

Teaching at Skidmore College

Impressions and Reflections
of STINT visiting fellow
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During the fall semester 2007 I was a visiting teacher at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, a small town located about 250 km north of New York City, and about the same distance west of Boston. (Or, expressed in the American car-centered way: three hours from each of these cities.) The purpose of the stay was to gain knowledge about liberal arts education in the United States, to gain new perspectives on pedagogics and teaching, and to find inspiration and insights ultimately useful for improving Swedish higher education.

This report summarizes my experiences, and discusses some aspects of the liberal arts tradition that I think can be of interest for Swedish education as well. In the final part of the report, *Society and Culture*, I also discuss some general differences between the American and the Swedish society. Needless to say, the remarks or views expressed in this report are not founded in any scientific or systematic investigations; they are just my personal impressions and observations. They are tentative remarks, that I hope will lead to further discussion. If you have any comments or reflections upon the content of this report, do not hesitate to contact me at holst@physto.se.

Contents

Introduction

From Stockholm University to Skidmore College

My Activities

Acknowledgements

Academics

Liberal Arts Education – not just about Education

Interdisciplinarity

The Importance of Individuals

Grading

How Does an American Physics Major Compare to a Swedish?

The Logic behind Course Requirements

College Expectations on Faculty

Evaluating Teaching Skills

Course Evaluations

Society and Culture

Role of the State in Sweden and in the United States

The Importance of American Communities

Busy Americans

Cars and Suburban Sprawl

Religion

Appendix: Interview with Larry Jones

Introduction

From Stockholm University to Skidmore College

Skidmore College is situated in the outskirts of Saratoga Springs. This is a small town, with essentially one big street – Broadway – along which most restaurants, shops and hotels are located. If it weren't for the college, the cultural activities in this town probably would be restricted to horse-racing and spa-hotels. However, Skidmore serves as a cultural center, not only for the town itself, but for the whole area. There are a lot of concerts, theaters and public talks – something interesting is going on practically every evening. For this reason I didn't have the feeling of living in a small town. The cultural and intellectual environment was that of a fairly large city.

Skidmore College is a fairly typically-sized American liberal arts college. It has about 2400 students, and about 230 full-time faculty members. Apart from traditional liberal arts disciplines – such as philosophy, languages, history and science – the college has a strong artistic profile with, for example, dance, music and theater departments. This is well in accord with the college slogan “Creative Thought Matters”, which, however, is not to be understood as limited to the artistic disciplines: all departments at the college aim at fostering creative thinking among the students. The college was founded in 1903 by Lucy Skidmore Scribner. As many other liberal arts colleges, it started out as a women's college, meeting the need for female education in the early 20th century. In 1971 both sexes were allowed. Today there is still a slight female majority among students: 60% of them are women.

I am a theoretical physicist, and in Sweden I teach at the Physics Department at Stockholm University. There are some important structural differences between this teaching environment and that at Skidmore. First, Stockholm University is one of Sweden's largest universities, with more than 40 000 registered students, over 2500 teachers and researchers, and near 2000 graduate students. The Physics Department is, in itself, large, with around 300 students and about 50 teachers, and 70 graduate students. In contrast, the Physics Department at Skidmore is small, even for an American college: there are just five faculty members, one technician and one administrative coordinator. Still, the college provides a reasonably broad range of physics courses, and produces about four physics majors each year. Physics is a highly specialized field, and with such a small department it is of course very difficult to conduct cutting-edge research projects. Still, at least two of the physics faculty members manage to conduct interesting research projects besides their teaching, and all of them show a genuine interest in widening and deepening their own knowledge in their field.

Another important difference between Stockholm University and Skidmore has to do with economics. While the education at Stockholm is free – as is the case at all Swedish universities – at Skidmore a student without economic support pays nearly 50 000 dollar each year (including lodging). Student fees are also the main income for the college. Another important financial source are private donations. The high fee is justified as a means to enable generous support for skilled

students from less wealthy environments. It is recognized that such support is essential in order to maintain a culturally diverse college environment. But the admission process at Skidmore is not blind as regards economic standard. That is: the students are not accepted independently of their ability to pay for their education, as is the case at some of the richest colleges. Thus, even though Skidmore has a generous support program, it is easier for wealthy students to get accepted.

One would guess that the high fee should guarantee that the students at Skidmore all are motivated and ambitious. Compared to our students in Stockholm, this is true to some degree, but not to the extent that one would expect. There are students at Skidmore too, that do not seem to care so much about their education. My impression is that this is more common among students for which a college education is something that was always taken for granted. The students who receive support seem more eager to get as much out of the college years as possible.

My Activities

My main duty at the Physics Department at Skidmore was to give a course in Relativity. There were two lectures a week, Tuesday and Thursday, 80 minutes each. I had eleven students, mostly sophomores and juniors, but there were also one freshman and one senior. Some of the students were physics majors, but most of them were not, so the mathematical prerequisites varied.

Teaching a course of one's own is definitely a good way to get to know the system, and to learn about the educational environment, so it is definitely something that I recommend to future STINT fellows. Teaching is also a good way to get to know some students, and to learn about their perspectives on the education. However, preparing the lectures was more time-consuming than I had expected, partly because of the new circumstances, partly because of the difficulty of teaching in a second language, and every piece of preparation that I had been able to do beforehand proved highly valuable.

In order to get a broader understanding of the educational environment I attended several classes at different departments, and interviewed some of the professors. Towards the end of my stay I gave an open lecture on General Relativity, which was well-attended, not least by faculty from other disciplines than physics. I attended some faculty meetings, and was also invited to one meeting of the Institutional Policy and Planning Committee (IPPC) – the central governing committee of the college.

As mentioned above, there were a lot of cultural activities going on at the campus, and I had no difficulties in finding things to do. I attended several concerts, talks, and movie screenings. During the first half of the semester I also took a tennis course at the college Sports Center.

Intrigued and puzzled by the strong status of religion in the United States, I decided to contact a Humanist organization in the area. After some searching on the internet I found one in Albany – the Institute for Humanist Studies. I contacted its president Larry Jones, and later made an interview with him at his office in Albany. A shortened version of this interview is included in the appendix,

and I also comment briefly on it in the last section of this report.

Acknowledgements

Before we can delve into the discussions of academic and social life in America, I have to mention a few persons whose help and support was of crucial importance for my activities this fall.

Susan Kress, the Vice President for Academic Affairs, made me feel welcome from the very beginning, and throughout my stay made sure that everything worked out for me.

In finding my apartment I had invaluable help from Mark Hofmann, Associate Dean of the Faculty.

My landlords, Pat Fehling and Denise Smith, made sure that I was comfortable in every possible way. I cannot imagine having found a better place to stay, than in their beautiful and bright apartment, just ten minutes walk from campus.

Bill Standish, Chair of the Physics Department, made me feel welcome in the Physics Department, and helped me with all kinds of practical matters related to my course.

My dear friends Sarah and Steve Goodwin kindly invited me to their home and family several times. Our discussions – always intense, interesting and warm – are among my dearest memories from this fall.

I learned a lot from discussing with faculty members, and many of the views and conclusions in this report, have been formed or reshaped in such discussions. Apart from those already mentioned, I am also grateful to Mark Huibregtse, Anita Miller, Andrew Skinner and Shannon Stitzel for sharing their views and insights on educational matters with me. With Andrew I also had several rewarding conversations in physics.

Emily Lacroix, one of the students in my Relativity class, frequently made sure that I didn't have to eat alone in the dining hall. From our conversations I learned a lot about American society and life style. Emily was also among the few who actually followed my requests and corrected my English – especially the pronunciation. Thank you!

To everyone mentioned above, all students in my class, and all others that I had the fortune to interact with: together you made this fall into one of the most fun, interesting and memorable periods in my life so far. I am greatly indebted to all of you.

Academics

Liberal Arts Education – not just about Education

Skidmore College is a liberal arts college. What is meant by this? First, liberal arts usually denotes theoretical disciplines, rather than education aimed at specific professions. The value of a well-rounded education is stressed, and in a sense, the ultimate goal is to create something like Renaissance persons: well-educated people, excelling in a wide variety of fields. This means that the students are encouraged to take courses in several different disciplines. For example, it is not unusual to take two majors in as different fields as mathematics and music. Course requirements are often set to a minimum, and the courses are scheduled in order to facilitate innovative combinations of disciplines. Most courses run through the full semester, with two or three classes a week, at certain time slots, and the standard course load for students are four courses per semester. Interdisciplinary courses are common, especially during the freshman year.

But liberal arts education means something more than just pursuing academic studies. It is just as much about forming individuals into democratic and mature citizens. Swedish higher education, in contrast, almost completely lacks this aspect. It may be surprising to find such an activity of shaping individuals into responsible members of society, imposing democratic values on them, at private institutions in the United States – a country that otherwise stresses the autonomy of its citizens. But, as we will see, this is just one out of many instances where actions and responsibilities that in Sweden usually are associated with the state, in the United States are rather taken on by private institutions, groups or communities. In a way, the norms and values that knit a society together, and that in Sweden are provided largely through public media and public institutions, in the States are provided by institutions like liberal arts colleges.

So, in what way does this individual-shaping aspect of the education manifest itself? First of all, the content of many courses is linked with life outside academics. Most teachers actively encourage class room discussions about aspects of society, and naturally incorporate these into their courses. For instance, one of the freshman courses this semester was about particular scientific issues that are discussed in the media today, such as global warming, and alternative fuels. Another course included discussions about nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism. A third discussed how science is depicted in Hollywood movies.

There are also a lot of evening activities on campus, such as talks, panel discussions, or action groups. These often link academics with issues of general concern in society, such as minority groups, racism, violence or gender issues.

The campuses typically work as miniature societies in themselves. Most students have certain duties for the college, such as helping in the dining hall, the media service, or tutoring other students. They are also encouraged to initiate groups and activities, and to take the full responsibility for these.

Interdisciplinarity

A key concept in the liberal arts education is interdisciplinarity. This takes a number of expressions in the college environment – in courses and in activities of various sorts.

At Skidmore all freshmen have to take a so called Scribner Seminar during their first semester. These typically have an interdisciplinary touch, and, since the teachers are almost completely free to shape their courses according to their own liking, they span a vast variety of subjects. For example, this semester one course was about the use and misuse of nuclear energy, a second discussed death penalty in the States, and a third dealt with the non-Euclidean revolution. The Scribner Seminars intend to prepare the students for their upcoming college years, by improving their writing and presentation skills, and the instructor also serves as a mentor, or studies advisor, for his or her group of students. This, too, is typical for small liberal arts colleges – advising students is a shared responsibility among the faculty, and each student has a personal mentor.

One unusual and successful example of interdisciplinarity at Skidmore is the Tang Teaching Museum. In addition to more conventional art exhibitions – mostly featuring contemporary artists – they also have exhibitions where they try to bridge the gap between art and various other disciplines. This semester they were featuring an exhibition in collaboration with the Chemistry Department: “Molecules that Matter”.

In the exhibition ten molecules are presented – ten molecules that have played an important role for humans, science or technology during the 20th century, and often resulted in some controversy. Among them are DDT, prozac and penicillin, to mention just a few. Each molecule is presented by a huge model, some information about its use (or potential misuse), relevant historical artifacts, and various artworks relating to it. The faculty members are encouraged to make use of the exhibition in their various courses, for example as starting-points for discussion. For that purpose the exhibition is well apted – it is certainly very engaging and thought-provoking.

The Importance of Individuals

A general difference between the Swedish and the American society has to do with the stronger emphasis that the latter puts on individuals. In the college environment this holds for both faculty and students. For example, at the monthly faculty meetings, each faculty member that has done something special for the college is recognized and applauded. At the first faculty meeting of the semester, this acknowledging of faculty members – which included welcoming new faculty, as well as welcoming back those faculty members that had been on sabbatical – took up a substantial part of the meeting. Even the new batch of students was thoroughly recognized: all countries that they represented were listed; all different kinds of jobs, activities or non-profit organizations that they had been involved in were mentioned. Of course, the newly accepted students were not individually named, but it was still clear that their individual experience and backgrounds were highly valued.

The American emphasis on individuals is also apparent in formal documents and policies. Here are two excerpts from “Classroom protocols” – a collection of information and advice to new faculty members:

“We recognize that each individual faculty member develops his or her teaching goal and implements them in ways commensurate with his or her own philosophy, pedagogical goals, and personality.”

“Nothing in these suggestions should be construed as contrary to Skidmore’s vigorous support of the faculty’s intellectual and pedagogical freedoms”

Consequently, the teachers have almost complete autonomy regarding their own courses, and they are also encouraged to create new courses. Many courses therefore reflect the personal fields of interest of the instructor. For example, a mathematician gives a course in food and society; a geologist teaches about how science and scientists are portrayed in pop culture and the media. In Sweden this probably would lead to begrudging comments among the colleagues: that is not his or her discipline, that course should be taught by someone who knows the stuff better! At Skidmore teachers trust their colleagues to be able to decide for themselves what they are capable of doing. It seems to work pretty well.

The attitude towards the students is, in a sense, similar: all initiatives are encouraged, whether it concerns taking an unorthodox mix of courses, or to form an action group or start a new campus activity.

Grading

The grades, and the grading culture, differ a lot when compared to Sweden. The passing grades are A, B, C, and D, where A is the highest and D is the lowest. There are also plus and minus signs for all these, except for D – there is no D minus – so in effect there are eleven passing grades. In the college catalogue, grade C is described as “satisfactory work”, but it seems that there has been some inflation in grades. I soon became aware that the students themselves considered both C and D as a failure, even if it is not formally so. The average grade for all students and all courses at Skidmore is B+, which in the college catalogue is described as “superior work”. However, when speaking to the faculty members, one does not get the impression that they, in general, consider their students to be “superior”. Indeed, most of them are complaining about their students, much in the same way as teachers do at Stockholm University.

The examination procedures are also quite different. Whereas in Sweden, the main examination event is the final exam, here, examination is an ongoing process throughout the whole course. The exact forms for the examination vary, and is a matter for each individual instructor to decide upon, but typically, grades are based upon a couple of exams, a number of writing assignments, and partaking in lecture activities, such as labs or classroom discussions. Classes are generally mandatory.

Such a system of continuous evaluation is of course necessary when it is understood that essentially all students should pass. Failing grades are rare. In practice, any student who does his or her work – who completes all assignments, who partakes in all exams, who attends classes – will get a passing grade, even if he or she has not really grasped the material. In practice then, grades D and C, and perhaps also B-, seem to be allotted those students who simply do their job, while B and A are reserved for those who really learned something.

Bill Standish, chair of the Physics Department, told me that he sometimes warns students who want to go to Europe a year to study physics, because of the differences in grading cultures. He says that American students are not used to a system where grades almost exclusively depend on final exam results. They often do not take enough responsibility for their studies during the course if there is no continuous grading, and so they often fail, or get poor grades. This, of course, is true of our Swedish students as well – many of them do not take responsibility for their studies when the exam is still two months ahead. But in Sweden we generally do not care so much about it: we fail them, and they have to redo the exam at a later point. At Skidmore College this is not a possibility – failed students would have to retake the full course.

How Does an American Physics Major Compare to a Swedish?

As already mentioned, the students are encouraged to take a wide variety of courses. They do not focus on just one discipline, as is the case at most Swedish universities. One may well ask if and how such a system works when it comes to a subject such as physics, which is highly specialized, requires a lot of mathematics, and where advanced courses often have a lot of other courses as prerequisites. The requirements for the physics major (Bachelor of Science in Physics) at Skidmore are essentially one full semester of mathematics, and two and a half full semesters of physics. The required physics courses include General Physics I and II, Foundations of Modern Physics, Advanced Theory and Methods in Physics Research, Mechanics, Electricity and Magnetism, Quantum Mechanics and a Senior Research Project. In addition a physics major has to take at least two additional more specialized physics courses, such as Statistical Physics or Optics. (Each of these courses corresponds approximately to 7.5 points in the Swedish system.)

This is clearly less than the requirements for a Swedish Bachelor of Science in physics, which is essentially three years (6 semesters) studies of solely physics and mathematics. The fact that American students enter college one year earlier than Swedish students enter university, seems to make it even worse, since, presumably, this implies that they cover less physics in high school. However, this is not necessarily so. The American high school system provides more individual choice than the Swedish, and skilled students can often cover the course material at a higher pace, and proceed to more advanced subjects. For example, one high school student told me that they were learning about vectors and matrices in the mathematics course – concepts that I myself was not introduced to until my first semester at the university. On the other hand, the quality of the education varies a lot from school to school – the high school system is not as standardized as in Sweden – and some students may enter college with very poor knowledge of physics and

mathematics. Therefore, the first courses in physics at college, are on a somewhat lower level than the first courses in physics at Stockholm University.

Let us return to the crucial question: Is an American Bachelor of Science in Physics from a liberal arts college comparable to a Swedish Bachelor of Science in Physics? Perhaps not in all respects. The American Bachelor of Science may lack some fundamental knowledge about how the spherical Bessel functions enter the quantum mechanical solution of a hydrogen atom, how to prove the Riemann-Lebesgue theorem in Fourier analysis, or some fundamentals of programming in LISP (or some other computer language that they will probably never use). They may never have programmed an electronic chip, and they may not have solved an equation numerically with the Runge-Kutta method.

I think that, in Sweden, we often overestimate the value of a thorough education limited to a single subject, covering all possible aspects of it. We do not recognize that human knowledge and skill most often is very specialized: people have the knowledge that is needed for their daily activities or thoughts. People tend to forget things that are not immediately relevant for what they are doing or thinking. What good is it to have a thorough physics education when you only remember half of it? A molecular spectroscopist will probably never need to use any Green's functions, and a string theorist will probably never have to know the workings of an operational amplifier. Even if they learn these things, during their education, they will almost certainly have forgotten everything about it ten years later. Perhaps their education should have been focused on more relevant things then.

Let us turn the question around: Is a Swedish Bachelor of Science in Physics comparable to an American Bachelor of Science in Physics from a liberal arts college? The American liberal arts student gains a lot of knowledge from other fields – fields that actually interest her, and that she, consequently, has higher odds of actually remembering for years to come. This other knowledge, not least from the humanities, may actually benefit her physics career, simply by widening her imagination. Another area or skill where the Swedish Bachelor of Science probably falls behind her American sister, is writing, and the ability to express oneself. This is something that is stressed in all disciplines at liberal arts colleges: writing assignments are abundant. It is recognized that such skills are important, whatever academic discipline or position one may end up in.

The Logic behind Course Requirements

I am not saying that we, in Sweden, should abandon our thorough academic education in physics or in any other discipline. But I do think that our current system is far too rigid. Departments should allow students to pursue their own interests, even if it is within other fields. A student that takes a course just because she has to, will probably not remember much of its contents some years later. So what was the point in forcing her to take the course? I also think that we often are too rigid when it comes to formal prerequisites. As we all know, and have experienced, the fact that a student has taken a certain course and passed the exam, is by no means a guarantee that she knows very much about its contents. On the other hand, a dedicated student may well have gained the required knowledge on her own, without taking the required course.

This point is even more relevant for courses in the humanities, where knowledge often is easier to acquire on one's own than is the case, for example, in physics. And yet, the rigidity and insistence concerning formal prerequisites can, in some cases, be stupendous, as if people are afraid to admit that it is possible to gain the specific knowledge in any other way than by taking their own courses. I think that this insistence on formal prerequisites in Sweden can be traced back to the unfortunate misconception that all students have the same capabilities in all areas, combined with a mis-aimed Swedish equality principle: no one should be allowed to progress faster than anybody else.

College Expectations on Faculty

In order to get a permanent teaching position at the college – a tenure position – one has to fulfill requirements within three areas:

1. performance as a teacher
2. achievement as a scholar
3. contribution to the welfare of the college community

These criteria also reflect what qualities are generally valued at the college, and there definitely is some pressure – both from the college administration, and among faculty members themselves – on each faculty member to perform well in each of these respects. Most important, though, are the teaching skills:

“no degree of excellence in scholarship or artistic achievement, no record of unusual productivity will compensate for unsatisfactory teaching” (From the Faculty Handbook describing the criteria for teaching positions at the college.)

Both the other requirements – scholarship and service for the college – tend to be motivated in terms of their beneficial impact on the educational environment at the college:

“Skidmore expects its faculty to be active in the profession because scholarly pursuits revitalize teaching” (Again from the Faculty Handbook.)

This focus on pedagogical skills is to be expected: after all, the main income for the college is tuition fees.

The teaching load is high, usually five courses per year, which means around nine hours in the classroom a week. In addition to this there is the grading of homework assignments and midterm exams. There is usually not much time left for pursuing research, or contributing to the college community, and most teachers struggle hard to find a balance between these commitments. One common solution is simply to defer the research to the summer vacations or the sabbatical every seventh year. Despite the high teaching load, and the difficulties to find enough time to pursue one's own research, most teachers still prefer being at a college, than at a big research institute. They consider the interaction with students a very important aspect of their professional life, and they are

proud of their teaching efforts. Teaching is not something secondary, that just steals time and energy from research – a view far too common among teachers at Swedish universities.

The definition of what counts as research or scholarship is broader than in Sweden:

“[Scholarship] denotes not only original research ... but also work that crosses disciplinary boundaries toward integrating knowledge, studies that bridge theory and practice in applied fields, and work that recognizes existing information in creative ways or interprets it for students and nonspecialists, be they colleagues or laypersons.” (From the Faculty Handbook)

Hence, popularizing research, reformulating known results, or engaging in projects which integrate various research fields, are all activities that could count as scholarship, apart from the number of publications in journals. In practice, though, I think that the latter still is considered as the main signature of a good scholar.

As mentioned, the rationale for having scholarship as a requirement for promotion and permanent positions at the college, is that research is believed to enhance and invigorate the teaching qualities. I think this is very true: in order to be a good and dedicated teacher one has to constantly challenge one's own mind, acquiring new knowledge and understanding of one's field. However, it is not at all clear that the number of publications is a relevant measure of such attainments. Indeed, in highly specialized fields such as physics or mathematics, the cutting-edge research usually is very far from the material covered in the classroom, and so there might well be better and more relevant ways to keep one's mind invigorated than to publish research papers, as is also recognized in the quote above.

I have been told that the college administration has the intention to increase the requirements for research and scholarship among faculty. I hope that, in doing so, they will retain the broad definition of scholarship just described. Otherwise, they may end up creating the same mental environment that is so harmful in Swedish higher education (and probably even at many American universities) where teaching is generally viewed as a second rank activity.

Evaluating Teaching Skills

In Sweden it is sometimes claimed that teaching skills cannot be evaluated. This is then used as an excuse for relying primarily on research qualifications when hiring new faculty. Therefore, I think it is of some interest to see how teaching skills are defined and evaluated at Skidmore. Let us look at the definition first (again, from the Faculty Handbook).

“Successful instruction ... encompasses skills that fall into three overlapping categories: (1) course management and design, (2) classroom manner, modes of presentation and delivery of course materials, and (3) knowledge and mastery of one's subject.

(1) Specific evidence of effective course management might include care in the selection of texts and shaping of syllabi; thoroughness and fairness in evaluating student work; adherence to high standards; thoughtful class preparation. (2) Evidence of effective modes of delivery might include organized presentations; a contagious enthusiasm for one's subject; an ability to foster creativity; skill in generating discussions leading to central insights or in funneling impromptu comments toward the same end; ... receptivity to the expression of student views both as contributions and as a source of discovering points of confusion ...”

There is no hard measure when evaluating teaching skills analogous to, for example, number of publications. It may also be hard to rely solely on letters of recommendation when trying to evaluate the pedagogical qualities of a potential new faculty member. However, the American tenure track system allows the college to see how teachers work and fit in at the college before hiring them. When working together with someone, it is not difficult to evaluate him or her according to the mentioned criteria. Many of these criteria concern qualities that are apparent outside the classroom, and also, at Skidmore, it is not unusual for faculty members to attend each other's lectures. People generally know who among their colleagues are dedicated and skilled teachers, and who are not.

Still, for the assessment of teaching qualities when considering continued hiring of a faculty member, the college relies most heavily on student evaluations. Therefore, let us discuss these next.

Course Evaluations

After each course, all students have to fill out two different forms, one that is specific for each department, and one that is common for the whole college. The procedure is much more strict than what is usual in Sweden, and there is a lot of administration around it: both type of forms are administrated by the department secretary, who prepares envelopes with the correct number of copies for each class; the teacher is supposed to leave the classroom while the forms are being filled out; the students must sign the evaluations (although the signatures will be removed, and the evaluations are strictly anonymous); the forms are collected and summarized by the department secretary; the teacher does not receive any results from the evaluations until all grades are submitted.

Let us first discuss the first of the two forms, the one common to all courses. Surprisingly little information is gained from this form – especially in consideration to the amount of administration just mentioned. There are only three items on it: the students should estimate on a five point scale how much they learned from the course, the general quality of the teaching, and the overall quality of the course. No explanations or comments are requested, or even allowed for. My guess is that a student seldom or never gives very different gradings for the three questions, and if he or she did, it would not be clear how to interpret that anyway, since the questions are so similar, and there is no room for explanatory comments. Thus, very little information is actually conveyed through these forms.

I have understood that these evaluations are used primarily as a “red flag”: if a majority of the students are disappointed with a certain teacher it will show in these evaluations, and the administration then can look further into the issue. I have also been told that there has been a lot of discussion about what questions to include in these forms, and the present three questions are what the faculty, after much debate, has been able to agree on.

However, it does seem to me like a tremendous waste of time and paperwork. (And, by the way, all of the faculty and students that I have talked to about this agree.) A common evaluation form like this could serve several other purposes apart from being that red flag signaling problems. It could be a way to compare different departments in various respects. It could also be used to evaluate to what degree students feel that the courses actually provide them with any of the services that the college promises in its brochures and on web pages: Do they learn critical and creative thinking? Do they find the teachers available outside class? Here are some other examples of questions that could be considered worth including in such an evaluation form:

- How many hours of studying *on your own* outside class did you put into this course, for each classroom hour?
- How many hours of studying or discussing *with your classmates* outside class did you put into this course, for each classroom hour?
- Thinking back upon your knowledge and perspectives before you took this course, how much did this course change the way that you think about the subjects covered?
- Thinking back upon your knowledge and perspectives before you took this course, how much did this course change your 'world view', that is, the way you look upon nature, society and life?
- Think back to situations when you asked the instructor something, during class or outside class. Estimate the percentage of cases when you felt that the teacher actually understood your question (or made efforts in doing so), and then was able to deliver a relevant answer.
- Would you recommend this course to your fellow students, with similar interests as yourself?

As mentioned, there is a second evaluation form, specific for each department. The one used at the physics department is, I think, fairly good. Apart from some questions on course attendance and preparation for class, the students are asked to grade the following items.

- The class sessions were valuable
- The text was useful
- The homework was helpful
- The lab work was worthwhile
- The tests were valid measures of achievement
- The instructor conveyed the course material effectively
- The instructor accepted/encouraged questions

- The instructor was knowledgeable about the subject matter
- The instructor stimulated student interest
- The instructor was available outside classroom
- The instructor graded student work fairly

The students are also asked to provide an overall grade of the course and of the instructor, respectively. And finally they are asked to comment on the instructor's strengths and weaknesses. (There is a similar form for laboratory sessions.)

I think that this grading form could be improved by leaving space for the students to comment their grades on the items listed above, especially when the grades assigned are not neutral. A grade without a comment is seldom useful.

Society and Culture

Role of the State in Sweden and in the United States

Some important differences between the Swedish and the American societies can be understood as consequences of the different roles of state and government in the two countries. In Sweden we have much more confidence in public institutions, and we are not as afraid as the Americans of the concept of a strong government. This, of course, has historical reasons. In Sweden, the general view of the role of state and government was formed during the last century, and has to do with the social democratic ideas of a Swedish “folk home” – the idea that the state should provide everything necessary for a reasonable life, such as free health care, free higher education et cetera.

The government and the public institutions never played that role of “a parent” in the United States. Here much more responsibility is put on the individual. People are free to succeed or to fail, and if they fail, the government will not be there to help them. As Larry Jones, president of the Institute for Humanist Studies put it: “In the United States, we are not so concerned with equality, as we are with freedom.”

The Importance of American Communities

I think that this lack of an overarching supporting state, forces people to form closer bonds in smaller groups. One of the most conspicuous aspects of this, is that the notion of *family* is much stronger in the United States than in Sweden. This is apparent in several ways. First, the commercials assume that everybody has a family, to a higher degree than in Sweden. It is not uncommon with tv-commercials ending with phrases such as “from our family to yours”. Second, in talk shows references to family life are abundant: no celebrity is ever interviewed without a reference to his or her family. And when I returned to Sweden just before Christmas, no one failed to tell me how nice it was for me that I then could celebrate Christmas with my family. (Which, by the way, *was* nice, but that is beside the point – in Sweden it would not have been stressed in this way.)

The avoidance of too much government in the United States, also explains the way in which the Skidmore *community* is emphasised. In Sweden, of course, I know that I am affiliated to the Stockholm University, and, more specifically, that I am working for the Physics Department. And, in a sense, I am of course loyal towards these – I like to think of the Physics Department at Stockholm University as being an important institution for education and research, and I would like to contribute to it becoming even better. But the sense of *community* at Stockholm University is nothing near to what it is at Skidmore. This becomes clear, for example, in emails to the faculty from the college administration, but also in emails from individual faculty members to all faculty, where the Skidmore community is often mentioned. As an example, let us look at a quote from a email from the President, Philip Glotzbach, where he thanks the partakers in a charity program “Skidmore Cares”:

“...we thank you for demonstrating the collective spirit, strength, and generosity of our Skidmore family. Our efforts will continue to make a tremendous difference in the lives of many local families for months to come. Congratulations on a job well done, and warmest wishes to you and your families for the holiday season.”

Suddenly being embraced in “our Skidmore family” strikes a Swedish mind as somewhat intrusive, and the references to its “collective spirit and strength” do not make the concept less worrisome.

The quote also illustrates the strong tradition of donations and charity in the United States. This too, of course, is a consequence of the lack of strong governance, and the distrust that people have in such. Whereas in Sweden, such support is provided by the Swedish government through our taxes, the American society relies on private donations and charity. The confidence that people have in public institutions is probably as low here, as the confidence that Swedes have in a system that relies upon private initiatives for charity and donations.

Busy Americans

I have the impression that Americans, on the average, are more busy than Swedes, or perhaps Europeans in general. That is, they do more things, and it seems that “to be busy” is one of the ingredients in their idea of a happy life. This also means that they focus a lot on efficiency and convenience. Key-words in tv-commercials are “easy” and “fast” – whether it concerns a cold-relieving drug or Christmas decorations.

Not surprisingly then, many Americans seem to be obsessed with issues of time management. This is a recurring subject both on television morning shows, and at the college. I attended one workshop on the subject, “Time and Priority Management”. The instructor, who is best described as a female Dr Phil, gave advice and presented simple models, on how to think about time and daily activities. The models were of the kind – common in popular psychology – that do not allow any criticism. All objections can be conveniently turned back on the person raising them; they are interpreted as symptoms of his or her own shortcomings. One woman did object, claiming that the proposed model was not applicable to her case. The facilitator took some decisive steps towards the objector's chair, put her hands on her shoulders, and told her that she had to take charge of her own life, and that it all was a matter of wanting a change.

I don't think that any such time management sessions will help. In the long run, they most probably make time issues even worse: they further increase the requirements on individuals to be efficient. The small pockets of extra time, that may temporarily be freed, will soon fill up with yet another activity. The only solution is to accept that one cannot do so many things. One has to drop some activity, duty or ambition. Which, in the end, also might mean a little less money. Unfortunately, this is probably an unacceptable conclusion for those Americans who have come to think of consumption and fervent activity as the meaning of life.

Cars and Suburban Sprawl

An important – and potentially fatal – aspect of American lifestyle, is its dependence on the car. The psychology of this dependence is founded long before the age of eligibility for driving. Since there are few buses or other public means of transportation (at least compared to European standards), children are completely dependent upon their parents in order to get to and from various activities, up to the age of 16. Then, when they at last get their driving licence, this is an important step in their detachment from their parents, and the car itself becomes the symbol of the newly acquired independence. It remains such a symbol for the grown-ups. And then they want larger cars. The size of the cars becomes like a peacock's tail: it doesn't matter that it actually is unpractical with large cars – the size and high cost have turned into qualities of their own. A big car has become the ultimate sign of independence and economic success.

In Saratoga Springs a new bus system had just been launched as I arrived in late August. There were four new bus lines, with reasonably frequent tours. The buses were clean and air-conditioned, and less expensive than buses in Stockholm (\$1 per trip). For the students and for all college employees the bus trips were free. Still, the buses were not used very much. It was mostly me and the students who used them – often they run completely empty.

Many persons at the college welcomed the buses: they hoped that more people would start to use them, so that they would continue to run. But few were prepared to use the buses themselves.

This is probably partly because the society is not well adapted to transportation by bus. The very structure of towns assumes that all transportation takes place by means of cars. The shopping areas – the malls – are mostly located at isolated areas outside the center of towns. In the words of urban sprawl critic James Howard Kunstler:

“the chief characteristics of suburbia, is its 'disaggregation' ... the disassembly of the organs of civic life, and then the consequent isolation of them, so that all the people live in one place, all the shopping occurs in another place, the offices are in a third place, the industrial stuff is in the fourth place, and all of it can only be accessed by cars.”¹

Also, in order for a bus system to work efficiently, it must be convenient to walk to and from the bus stops. This is not always the case in a country where the maintenance of sidewalks often is a responsibility of each individual house owner: a sidewalk can suddenly end or be unwalkable in front of a house where the owner didn't find it important enough to be paid for.

I was living at ten minutes walk from the campus (and the nearest bus stop), and in order to get there, I had to walk along a road with no side walks, and with only a little walking space at its shoulder. It worked pretty well during daytime, but when it was dark, and when the road was edged

1 J. H. Kunstler interviewed on the Humanist Network News webradio, www.humaniststudies.org/podcast, episode 25.

by banks of snow, it was harder. I can't think of any other industrialized country where pedestrians would have to face similar problems.

Religion

Whereas Sweden is one of the least religious countries in the world, the United States is one of the most religious of the industrialized countries: 81% of the American population identifies themselves as religious. Their beliefs are also surprisingly fundamentalistic – it is a very different kind of Christianity than the one that is represented by, for example, the Swedish church. Thus about half of the American population denies that man has evolved through Darwinian evolution, and three quarters of them believe in hell.²

When I first arrived in the United States, I saw something of a paradox in this: how could it be that a country so reliant on science and technology sustained such strong religious beliefs? How could it be that a population so focused on efficiency and rationality in everyday life, still was so irrational when it came to matters of belief?

I can't say that I now have understood the reason for this strong religiosity, but at least it does seem somewhat less paradoxical. First, the churches in the United States play an important social role, very different from, say, the role of the Swedish church. 45% of the population attends religious services once a week or more, and for a large part of these, the social aspect of it may be even more important than the religious content. As noted above, affiliation with groups and subcommunities is much more important in the American society than in the Swedish.

Second, in the American society there is a lot of pressure towards individual responsibility. That each person should be independent, able to cope with his or her own problems, is part of the American dream. Asking or expecting society to help is less accepted than in most European countries. In such a social climate the notion of a god probably becomes more relevant. It is hard to bear the full responsibility for one's life – and for the lives of the rest of one's family: the responsibility of choices, disappointments, failings. It becomes easier if there is a god to share the responsibility with. Also, the notion of a god may help to explain the large social differences in society. Why am I rich and healthy, while my neighbor is poor and sick? Well, God probably has some purpose with it all. Expressed differently: the concept of a god gives meaning and purpose to aspects of life which otherwise seem meaningless and arbitrary. Because of social gaps and poverty, there is a lot of room for such “arbitrariness” in the American society.

Third, the notion of a god – at least the American version of the Christian God – makes the difference between good and evil clear-cut. A naïve notion of such concepts can make life easier in certain respects. In that sense, a religious belief may actually fit well in, in a society that focuses precisely on efficiency – that things should be easy and fast. In a black and white world one does not have to spend as much time pondering, as in one where good and evil have no god-given

² Statistics from World Values Survey, 1999 (www.worldvaluessurvey.org)

meaning.

In order to find out more about religion, and how it affects politics in the United States, I contacted Larry Jones at the Institute for Humanist Studies. This institute promotes humanism in various ways, for example by grants, and by supporting other humanist organizations. They have a quite extensive educational website³, with courses related to humanism, they run a web magazine⁴ and a web radio⁵. Their office is situated in Albany, 50 km south of Saratoga Springs.

Larry Jones founded the Institute for Humanist Studies in the late 90s, and is also its president. I visited him at his office in Albany November 19 and made an interview with him about religion and humanism in the United States. A shortened version of that interview is included as an appendix. (A translated and fuller version will be published later this year in the Swedish magazine *Humanisten*.)

Larry had a very interesting point about the power of religion in the United States compared to most European countries. He suggests that, somewhat paradoxically, the separation between church and state in the United States made religion very powerful there, while, in Europe, people became less religious as a consequence of the state churches. This idea, as well as other interesting issues, is discussed and elaborated on in the interview in the appendix.

3 www.humaniststudies.org/education.html

4 www.humaniststudies.org/eneews

5 www.humaniststudies.org/podcast

Appendix

Interview with Larry Jones, President of the Institute for Humanist Studies⁶

November 19 2007, Albany

Sören: The United States is one of the most religious countries in the industrialized world. How come?

Larry: This is a difficult question. I think that part of the reason is that we never had a state religion. So we never had a religion that everybody could dislike. Religion in the United States, became very diverse, so that if you didn't like the church you were going to, you could go down the street, and you would find one more to your liking. This diversity made religion very powerful. Most of the European countries had state religions, and people were either with that religion or against it. It was hard to have a religious movement when you had one religion. And in this country we had just a plethora of religions that people could join. And I think, one of the reasons that this took place, was because of the Jeffersonian separation of church and state. And it is quite an irony, that the wall of separation kept government out of churches, and religion out of government, but it allowed religion to diversify into many different clones of itself. It became much stronger, I think, than if it had been one state religion that people had to either belong to or not.

S: Your hypothesis here are actually strengthened by the Swedish case, because in Sweden, until recently, we had a state church. And still, actually, 80 percent of the population are members of the state church. However, if you ask the Swedes if they are religious, you will find that only about 30 percent identify themselves as religious, depending on how you phrase the question. And even these 30 percent are very moderately religious compared to people in the States, I think. For example, if you ask them if they believe in hell instead, you will find that only around 10 percent do that, compared with over 70 percent in the states.

Now, why is it that Christian fundamentalists and the religious right in the States are so closely connected? If you just look upon what Jesus said, it is not obvious at all, whether it is politically closer to the left or to the right. If anything, it should rather be to the left, I think. I mean, Jesus is very radical in some respects.

L: Well, in the United States in the 60s, the trend was towards liberalism and freedom and free drugs, free sex. There was a tremendous counter-reaction by conservatives against this. They were afraid that the society would unravel with all these young people running around having sex and drugs. The religious elements were also against this kind of freedom and looked at it as ungodly behaviour and not pious. It became a conservative reaction to it. And in 1988 Pat Robertson ran for

⁶ This is a shortened version of the interview. If you are interested in having the full interview, please contact me at holst@physto.se

president. He actually won – I don't think he won New Hampshire – but he won one of the primaries, but then lost, fortunately, all the others. But he had a great many supporters from the religious right. And from this group he formed the Christian Coalition, which became a rather radical political arm of the religious right. This Christian Coalition found a way into the political process. The best way was into the Republican Party, not the Democratic Party, because most of the people concerned with the behaviours in the 60s were conservatives. So they took aim at the Republican Party, and infiltrated it, and took it over. And the result of that is the Bush-administration. It is a very religious theistic government that we have.

S: You spent some years in the 90s infiltrating the Christian Coalition. What did you learn about their tactics and political goals?

L: I was kind of surprised at how intensely they were trying to take over the political process. And they used kind of military terms: this was *a war* of ideas. And their mission was to take over the political apparatus of this country. In this area, in upstate New York, their strategy was to work on the local level. "Politics is local" was their mantra. They tried to get people interested in politics on the local level, not far-away issues of the federal government, but what's going on in our school district, what's going on in the mayor, and so forth. For example, they infiltrated the school districts, and then tried to change the curriculum. Now, these were the extremes. This is the Christian Coalition. Pat Robertson is an extreme fundamentalist. I am sure you have heard some of his more crazy statements. I recall a few years back, when a hurricane came up the coast, he had all his followers pray that it didn't come over his Virginia Hotel and complex. And the hurricane moved, and did not come over his place, and he said "See! Thank you for all the prayers!" And then I thought, well, what about all those other people that got hit by the hurricane. They didn't mention those poor people. But then, of course, he was one of those who said that 9-11 was the result of homosexuals and womens liberation, and every other liberal aspect of this country. He is really crazy.

S: I have been wondering: Bush is often mentioning God, but maybe this is just rhetorics. Would you say that religious belief really affect political decisions in the States, or is it just rethorics to attract the religious people?

L: Well, your question is, do politicians feel that it is important to appear religious to be successful politicians. In this country, that's true: you can never run for a political office, if you say you are an atheist. But I think many of the politicians really *are* religious. And I think Bush believes in religion very strongly. He believes this is a Christian nation, and it should lead the world, to the Christianity.

S: So you think that the fact that he is Christian actually affects the decisions?

L: Oh, yes, I think so.

S: How do people react when you criticize religion here? How are humanists perceived in the United States?

L: If you criticize religion you get a very aggressive reaction. Humanists feel that there should be no ideas immune from criticism. Even our own ideas should be subject to criticism. And, of course, this is how good ideas rise to the top, where they belong, and bad ideas work their way down to the bottom, by this process of arguments and criticism. This is so essential if you want to establish the truth. Religion is trying to say, you cannot criticize us, you cannot criticize religion. And we say, oh no, we feel all ideas are subject to criticism, including religion as well as our own ideas. But we are not against religion. We know people apparently need religion, and it serves a purpose for people. But when religion gets into the political arena, then it becomes a problem. Because, you cannot have a true democracy, or representative democracy, if it is a theistic government, especially in a diversified population, because the particular religion in power cannot represent other religions, or non-religious beliefs, well. At least historically they have not done that. So if you want to have a democratic government, you have to make that government secular to represent all the people in the country.

S: Some weeks ago I learned, that in the schools in the United States, they do not teach about other religions. I was surprised, because I thought that was the case everywhere, since in Sweden we teach about religions both in compulsory schools and in high schools. And I think that is very good, because, once you come to know about other religions in the world, singling out just one of them as your own seems less natural, and somewhat arbitrary. So I think that it's a great thing that we have this in Sweden. Maybe the course shouldn't be called religion, maybe it should be called knowledge of life-stances, or something like that, or cultural knowledge. But in principle I think it is a good thing to learn about religions in the world. Do you think that you should try to have that in schools in the States too? Would it be possible?

L: Yes, I think one of the problems with education in the United States is that people - students, young people - know very little about other religions. And so, they are very susceptible to assuming negative attitudes toward them. Because they don't know them. They don't know what their life-stances are, or the similarities – there is many similarities between the muslim religion and Christianity. You don't get a course in comparative religions until you get into college, perhaps. But I don't think this is happening very successfully when children are most susceptible, and that's in high school. And I think comparative religions, and this kind of thing, should be taught very much in high school, at that age.

S: I talked to some other people about this, and they thought that the parents would not allow teaching of religion at high school.

L: Yes, I think to a large extent that is true, unfortunately. Some parents would be glad to see that their children got a well-rounded education, but there would be a lot of resistance to teach, say, the

muslim religion.

S: Are there religious schools in the United States?

L: There is something that we call charter schools – the name comes from that they get a charter from the state to run the school. Charter schools are essentially public schools, but they don't have all the restrictions of a public school. Many of them are religious, but not all of them are. They can be focused on a specific teaching, and so on. There are perhaps less controls over them than public schools, less controls over the curriculum. The religious right is trying to establish their own charter schools. And Humanists in Florida recently started a charter school. It allows for anyone to be able to begin a charter school, even if it is quite a long process to get the permission. But I think this is a bad thing. I think that one of the things that was so very important in the United States were the public schools. It was the melting pot, the mixing pot, that made Americans out of the many different immigrants that came over. Because, they were all thrown in together, and they had a common experience, with a common language, and out of that they became americans. Now, if we have private schools, which are Christian, or denominational of some sort, or even ethnic, then we loose this mixing pot. To have isolated schools, religious schools or ethnic schools, doesn't give any kind of uniformity to the society. In fact, it is devisive, because if you are from that school you don't play with children from the other school, and you grow up with prejudices against people from other schools, or other religions. So it is quite damaging and devisive to our society. I am very much against it.

S: So, if I understand you correctly, in addition to the charter schools there are private schools that do not need any permission here?

L: Well, you may need *some* permission – I am not so well versed in that. But you can start a school, that's say Christian, and that does not let other students in. And you can essentially teach them the tenets of that faith, and inculcate in them these beliefs. They may have to live up to certain standards, or they may have to pass some tests, in English and mathematics, and things like that, but in general, as I said, they divide the society into ghettos of different religions and cultures, instead of mixing, as does the high school experience.

S: Earlier we were discussing why the people in the States are so religious. When I came here some months ago I was thinking a lot about this, but then I also started to think a little bit about why Sweden is so non-religious. Because, I realized, that may be a more relevant question. Perhaps Sweden is more of an exception, I don't know. And your suggestion that the state church actually is important here – I like that hypothesis very much. I have an other hypothesis that I would like to try on you. I think that one reason that people in Sweden are so non-religious may have to do with the political climate, and some political ideas during the 20th century. The dominating party in Sweden then was the Social Democrates. They had an idea, that they wanted to create what would be translated as a "folk home". That is, a home for all people. So they wanted all Swedes to be part of

this folk home. Their idea was that the state should provide everything that is necessary for a reasonable life. Like free health care, free education. Basically, the state should take care of you. So a quite extensive welfare system was introduced in Sweden. And the Social Democrats really succeeded in forming this atmosphere of a folk home for some decades during the 20th century. And I think that people in Sweden really felt safe, at least safer than in many other parts of the world. There was a general feeling that nothing can go wrong, because the state is there. And if something goes wrong, then the state will manage to take care of the situation. And maybe, in such a social atmosphere the idea of God was not so urgent. God became superfluous, because the state was there to protect you. And when I compare to the States... I mean here the state does not have that role – you put much more responsibility on the individual. And you also have much larger gaps between poor and rich. I mean, if you fail in the States, you fall much harder. The difference between failure and success in the states is huge. And that may make the concept of a god more psychologically important. What do you think?

L: Well, in the United States – we are not so concerned with equality, as we are with freedom. You are free to succeed or fail. And the government is not going to take care of you if you fail. But your hypothesis would suggest that perhaps only the poor in this country would be religious, the ones who are in danger of falling or failing or needing that social net, not the rich. And I don't think this is true in this country. Religion doesn't fall along economic lines – it goes through the society. If you are rich, you thank God you are rich. Christians believe that God wants us to be wealthy and do well. This is part of their tenets. Because of God you are rich and wealthy. So I think that goes against your hypothesis, at least in this country, it may have had a factor in Sweden.

S: Yes, I see your point, but I think that even if you are rich then... I mean, you see that there is a lot of poor people around. In some way this would seem arbitrary: why did I succeed, and why didn't they? I always felt that maybe this arbitrariness in life is perhaps scary to people. And what religion often does is to explain this arbitrariness, or take away the arbitrariness. Religion does not necessarily make things less frightening, right? Because, if you believe in the devil and in hell, it is certainly not less frightening, but it takes away the sense of arbitrariness. Why do some people fail, and some succeed? And why do some people die in meaningless car accidents? So maybe in this sense, even if you are rich, you are still faced with this problem of arbitrariness.

L: OK. Sickness, and you could die of a heart attack, or something, even though you are rich. But I think among the religious, the time spent on earth, is for really one purpose, and that is to get into *the right line*. The right line goes to heaven, and the wrong line goes to hell. And if you abide by the tenets of your religion, you will be in the right line. Whether you are wealthy or not. In fact, one of the tenets of Christianity is to give to the poor, to help the poor. So religion does have a role in helping the poor. And I said before that the government offers no help, but it does. There are social welfare programs going on to help the poor, but it is probably not as extensive as in Sweden. But I think that why religion has been so successful in this country, is that there are so many choices, because there was no state church.