within family and school systems. The collaborative nature of these discussions highlighted Williams' commitment to innovative pedagogy and ensured that the course content would resonate with students from diverse academic backgrounds.

The course's interdisciplinary nature required significant preparation, as it combined principles of psychology, sociology, and education. Topics included systemic analysis of risk factors, behavior analysis for case formulation, and practical intervention design. The Department Chair and I also discussed the importance of integrating interactive components, such as case studies and group projects, to encourage active learning and foster critical thinking.

### *Preparatory Visit*

In April 2024, I visited Williamstown to finalize arrangements and gain a deeper understanding of the academic culture at Williams. The visit allowed me to observe classes, interact with faculty, and familiarize myself with the college's emphasis on discussion-based learning. One particularly impactful observation was a seminar in the Psychology Department, where the instructor skillfully facilitated a discussion on developmental psychology. This inspired me to incorporate similar methods into my own course, particularly during sessions on designing interventions for children and adolescents. One thing that stood out to me in comparison with similar seminars at my home institution was the extent to which the students seemed to have read the assigned materials. Another thing was the wide scope and liberal attitude the seminar leader projected in the discussion. At my (medical – not so liberal) home institution, seminars usually are much more focused on specific topics, techniques and more a matter of student's demonstrating their knowledge and skills rather than to think freely.

During the visit, I also met with administrative staff to address logistical matters, such as housing and visa requirements, ensuring a seamless transition for my family and me. Exploring the campus and surrounding community reinforced my appreciation for the close-knit, collaborative environment that defines Williams College.

### *Logistical Arrangements*

Relocating for the sabbatical involved careful planning, particularly in arranging housing and schooling for my children. Williams College provided a furnished house conveniently located near campus, allowing me to balance professional and personal commitments. For my children, we coordinated with local schools to ensure a smooth transition. These arrangements were made significantly easier with the proactive support of the Dean's Office.

### *Course Development*

Designing the syllabus for Psychology 353: Family and School-Based Interventions was an intellectually rewarding process. The course aimed to equip students with an understanding of the factors influencing child psychopathology and the skills to design interventions targeting these factors. Weekly themes covered topics such as risk and protective factors, systemic and behavioral analysis, and ethical considerations in intervention planning. To enhance the applied nature of the course, students engaged with simulated case studies, utilizing tools like ChatGPT to interact with virtual families.

Group projects further enriched the learning experience by encouraging collaboration in the design of innovative prevention programs. The flexibility of the Williams academic model enabled me to incorporate these interactive elements, creating a course that balanced theoretical exploration with practical application.

## **Tasks and Responsibilities**

As a visiting faculty member, my responsibilities extended beyond delivering lectures to include office hours, active engagement in departmental activities, and collaboration with colleagues across disciplines.

### *Teaching Responsibilities*

Teaching Psychology 353 was both challenging and rewarding. The course met twice weekly for 75-minute sessions, structured to foster discussion and active participation. The class was capped at 20 students and was fully enrolled. The smaller classes are typical at Williams upper-level courses. Each class centered on a specific topic, supported by assigned readings and discussion prompts. For instance, during a session on behavior analysis, students applied theoretical concepts to case studies, debating the ethical and practical implications of different intervention strategies. These discussions highlighted the intellectual curiosity of Williams students and their ability to integrate knowledge from various disciplines.

Assignments were integral to the course, emphasizing critical reflection and practical application. The case formulation assignment, which required students to analyze virtual family scenarios, encouraged them to think systematically about the factors contributing to child psychopathology. A subsequent assignment on intervention planning allowed students to build on this foundation, designing evidence-based strategies to address identified issues. These projects not only deepened students' understanding of course material but also prepared them for real-world challenges in applied psychology.

### *Office hours*

Meeting with students individually during office hours, which I was expected to schedule 1-2 times each week, was one of the bigger differences between Williams College and my home institution. Some of the students enrolled in Psychology 353 expressed an interest in pursuing careers in counseling, social work, or clinical psychology, and our discussions often focused on how the skills and knowledge gained in the course could serve as a foundation for these paths. Even if I experienced the meetings I held as rewarding, many students did not take part in them.

One particularly memorable interaction involved a student who was struggling with the ethical considerations of implementing a proposed intervention. The student's thoughtful questions about balancing evidence-based practices with cultural sensitivity led to a series of productive conversations, during which we explored case studies and theoretical frameworks. By the end of the semester, this student had developed a

sophisticated understanding of the topic, which they showcased in a final project that examined the role of cultural competence in family-based interventions.

### *Departmental Engagement*

In addition to teaching, I actively participated in faculty meetings and departmental activities. All my colleagues were very helpful and welcoming, but I experienced the work as a teacher at Williams as a much more independent (and less collaborative) endeavor compared to my home institution. I did invite (and was invited) other faculty to be part of classes or lectures, but in general every teacher was working alone.

One of the highlights of my departmental engagement was co-facilitating a workshop on the similarities and differences in the mental health care systems of Sweden and the US. Drawing on the content in Psychology 353, the workshop sparked a lively discussion among students, many of whom expressed the value of getting a foreign perspective on the matter.

### **Activities During the Sabbatical**

While teaching was the primary focus of my sabbatical, I also engaged in a wide range of activities that enriched my experience and deepened my connection to the Williams community. These activities extended beyond the classroom, encompassing cultural exchange, interdisciplinary collaboration, and community outreach.

### *Guest Lectures and Seminars*

In addition to teaching Psychology 353, I delivered a guest lecture on parenting interventions, which was part of the college's faculty seminar series. It was attended by faculty and students from various disciplines, creating a rich and diverse audience. The questions raised during the Q&A session reflected the intellectual curiosity of the Williams community, with participants drawing connections between the lecture's themes and their own fields of study.

I also attended a series of interdisciplinary seminars organized by the faculty, which provided a platform for discussing global challenges from multiple perspectives. These discussions inspired me to think more broadly about the connections between psychology and other disciplines, an insight I plan to integrate into my future teaching and research.

Finally, I was invited to St. John's University to give a guest lecture for faculty and students on internet-based parenting interventions. It was interesting to visit another type of institution for higher education, besides Williams College.

### *Cultural and Social engagement*

Cultural exchange was an integral part of my sabbatical experience. Inviting faculty to Swedish Lucia was one of the highlights in this aspect of my stay.

I also hosted a workshop during my course, in which I invited the mental health team from the local high-school. The purpose was to let the student's get an idea of how the theory and methods we discussed during the course could be applied in practice. It was also an opportunity for me to learn about the health system in US schools.

Apart from the events I organized, me and my family also took part of the rich cultural and social offerings at Williams. It ranged from attending sport events, dance, theatre, and parties arranged by different branches at the college. A highlight was an invitation to "faculty salon" from the college president, in which a professor in art gave a presentation with a following discussion among the invited guests. Another highlight was of course the "Mountain day", a random Friday in October during which the whole college (students, faculty and family) hiked the surrounding mountains.



### *Faculty Collaboration*

My primary task at Williams was to teach my own course, which I primarily handled on my own. One exception was a joint seminar together with a colleague at my department. The purpose was to discuss and compare the systems for mental-health care and the social services in the US vs. Sweden. It was very much appreciated by the students.

Another aspect of my stay that I very much appreciated was the ambitious program for new faculty. Besides introductory days, the college arranged several lunches and workshops for new faculty throughout the semester. It was a great opportunity to meet faculty from different departments and disciplines. The atmosphere was very welcoming and social.

## Important Lessons



One of the first lessons I learned during my stay at Williams was the value of building a sense of community. It is of course much easier to do at a small, relatively isolated college where 99% of the students live on the college grounds. But it was also something that the staff and faculty actively supported in different ways. The college arranged numerous social, cultural and athletic activities throughout the semester that brought people together and fostered a “Williams identity”. Each morning everyone received a newsletter with information of upcoming events, performances, workshops, and open lectures. Even if my home institution is larger and spread out geographically, I think there is a lot to learn from the community building efforts I witnessed at Williams.

Another lesson, which might sound strange, was that I learned the value of reading. Swedish students do of course also read before exams, but at Williams the level of engagement (in terms of reading assigned chapters/articles) was much higher. If I asked the students to read a chapter before next class, most did so. The discussions we had in class were in comparison much more dynamic and elaborate. A large proportion of students also took part of the discussions. I hope I can do a much better job in the future to regularly incorporate and encourage readings in my teaching. One explanation for Williams students being more engaged in readings may be the tradition of interactive and discussion-driven format, unlike traditional lecture-based methods. The seminar structure at Williams encouraged students to take ownership of their education, engaging critically with the material and with each other. This approach not only enhanced their learning but also transformed my perspective on the role of the educator as a facilitator rather than a sole authority figure.

Another critical lesson was the importance of interdisciplinary perspectives in addressing complex issues. The course syllabus deliberately included readings from psychology, sociology, and education, reflecting the multifaceted nature of family and school-based interventions. During a session on protective factors in child development, one student drew on knowledge from a prior course in public health to propose a community-based approach to reducing risk factors. These interdisciplinary connections enriched class discussions and highlighted the value of exposing students to diverse fields of study.

## Comparison Between Host and Home Institutions

Teaching Psychology 353 at Williams College highlighted several key differences between the liberal arts model and the Swedish university system, particularly in course structure, assessment methods, class sizes, and specialization.

### *Course Structure: Parallel vs. Block Scheduling*

A major difference is how courses are structured. At Williams, students take three to five courses simultaneously over a semester, balancing multiple subjects. In Sweden, students typically take one course at a time in shorter, intensive blocks before moving on to the next.

The liberal arts approach fosters interdisciplinary learning, as students constantly engage with multiple subjects, bringing insights from one field into another. In Psychology 353, students often referenced ideas from their concurrent sociology, education, or public health courses, deepening discussions. The Swedish system, while allowing for focused study, can limit cross-disciplinary connections.

### *Assessment: No Re-Exams vs. Retake Opportunities*

At Williams, exams and assignments are final, with no re-exam opportunities. In Sweden, students often have the chance to retake failed or low-scoring exams. This difference shapes student behavior: at Williams, students tend to stay consistently engaged, knowing their performance is final. In Sweden, some students may take a more relaxed approach initially, relying on retakes.

In Psychology 353, students took their assignments seriously from the outset, knowing their grades would stand. While the Swedish model offers second chances, the Williams system cultivates a sense of accountability and preparation.

### *Class Sizes and Student-Faculty Ratio*

Williams' 7:1 student-faculty ratio allows for smaller, discussion-based classes. My course had 19 students, creating an interactive environment where each student received personalized feedback. In Sweden, class sizes—especially in introductory courses—can be much larger, making lecture-based teaching more common.

The ability to engage with students individually at Williams was invaluable. Discussions were richer, and students felt comfortable seeking mentorship. While Swedish universities emphasize independent learning, the Williams model fosters closer faculty-student relationships.

### *Specialization vs. Breadth of Study*

Williams students must take courses across multiple disciplines, as outlined in the liberal arts curriculum ([Williams Academics](#)). Swedish universities, by contrast,



encourage earlier specialization, with students primarily taking courses within their chosen field from the beginning.

In Psychology 353, this broad academic exposure was evident. Students connected our discussions on intervention strategies to policy debates, ethical considerations, and even economic frameworks. In Sweden, the focused specialization model allows for deeper expertise but may limit interdisciplinary problem-solving. A balance between breadth and depth could enrich both systems.

## **Recommendations**

Based on my experiences teaching Psychology 353 and participating in the broader Williams community, I have several recommendations for future visiting faculty and for Swedish academic institutions seeking to innovate.

For future participants, I recommend embracing the interactive and interdisciplinary nature of the liberal arts model. Designing courses that incorporate applied learning components, such as case studies or simulated scenarios, can greatly enhance student engagement and understanding. Additionally, taking advantage of resources like writing centers and technology workshops can provide valuable support for both teaching and research.

For Swedish institutions, there is much to learn from Williams' approach to curriculum design and pedagogy. Introducing interdisciplinary courses and incorporating continuous assessment methods could provide students with a more engaging and comprehensive educational experience. Finally, investing in academic support services, such as writing centers and faculty development programs, would create a more supportive environment for both students and educators.

## **Action Plan**

The lessons learned from teaching Psychology 353 will inform several initiatives that I plan to implement upon returning to my home institution.

At the individual level, I will incorporate discussion-based teaching methods and applied learning assignments into my courses. Inspired by the case formulation and intervention planning exercises in Psychology 353, I intend to design similar activities that challenge students to connect theory to practice.

At the departmental level, I will advocate for the integration of interdisciplinary content into the curriculum. Drawing on the success of the group prevention project in Psychology 353, I will propose a new course that combines elements of psychology, education, and sociology to address real-world challenges in child development.

At the institutional level, I will work for my institution to support and foster community building.