

## THE FACULTY

### Me and My Professor

Williams College expands its Oxford-style tutorials,  
changing the role of professors

BY SCOTT SMALLWOOD



PHOTOGRAPHS FOR THE CHRONICLE BY WILL WALDRON

*In a tutorial on electromagnetic theory, the two students in the class go over the answers to a lengthy problem set while the professor, Kevin M. Jones, asks for explanations.*

WILLIAMSTOWN, MASS.

LEGEND HAS IT that long before James A. Garfield became president of the United States, he uttered these words about his former teacher at Williams College: "The ideal college is Mark Hopkins on one end of a log and a student on the other."

The aphorism is known throughout higher education, but here at Williams, it has almost mythic significance. The student bar just off campus is called The Log. A current exhibit at the college's art museum features a massive sculpture of Mark Hopkins, the renowned 19th-century Williams president, sitting on that famous log.

In the age of distance education and large lecture classes, Garfield's words focus on the fundamental teacher-student

relationship. For the past 15 years, professors here thought they were recreating a bit of that old-style log magic through their tutorials program — courses based loosely on the tutorials at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge that pair one student and one professor. At Williams, the model is two students with one professor.

The program, inspired in part by Williams's Oxford program, which sends 25 students a year to England, was born in the late 1980s in an attempt to foster personal relationships between students and teachers, improve students' speaking skills, and teach them about making and criticizing an argument. Then, during a curriculum-reform debate last year, Williams professors overwhelmingly agreed to expand the

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program, doubling the number of tutorials to about 60 a year. Tutorials already were an unusual facet of a Williams education, but relatively few students took them, worried in part that they would be too difficult. The faculty did squelch the idea of requiring every student to take one, but proponents believe about two-thirds of students will now enroll in at least one tutorial, and they hope to eventually have 600 of 1,900 students on the campus taking them each year.

At a time when every institution is searching for a way to distinguish itself, the college has decided to make the tutorials a signature program and market them as part of a more personalized curriculum.

Here’s how the tutorials at Williams work: Two students — one presenting a paper, the other critiquing it — spend an hour each week with a professor. Unlike independent study, reading lists, problem sets, and assignments are part of the agenda. If all goes well, the professor stays quietly in the background.

## NO INTERRUPTIONS

On a fall afternoon in James B. Wood’s popular tutorial on World War II, the history professor begins the class by announcing that week’s topic: the atomic bomb and the end of the war. Then he stays quiet. One student reads his eight-page paper that tries to answer whether dropping the bomb was the right decision; the other offers an initial critique, and they have a far-reaching conversation about the atomic bomb and the end of the war. Mr. Wood’s most notable movement in the first half of the class is to take the phone off the hook so it won’t interrupt the students. In the second half, he leads the discussion a bit, asking some pointed questions as the students form and reform their theories regarding the bomb.

“The ethical aspects were imposed on the bomb after the fact,” argues David Riskin, a sophomore, who is offering the critique this day.

John S. Linehan, a senior philosophy major and the paper’s author, agrees that some of the later criticisms of the bomb couldn’t even have been envisioned at the time. “It was such a novel war in nearly every respect,” he says. “Almost throughout the whole thing, they were improvising.”

Mr. Wood interjects. Sure, he says, the military considerations must be examined. “But atomic weaponry was qualitatively different,” he says. “Shouldn’t somebody at the time be

asking the hard questions?”

After the students leave, Mr. Wood says he loves the intense experience of the tutorial method, which he’s been doing for years now. “In a way,” he says, “it’s preserved my love of teaching.”

The history tutorial looks a lot like you might imagine — professor in tweed jacket; cramped, book-lined office. But Williams runs the same type of course in the sciences. In fact, all of the 400-level courses in the physics department are now taught as tutorials.

In Kevin M. Jones’s tutorial on electromagnetic theory, the students don’t offer papers but take turns at the chalkboard, going over the answers to a lengthy problem set. Mr. Jones leans back in his chair, nodding his head and occasionally asking for more details. At one point, his suggestion provides the breakthrough. “That explains our problem,” says one of the students.

The work is the same that the students would do in a seminar version of the electromagnetics course, but in the tutorial they have to really know it, they say. You can’t stand in front of your professor for an hour and fake it.

## THINKING ABOUT THE SUBJECT

Nearly everyone involved in the tutorials at Williams loves them. The students, while maintaining that tutorials are harder than their regular courses, often say they’re the best courses they take. For their part, professors enjoy the intense, personal nature of the class and the chance to worry more about the ideas than class dynamics.

“In most classes, I’m not actually thinking about the material,” says Thomas Kohut, a professor of history and now dean of the faculty. “I’m thinking about moving the class from one point to another. And afterward, I’m exhausted. I’m never exhausted after a tutorial. In the tutorial, I’m thinking like a historian. I’m not thinking about running the class.”

Others get great ideas that spur their research. Mr. Wood is working on a book, *How Japan Could Have Won the War*, that grew directly out of his tutorial conversations. And Stephen Fix, an English professor and director of the tutorials program, says the tutorials taught him how to be quiet. “It’s hard to keep yourself from stepping in,” he says. “In some ways, it’s the hardest thing: to trust that the hour will unfold without your aggressive management.”



While each session has just two students, the tutor officially has 10 students per semester. The professor separates them into five pairs and meets separately with each group. That means five hours a week in the same class — more than most courses — but professors have to do little preparation other than creating the course and writing the syllabus. “I don’t need a lecture prepared,” says Will Dudley, an assistant professor of philosophy. “Even in a seminar, if no one wants to speak, I have to talk. In the tutorial, they don’t have the option of not talking.”

Williams President Morton O. Schapiro, a strong supporter of tutorials, points to the relationships fostered in such a close-knit environment. An economics professor who has taught “The Economics of Higher Education” as a tutorial, Mr. Schapiro says these types of personal connections are at the heart of the small liberal-arts college.

The president tells of a time last fall when he was watching a soccer game and happened to be sitting near a psychology professor. “Who are you cheering for?” he asked.

“That’s my tutorial student,” the professor replied.

#### STUDENT INVOLVEMENT

That student-faculty interaction was one of the reasons David Riskin came to Williams in the first place. A sophomore

who plans to major in international relations, he signed up for Mr. Wood’s World War II tutorial last fall because “this is what I wanted out of my college education,” he says. The workload was heavy — about 600 pages of reading and a paper each week — but the course, he says, was “one of the best academic experiences I’ve had.”

His partner for the tutorial was Mr. Linehan, who has taken two Williams tutorials and half-a-dozen others last year at Oxford. Mr. Linehan says the tutorials helped him mature and allowed him to form friendships with professors. “Through the whole American system of education you’re force-fed information,” he says. “That may not mean it’s easy, but it’s there in front of you. With the tutorials, you’re very much on your own. You have to be more creative and rely on your own resources.”

In students’ course evaluations, tutorials outrank other upper-level courses in their “educational value,” and a 1997 survey of alumni who took tutorials found that 80 percent regarded the tutorial as the most valuable of their Williams courses.

As part of the tutorials expansion, Williams plans to create a number of sophomore-level tutorials. Most tutorials are now 400-level courses, usually taken by seniors. Proponents hope that offering students such courses earlier will help them throughout their college careers and allow them to develop



*Stephen Fix, an English professor who directs the tutorials program, shows off a sculpture of the educator Mark Hopkins and the fabled log, the model for personalized instruction.*

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deeper relationships with faculty members at an earlier point.

“Moving it to the sophomore level is going to be a very big change that will reverberate throughout their work at Williams,” says Laurie Heatherington, a psychology professor and former chairwoman of the committee on educational policy. “That sophomore who was in a tutorial will be a very different junior the next year.”

There are downsides. Even tutorial-lovers acknowledge that it’s not the best format for every course. “It’s just another pedagogic arrow in the quiver,” says Francis C. Oakley, a former president of Williams and now professor emeritus of history.

The format can be seen as risky because much of the responsibility is given to the students. “The burden is on their shoulders to make it good,” Mr. Oakley says. “And the burden is on the faculty member to keep his mouth shut.”

Mr. Dudley, the philosophy professor, has seen that in action. “If the students are well prepared and on, it can be great,” he says of his tutorials. “But pairings where the students aren’t as sophisticated don’t work as well. It’s sink or swim.” Mr. Dudley allows his students to tell him who they don’t want to work with before he creates the pairings.

Even professors who like the tutorials may decide it isn’t the right format for them. Mr. Kohut calls his tutorials “without a doubt, the single-best teaching experience I ever had.” But after teaching the course three times, he stopped. “I had to concede that there’s a part of me that likes being center stage,” he says. “In the tutorial, they’re on stage. Narcissistically, I think as professors we want to be the directors.”

Mr. Schapiro, the president, wasn’t entirely pleased with the way his first tutorial went. He sought out advice over the summer, and he says his second try was better as he became more adept at guiding the discussion without controlling it. But he acknowledges that teaching a tutorial is hard. “You give

up control,” he says. “The students run the damn thing. I’m not trained to give up all that control.”

Another challenge is that a substantial expansion of tutorials will require more faculty members. Williams plans to add about 20 new faculty positions, and Schapiro says departments vying for those new people will have to show how they’re supporting the push for more tutorials.

Are tutorials just another program that only rich, elite, liberal-arts colleges can afford? Can any place other than Swarthmore or Amherst learn from Williams’s experience? Most professors probably would say, “No.” But others, including Mr. Schapiro, suggest that many other institutions could duplicate the Williams model, though he acknowledged that the focus on teaching at a liberal-arts college makes it an easier sell to the faculty. “But there are plenty of research universities who might have one seminar with 10 students,” Mr. Schapiro says. “They could break them up and let the students run them.”

At Williams, the debate over expanding the program has prompted more faculty members to come to Mr. Fix to suggest topics, and the college offers a few thousand dollars in course-development money to professors who create new tutorials. But perhaps, more than the money, the interest stems from what Mr. Wood, the history professor, says of his tutorial: “This is the essence of what a college course should be.”

During his tutorials on the second floor of Stetson Hall, Mr. Wood leaves the door open because his small office, bulging with books, gets stuffy. But last fall, when a colleague moved in nearby, Mr. Wood was concerned about the noise. One day, Mr. Wood ran into his new neighbor in the mail room, and asked whether the sometimes-boisterous conversations during his five tutorial sessions each week were bothersome.

“Oh no. Not at all,” came the response. “I like the sound of learning.”