

Tales from Sabbatical I: Planning your leave

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Abstract

This *Matter of Opinion* article is the first of three in a “Tales from Sabbatical” series focusing on sabbaticals in academia with perspectives before you go, during the sabbatical, and once you return. This piece discusses some of the reasons why you would choose to go on sabbatical in the first place, the potential impact on personal and professional life, and logistics for planning.

“You academics sure have a sweet gig – working whenever you want while the rest of us are stuck to a nine to five.” was the envious response from my friend, a K-12 administrator, when I shared a video of me and my kids skiing in the fresh powder on a Wednesday morning. He’s not alone in his opinion. Many people imagine a professor’s job is cushy. Slip on your Birkenstocks and button up your Hawaiian shirt, or don’t. Teach a few classes a week, travel to conferences, hang out on beautiful, garden-like campuses working with optimistic youth pontificating the finer points of some theory or another insulated from reality.

Those of us who have worked in the ivory tower know that in actuality it’s a mixed bag. You do have unparalleled freedom and flexibility, working when you and want and on what interests you. Assuming you can convince a program manager to fund it. At the same time, the old joke about academics being able to work any 60 hours a week of their choosing hits a bit too close to home for comfort. Ironically, this op-ed was typed at 9pm at night while half-watching Netflix with my wife. There are certainly other challenges not limited to lagging pay relative to industry, bureaucracy, stress, deadlines, and fighting for funding. And let’s be honest, the last two years have been particularly tough with a worldwide pandemic, arguments over masks and vaccines, overnight online learning, and work-parenting from home. Shockingly, a survey of professors carried out by the Chronicle of Higher Education and Fidelity Investments found that 35% of tenured faculty are considering leaving higher education to pursue a different career![1]

Well, before you drop off your tweed jacket at Goodwill, clear your desk of your favorite red pens, or

cancel your membership to the American Society of Whatever, let me throw down the ultimate professoriate trump card; the sabbatical! In what can only be described as the mother of all job perks, the sabbatical is a time-honored, tradition in academia going back to the 1800s[2] where a faculty member is given paid time-off to take an intentional, lengthy break from their career in order to focus on scholarly and other creative activities. Sabbatical leaves are modeled after the ancient Israel *shmita* practice, literally “release”, where farmers would intentionally avoid agricultural activity every seven years as a sign of religious devotion.

Now, not all sabbaticals are created equal. The exact details of when you become eligible, how long the leave is for, what is expected of you etc are all going to vary widely depending on individual University policy. However, in general, most sabbaticals become available after six years of regular service and are offered for flexible time periods ranging from half a semester to two semesters with the expectation of a research report at the end.

I recently received notice that my sabbatical application was approved. My family and I will be spending 12 months in the United Kingdom hosted by Prof. Matthew Rosseinsky at the University of Liverpool. I’d like to share a few things that I’ve learned so far about the process. If the prospect of a sabbatical leave has lit your flame of curiosity, consider these questions as you plan your leave.

1. Why go at all?

Sabbaticals are not right for everybody and not all academics take them. I met a senior faculty member

who boasted about how they had never taken a sabbatical despite 30+ years of eligibility. A sabbatical is not a vacation and is certainly a lot of work. So, why bother?

One possibly counter-intuitive reason is that a break can actually do wonders to enhance research productivity! I don't think it's accidental that sabbatical eligibility coincides with the tenure calendar for most universities. Those who have been through that particular refiner's fire will recall the fever pitch of effort and stress that leads up to tenure. The prospect of a pause to catch your breath and focus on what made you fall in love with research in the first place is certainly an attractive option for faculty facing burnout.

Once faculty realize a frightening amount of their time is spent writing grants and reports, attending meetings, managing personnel, preparing (and formatting) manuscripts, teaching classes, and, worst of all, answering emails, they look back with fondness to their graduate school or postdoc glory days when their entire job was to learn new things and carry out interesting experiments. A sabbatical leave is a unique opportunity to recover time lost to these unfortunate time sinks and instead invest that time into other areas.

Have you been wanting to learn how to use that new software or simulation package? Is there a research group with a particular knack for synthesizing challenging materials? Is there a national laboratory facility conducting experiments that would take longer than a typical visit? Have you wondered about a puzzling characterization or analysis technique that could open doors to understanding? Now is the time to go and learn first-hand and then bring that skill home to your own research group, department, and university.

Sabbaticals are perfect times to ~~start new projects and~~ finish old ones. As you travel to other labs, universities, or industry partners you can identify complimentary skill sets, new problems and funding opportunities, and forge new partnerships and relationships. You can also catch-up on all those projects that got relegated to the back-burner. Have you always wanted teach a new class a bit outside of your current expertise, but you were terrified of the preparation to instruction time ratio given your already tight schedule? Maybe you've been considering writing that text book or invited review but wanted the time to do it justice. Even if you only refresh your current courses with all new homework and test questions, this would normally be a major undertaking! With each passing year the likelihood of old homework and exam questions being archived online increases due to sites like Chegg. I recently had to submit 125 copyright infringement take down requests! Here it's important to note that some people go on a sab-

batical for non-research purposes too. Some universities allow career-line teaching faculty to go on sabbaticals in order to visit other universities to adopt best practices or revamp curriculum.

Another great reason to take a sabbatical is to gain cultural perspective. As a young 19 year-old I was able to leave my home in the suburbs of Salt Lake City, Utah to spend two years as a missionary for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints in Argentina. Later, during my PhD program I spent three summers in China working alongside collaborators at Tsinghua University and the Shanghai Institute of Ceramics, Chinese Academy of Sciences. These experiences turned my world upside-down and I was never the same. Living in a new land with a new language and society challenged so many of my preconceived notions. They granted me empathy, understanding, and countless opportunities for growth. I came to love entirely new cultures and people. Even as adults, the possibility of changing our worldview through a sabbatical stay in a different culture is real and worthy of consideration.

2. How will a sabbatical leave impact your personal and professional life?

Faculty who oversee research groups will likely wonder how a sabbatical leave will impact the group. Will their students keep busy and productive? Will they get the help they need when they encounter problems? These are legitimate concerns and different groups will likely have different needs. Some students need more interactive mentoring than others. However, if there is a silver lining to the pandemic that we have just endured, it's that working remotely is not only possible, but it's less painful than we might have once imagined. Virtual meetings, even for important events such as thesis defenses, qualifying exams, and service obligations such as retention, promotion, and tenure votes can be carried out smoothly. Note – just because it's technically possible to attend meetings remotely, I plan on disconnecting from as many obligations as is possible so I can truly throw myself into the scholarly/creative activities for which the sabbatical was intended.

Recognize that a prolonged leave, such as a sabbatical, could impact your ability to oversee research projects as the Principal Investigator. Some funding agencies actually have strict policies for sabbatical leaves and expect you to appoint a PI in your absence. For example, in the National Science Foundation Proposal and Award Policies and Procedures Guide (Chapter VII, section 2B2a) dictates that "In the event the PI or co-PI will be disengaged from the project for a period

greater than three months (e.g., sabbatical leave) but intends to return, arrangements for oversight of the project must be signed and submitted by the AOR via use of NSF's electronic systems. This request must be submitted at least 30 days before departure or as soon as practicable after the prospective disengagement is known..." I plan on returning in-person once a quarter for a week to check in on my research group and otherwise relying on weekly video meetings with individual group members and collaborative research teams.

At the department and college level your absence will also impact teaching and service activities. Who will teach your classes and sit on your committee assignments? Most universities offer paid leave during a sabbatical, but at a reduced rate. For example, at the University of Utah a short sabbatical for a half-semester would receive full pay, but a longer sabbatical leave for a whole year is accompanied by a reduced salary of 80% of the annual base salary. However, most universities are 100% salary for a semester or 50% salary for an academic year. Your department chair will need to either have other faculty members step-in to fill teaching assignments, or hire adjunct faculty to help cover the teaching load temporarily. If you're like me, you might find it hard to let go of teaching that favorite course and handing it off to somebody else with the hopes that you'll get it back upon your return.

The impact on personal life can be far more challenging to navigate! Just because you can leave your career for a prolonged absence, doesn't mean your spouse will necessarily be able to. Sabbaticals in industry are still very rare although some large companies such as Google have just implemented sabbaticals for employees seeking to work at nonprofits. Leaving a spouse and kids behind during a sabbatical might be a possibility, but may not be ideal either. Ultimately, this decision may require compromise between competing interests.

My wife and I are currently raising four young kids ages 2 to 11 and when we told them about our sabbatical plans, they announced that we were trying to ruin their lives! They don't want to leave their friends, schools, church, activities, or their dog. Our neighbor kindly offered to watch our dog, but this was a major concern for a foreign sabbatical! They are afraid of change and don't know what to expect. Bringing them along means figuring out what to do with schools both here and abroad. For example, our students attend a Spanish immersion program which is hard to get into and leaving for a year means you are not guaranteed a spot upon returning. For our sabbatical, we will be based in Liverpool, UK so we have had to learn a great deal about the local schools and how to best integrate our kids into

the education system. Similar considerations have to be sorted out for hobbies such as music or sports. Do you try to make a seamless transition, or do you just decide to take a break for a time? Ultimately, we decided to pause many of these extracurricular activities and we are looking forward to a "reset" where we worry less about things and simplify our life's activities.



Figure 1: Scout is disappointed that she wasn't invited on our sabbatical.

Housing will require some consideration. Where will you live while you are gone and what will you do with your current housing? Of course, it's not required to travel to some far off land during your sabbatical. You could always stay at home and work on scholarly projects without the interruptions of meetings and teaching. However, that feels a bit like going through the trouble of finding a babysitter on date night only to stay in and order cheap take-out – if you've gone through the effort of applying for a sabbatical, you should make the most of it!

There are some useful resources we have learned about in preparation for our sabbatical. For example, there are some unique services for house swap/exchange/rent aimed at sabbaticals such as www.sabbaticalhomes.com. One colleague told me

how much she enjoyed reading through another professor's bookshelf for a few months. Faculty tend to live near universities, so renting to other academics could make sense from a commuting perspective. The timing of such exchanges is aided by the fact that many sabbatical leaves tend to begin and end near the same academic calendar points. Another advantage is that you can rent furnished housing so you won't need to store/buy as much furniture during the stay. We have our home listed on sabbaticalhomes.com right now and we will be staying in a rental in Liverpool that our host helped us find.

Finally, transportation requires some of these same considerations. What will you do with your vehicle while you are gone? What vehicle, if any, will you use at your host institution? If you decide to drive in order to have a vehicle, then the trip itself can be an excellent way to stop by colleagues, national parks, or other sites along the way. We are planning on selling one vehicle before we go, storing our other vehicle with family, and leasing a vehicle during our stay.

3. How to plan ahead for a successful sabbatical

This is my first sabbatical leave, but I did submit a sabbatical application previously and learned from that experience that planning ahead is important! While I will certainly have better advice to offer by the time I write parts II and III of the *Tales from Sabbatical*, I can already point to a few important suggestions for those seeking to plan their sabbatical.

First, you need to start planning well in advance of when you think you will want to go. Most schools will have sabbatical applications due in the fall with notification in the spring for those hoping to leave in the summer or fall. Something I learned after my first unsuccessful application was there are numerous funded fellowships you can apply for to help defray the cost of a sabbatical. Looking through these fellowship opportunities in advance and paying attention to timelines for application due dates and notification dates will help you make a compelling case for your sabbatical application. After all, a sabbatical application where the applicant has already been extended a prestigious fellowship is more likely to be accepted! Remember, most universities receive more requested sabbaticals than they can accommodate, so they have to award them based on some ranking criteria. Some fellowship programs to consider are the Fulbright Program (US), Royal Society (UK), Alexander von Humboldt Foundation (Germany), Arthur P. Sloan Foundation (US), Google's Visiting

Faculty program, National Endowment for the Humanities (US), American Association of University Women (US) and many, many others. Additionally, most universities also have a few named fellowships to support sabbaticals and some universities can offer stipends directly to visiting researchers or teachers.

If you plan on attending a foreign institute, be aware that your visit may require a visa which might necessitate a trip to an embassy. Sabbaticals can also sometimes require immunizations and possible testing such as for COVID-19, tuberculosis etc.

Contacting potential hosts early is also important. Even if you feel it's early on, a preliminary conversation with a potential host can help you zero in on a good fit and ensure ample time to apply for any and all funding opportunities. A good host has complimentary skills to your own and will be a good future collaborator. However, a sabbatical need not be in a single location. Several mentors I spoke to in preparation for my leave suggested that I plan on having a home base, but try to visit a number of different labs. Reaching out to these other labs to request an invitation for a seminar takes a bit of initiative, but is worth the effort. I was pleased to learn the UK materials informatics community were so open and inviting! They not only helped line up seminar and colloquium opportunities, but also provided letters of support for my Royal Society fellowship application, and helped connect me with other academics whose work was related to my own that I might have otherwise missed.

Getting ready for a sabbatical was a fair bit of work, but I think it will be worth it. Of course, there is the old saying that "no plan survives first contact with the enemy" and I'm certain I'll have a new perspective once the sabbatical is underway, but to hear about that you'll have to wait for Part II of *Tales from sabbatical*.

References

- [1] A. Tugend, On the verge of burnout: Covid-19's impact on faculty wellbeing and career plans (2020).
- [2] W. C. Eells, The origin and early history of sabbatical leave, *AAUP Bulletin* 48 (1962) 253–256.

Key considerations before your sabbatical	
Why go at all?	Avoid burnout Enhance productivity Learn new skills and techniques Finish old projects Start new projects
How will it affect your personal and professional life?	Remote research group management Temporary PI during your absence Impact on department teaching load Impact on department service load Reduced salary (50% for academic year is common) Impact on partner or spouse's career Impact on children's social and educational environment Long-term pet care, vehicle storage, and housing rental
How to plan ahead for a successful sabbatical	Start early Contact potential hosts to ensure good fit Apply for Fellowships Prepare goals and proposed research goals and plan Obtain passport, visa, and vaccinations if necessary Seek out housing options (www.sabbaticalhomes.com) Request seminar and speaking opportunities