

The Tutorial Program at Williams College
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My colleagues and I are grateful for the opportunity today to describe the Tutorial Program at Williams College.

I will give a brief overview of the program's history, scope, and operation. Bill Wagner will describe a History tutorial he has taught. We'll then hear from Sarah Bolton and Andrea Danyluk, who will discuss science tutorials at Williams. We're giving that subject special emphasis because the sciences are perhaps the area where it is least easy to imagine using the tutorial model systematically.

After our presentations, we'll be sure to leave a lot of time for your suggestions and questions.

At Williams—and, I'm sure—at your institutions too, we encourage students to be not passive consumers of knowledge, but active partners—with their teachers and fellow students—in the creation of knowledge. Our Tutorial Program is one of the most important ways in which we bring that challenge to students.

Let me say first, for the sake of clarity, what our tutorials are NOT. They are not independent study courses (which are usually one-on-one reading courses); they are not honors courses; and they are not required—though, as you'll hear later, it's pretty hard for students majoring in certain sciences to avoid them.

Here's what they ARE.

They are advertized in the annual catalog with regular course descriptions, and students register for them as they would for any other course. Some are broad in topic—"Poverty and Public Policy"; some are more narrowly focused—"Hitchcock and Psychoanalytic Theory."

Tutorial courses, with only a few exceptions, are limited to ten students. At the start of the term, the teacher divides the students into pairs, and those pairs meet with the instructor once a week—typically for sixty or seventy-five minutes.

In one week, one of the two students writes a paper, usually 4-7 pages long, on the material the teacher has assigned for that week. Sometimes the teacher specifies a particular topic for the paper; sometimes

the teacher simply sets the reading and leaves it to the student to fashion a topic.

The other student receives the paper in advance (usually the night before the tutorial meeting), and prepares a critique—typically 2-3 pages—of the paper.

The following week, the two students switch roles. Over the course of a twelve-week term, then, each student authors five or six papers, and five or six critiques.

Tutorial meetings usually begin with the paper's author reading the paper aloud. Thereafter, the other student reads the critique, and then general discussion ensues.

Almost all faculty members end each tutorial session with an oral commentary on how both students did that week, offering suggestions for improvement in the following week. Some faculty collect the papers, marking them up—and grading them—as they would papers in a regular courses; others give all their comments orally in the tutorial session.

What I've just described is the basic model of a Williams tutorial, but that model gets adapted in various ways to suit the needs of different disciplines. Sarah and Andrea will be describing later some of the particular ways in which this model gets adapted in the sciences.

Our Tutorial Program started in 1988—and from that year, until about 2000, we offered roughly 20-30 tutorial courses each year. The faculty who taught tutorials were almost embarrassingly enthusiastic about them; many said they were the most satisfying teaching experiences they ever had.

Students, too, reacted very positively. In a late-1990s survey of alumni who had taken tutorials, 80% said they were the most rewarding courses they had taken at Williams, and the ones that had had the greatest long-term impact on their educations.

So by the time we undertook a comprehensive review of the College's entire curriculum in 2000-2001, tutorials were already a success story at our institution. That curricular review led to various new initiatives, but one of the most important was the faculty's decision—by a vote, amazingly, of 81 to 19 percent—to dramatically expand the Tutorial Program. The expansion was to have two key features: first, to double the number of tutorials offered each year; and second, as part of that growth, to begin offering some tutorials designed primarily at first-year students and sophomores. Until 2001, almost all tutorials were at the 300- or 400-level of our curriculum, aimed principally at juniors and seniors, and often at majors in particular disciplines.

Blessed with a healthy endowment, we've achieved these goals over the past five years. In the current academic year, we are offering 62 tutorials. One-third are at the 100- or 200-level, intended primarily for sophomores and first-year students; two-thirds are at the 300- or 400-level, intended primarily for juniors and seniors. In the past two years, virtually every department or program at Williams has offered at least one tutorial—and some, many more than that.

In the past few years, the average enrollment per tutorial has been between eight and nine students. Some tutorials draw only a few students, but 70% of them recently have drawn eight or more students.

In the class that graduated from Williams last June, 51% of the students had taken at least one tutorial course, and 21% had taken more than one.

Tutorials continue to be highly rated by students. The course evaluation scores for tutorials—especially in the key category of “educational value”—are notably higher than those for non-tutorial courses. Our Admissions Office reports that the opportunity to take tutorials is a significant factor for many students in deciding to attend Williams.

As we all know well, tutorial teaching is an expensive form of education. The expansion of our program has been made feasible by the College's decision—taken around the same time as the curricular review—to increase the size of the Williams faculty by roughly 15%. That increase has made it possible for us to offer more small courses like tutorials.

But the program's expansion has not been underwritten only by a larger faculty. Some departments have converted courses with traditionally low enrollments—once offered as small seminars—into tutorials, thus increasing the number of tutorials without any new costs in terms of finances or faculty time.

I want to mention two practical steps the college has taken to encourage departments and individual faculty members to offer students.

[1] When we were expanding the faculty a few years back, our Committee on Appointments and Promotions (which allocates faculty slots) made clear that it would be most sympathetic to requests from departments that were committed to advancing the various new curricular initiatives—tutorials included—that the faculty had voted to support in 2001.

In allocating new faculty, then, we made what we call—for lack of kinder term—tutorial “contracts” with many departments, allowing them to

grow in exchange for a promise to offer a specified number of tutorials every year. My own department, for example, was allowed to grow, but is expected to produce a minimum of four tutorials each year—an obligation we're happy to meet. Compliance with all such contracts is monitored each year by the program director and the Dean of Faculty's Office.

[2] We offer faculty the opportunity to apply for \$4,000 summer stipends to develop new tutorial courses for the following year. We are fortunate to have an endowed fund to support this initiative, and we are able to fund most applications for summer stipends. In the past few years, we've provided 15-20 stipends annually.

In their presentations, my colleagues will talk about some of the educational pleasures—and challenges—that teachers and students encounter in tutorials, but I'd like to say a brief word about why I relish the chance to teach them.

Some are obvious. Tutorials help students improve their writing and argumentation skills, since every week their work is being scrutinized in rigorous detail by a teacher and a fellow student, who are constantly holding them accountable for the extended implications of what they write and say.

Tutorials provide students the opportunity to grow in an area that American higher education, in recent decades, has too much neglected: The development of oral skills—whether in presenting their prepared papers; or in offering oral critiques of their partners' work; or in adjusting quickly to the flow of a discussion in which they are expected to participate actively.

They provide students the chance to learn the skill of giving serious, constructive criticism to a peer—a hard thing to learn, and one they're usually not especially good at in the early weeks of a tutorial.

Some other advantages are less tangible, but no less important. Tutorials allow students to forge deeper intellectual bonds with each other; indeed, many of my students report that their tutorial partners became a crucial colleague in their educational development, both during the course and afterwards.

As importantly, tutorials forge deeper intellectual—and often personal—bonds between faculty members and students. By the end of a tutorial, we know not only what a student thinks, by how he or she thinks—what his or her characteristic mode of approaching a subject or issue might be. That knowledge can become the basis of a deeper, more fruitful advising relationship with a student—not only in discussing later courses they might take, but in considering a choice of careers after Williams.

These are, for me, some of the pleasures of teaching tutorials. I'll end by mentioning one of the challenges. When colleagues ask—"What's the hardest thing about teaching tutorials?"—I have a simple answer: We have to learn to shut up. Faculty members don't like to shut up; we went into this business because we like to explain things, and to help students savor all the complexities of the topics we have mastered.

But to be a good tutorial teacher, I think, we have to learn to shut up—at least for some significant part of the session, and then to intervene mostly to ask questions rather than announce answers. We have to let students accept the challenge of finding their way through the material; of developing a vocabulary and framework for assessing it; and of fashioning their own stance toward the material. We need to accept that this process won't always be smooth, or lucid, or efficient, but it is valuable nonetheless—no, it is valuable for that very reason.

The core of tutorial teaching, I'd say, is to trust our students—and trust them enough to be quiet.