



A Critical Examination of Sabbatical Application Policies: Implications for Academic Leaders

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Abstract

Sabbaticals have been identified as an important tool to help faculty remain current in their responsibilities. By having a dedicated break from traditional responsibilities, faculty members have self-reported rejuvenation and recommitment to their professional work. Institutional policies, however, are largely vague and lack measures to help guide faculty in their planned development activities. The current study was completed to describe what institutions expect from their sabbatical leave experiences. Findings indicate vague language and largely subjective interpretations of what sabbaticals are to be used for, prompting critical discussions of the effectiveness and accountability associated with these leaves.

Sabbatical leave experiences can be valuable tools for rejuvenating faculty, particularly in creative academic disciplines where mental creation is an important part of a faculty member's workload (Page, 2010). Yet, research is inconclusive as to the short- and long-term benefits of paid leave programs (Miller & Bai, 1997; Miller & Bai, 2006). Although faculty members taking sabbaticals typically report positive experiences and report that their change in academic duties has been beneficial (Benshoff & Spruill, 2002), these are typically self-reported outcomes or anecdotal commentary on the benefits of taking time away from a routine to gain a different perspective on what has become ordinary (Bai, Miller, & Newman, 2000).

There is a significant body of literature that supports the notion of taking time away from a professional routine to learn new skills or return to the workplace a better employee (Romano, 1995; Carr & Tang, 2005), yet there is a rising questioning about the cost effectiveness of sabbatical leaves. Notably, Louisiana (Blum, 2010), Iowa (Associated Press, 2010; Chronicle of Higher Education, 2010), California (Walton, Davison, Echeverri, Koller, Mahon, Takahashi, Murillo, & Cousin, 2007), and even historic debates in Colorado (Lively, 1993) have questioned the cost efficiency of sabbatical leaves. Although abuses of sabbaticals have garnered the majority of headlines, there are real problems associated with the high costs of providing sabbatical opportunities (June, 2009) and the growing sentiment that sabbatical leaves, while enjoyable and beneficial for the tenured faculty member, come at the exploitation of cheaply paid adjunct and special appointment faculty (Potter, 2010).

The current study was designed to look at sabbatical leave application processes and guidelines, and to better understand and describe what sabbaticals are attempting to do. By creating this baseline explanation of contemporary thinking about sabbaticals, better research can be conducted to determine whether or not sabbaticals are efficient and cost effective strategies for faculty development. Additionally, research of this nature will be helpful to academic leaders who attempt to improve their institutions by

investing in their faculty.

Background of the Study

A key to the Boening (1996) and the Meehan (1999) dissertation research was the selection of sabbatical participants and the assumption that sabbatical leave programs work in a transformative manner to alter the behavior of the faculty member. The fundamental contention is that the faculty member, or almost any employee, will benefit from a change in professional routine, particularly when given the opportunity to pursue either an in-depth study and development in one aspect of professional life, or the professional development to strengthen some component of professional responsibility (Kirk, Downey, Duckett, & Woody, 2000). From a practical perspective, this means that faculty members can focus on some aspect of their jobs, such as research or learning to make teaching relevant, and that these activities are important to helping the relevance of instruction and research (Carr & Tang, 2005). Similarly, there are intangible benefits to taking a sabbatical, such as improved morale and satisfaction within the workplace (Neil, 2003; Benschhoff & Spruill, 2002; Romano, 1995). Yet, when subjective measures using self-report data and perceptions of feelings are removed from sabbatical analyses, results have illustrated that research productivity declines (an average of 11% over three years) and teaching performance was less likely to be recognized as outstanding by the institution (Miller & Bai, 1997). These conflicting reports on the benefits of sabbaticals leads to the discussion of attempting to define and describe what, specifically, sabbaticals are intended to accomplish.

Although there are a number of guides to assist faculty in securing and implementing a sabbatical leave (Zahorski, 1994 is probably the most popular), the intention, as prescribed by the host university, has rarely been discussed or examined in either the popular or academic literature. The closest examination of the intent of sabbatical leave programs has been Sima and Denton's (1995) conference presentation that highlighted that sabbaticals are taken for the traditional, implied reasons of improving or enhancing teaching, research, and service, and that the typical product of a sabbatical is some form of written report.

A significant challenge to college administrators is how to measure the effectiveness of sabbaticals as a form of faculty development (Miller & Bai, 2003) while maintaining the developmental or renewal focus that many faculty see as the real use of an extended leave of this nature (Page, 2010). The failure of administrators to specify the use and results of a sabbatical program can potentially add to the confusion, public debate about, and legislative questioning of why college faculty might need, require, or benefit from a sabbatical leave (Miller, Murry, & Bai, 2007). Ultimately, without a clear objective that has some means of accountability (although not necessarily a quantifiable outcome), public and legislative discourse will continue to pressure the offering of sabbatical leaves to the extent that public funding for such leaves may well fall into question. This study is an initial attempt to understand why institutions offer sabbatical leaves and what institutions might hope to get from providing funding for these programs.

Research Methods

A content analysis was conducted on the sabbatical application and operation policies of 75 colleges and universities. Although the intent was to describe what is in place and being utilized in contemporary higher education institutions, the composition of the sample was derived from the spectrum of bachelors, masters, and doctoral granting institutions. One-third of the sample (n=25) came from public and private bachelor's degree granting institutions, one-third from master's comprehensive institutions, and one-third from doctoral research focused institutions. All institutions were selected from the 2010 Higher Education Directory (Burke, 2010) and then identified on the internet. Each institution was selected using a table of random numbers, and if sabbatical application guidelines were not identifiable, then the institution was replaced in the sample.

For each identified institution, the entire sabbatical policy was retrieved and printed during a two-week time period in late-July and early-August 2011. This time frame is important to the study as policy changes may have been made shortly before the start of the academic year, however the research team made the conscious decision to collect policies approximately one-month after the start of what is considered the fiscal year for many institutions (July 1), and, approximately one- to two-months after the end of the spring term for most institutions when policy changes, if any, would have most likely been completed.

Sabbatical policies were reviewed by members of the research team individually with individual notes forming a collective. This collective, making use of a broad constant comparison technique, identified specific categories of analysis (oversight, purpose, funding, approval chain, applications, and post-sabbatical reporting). Within each category, then, a content analysis was conducted on relevant material, both independently by the research team and then collectively.

Findings

Sabbatical application policies were not easy to find on many college and university websites. As indicated, the sample was selected using a table of random numbers, with replacement. A total of 164 institutions were ultimately reviewed online to identify 75 sabbatical application procedures with a distribution of 25 institutions at bachelors, masters, and doctoral institutions. As shown in Table 1, 42 (56%) were public institutions and 33 were private, although the distribution was heavily skewed toward private bachelor's degree granting institutions with a small representation of privates among the master's and doctoral institutions.

Table 1.

	Distribution of Sample Institutions		
	Private	Public	Replacements needed to complete sample
Bachelors	24	1	56
Masters	4	21	22
Doctoral	5	20	11

The majority of all institutions held their sabbatical guidelines and application process description in the faculty handbook. This was particularly true for many of the bachelor's degree granting institutions (n=15; see Table 2), where the faculty handbook served as the primary location for all policies and procedures related to faculty and institutional work-life. The majority of doctoral institutions housed sabbatical information in the vice president for academic affairs/provost office (along with additional faculty development information), and comprehensive institutions maintained sabbatical information in faculty senates (n=6), faculty handbooks (n=7), and provost offices (n=7). Other web-based locations for housing sabbatical information included presidential offices, human resource offices, and in individual academic college offices.

Table 2.

Responsibility Location for Sabbatical Material and Process

	Doctoral	Masters	Bachelors	All
Academic College/Unit	3	1	0	4
Academic/Faculty Senate	2	6	1	9
Faculty Development Office	0	1	0	1
Faculty Handbook	4	7	15	26
Human Resources Office	3	1	2	6
President/Chancellor	2	2	0	4
Provost	9	7	5	21
Dean of Faculty	1	0	2	3
Policy Office	1	0	0	1

Table 3.

Sabbatical Application Guidelines

	Doctoral	Masters	Bachelors	All
Purpose				
General statement	18	17	14	49(65%)
<i>Specific statement</i>				
Research	1	0	1	2(3)
Renewal	2	0	0	2(3)
Teaching	0	0	1	1(1)
Implied/no Statement	4	8	9	21(28)
Funding				
Traditional	16	22	14	52(69)

Negotiated	2	0	4	6(8)
Required external	1	0	2	3(4)
Scale-based	3	2	5	10(13)
Variable	3	0	0	3(4)
Not allowed	0	1	0	1(1)
Approval Chain				
Chair	17	10	7	34(45)
Dean	22	16	4	42(56)
Committee	11	15	7	33(44)
Provost/VPAA	19	17	21	57(76)
President/Chancellor	7	6	4	17(23)
Trustees	2	0	1	3(4)
Other	1	0	0	1(1)
Application Materials				
Detailed plan	18	12	13	43(57)
Curriculum vitae	10	6	7	23(31)
Letter-chair	4	0	2	6(8)
Letter-dean	3	0	1	4(5)
Letter-external	1	0	1	2(3)
Application	15	20	19	54(72)
Grant detail	3	0	0	3(4)
Benefit to institution	12	9	4	25(33)
Previous sabb.report	12	6	3	21(28)
Projected product				
Listing	1	3	2	6(8)
History on campus	0	0	2	2(3)
Plan to cover work	3	0	2	5(6)
Signed contract	4	4	0	8(11)
Grant detail	3	0	0	3(4)
Benefit to institution	12	9	4	25(33)
Previous sabb.report	12	6	3	21(28)
Projected product listing	1	3	2	6(8)
History on campus	0	0	2	2(3)
Post Sabbatical				
Submit written report	20	20	16	56(75)

Return to employment	21	16	17	54(72)
Nothing specified	0	1	0	1(1)
Submit final product	0	0	1	1(1)
Public report (<i>lecture, colloquium, etc.</i>)	0	0	9	9(12)

Purpose: Nearly all of the institutions (93%; see Table 3) either had a general statement about improving faculty performance for the welfare of the institution or had no statement regarding the purpose of the sabbatical leave program. Sample general statements included:

"Sabbatical leave is granted for the express purpose of providing an opportunity for faculty members to enhance their professional development as educators through projects of research, writing, artistic production, and/or other professional activity." (a bachelor's institution)

"Sabbatical leave is a leave of absence with pay granted to full time tenured faculty members in recognition of service to the University in order to provide opportunity for further professional development." (a bachelor's institution)

"Sabbatical leave of absence is an important component of faculty development and institutional excellence. Through the use of sabbaticals, teaching effectiveness is enhanced, scholarly endeavors enriched, and academic programs developed and strengthened." (a master's institution)

"A Sabbatical leave is a leave of absence for professional improvement and is intended for the mutual benefit of the University and the person granted leave. It should facilitate productive independent study, research, and creative activity by providing a period for concentrated scholarly work." (a doctoral institution)

The remaining five sabbatical purpose statements included two that were tied directly and solely to the purpose of enhancing or conducting research, one focused on teaching improvement, and two were directed at faculty renewal. One of these purpose statements, at a doctoral institution, included the statement that leaves must be related to "conducting research that leads to publication."

Some purpose statements that were classified as broad or general statements did include caveats to regulate the use of the leaves. Several institutions included the word "renewal," such as "...engage in activities designed for professional growth, development, and renewal." Others, however, specifically state that sabbaticals "are not granted as rest periods."

Funding: Of the institutions examined, 52 (69%) indicated that a faculty member could take one semester at full-pay or one academic year at half-pay for compensation during the sabbatical. There were a variety of other funding strategies, including scale structures that provided a percentage of

salary during a given time (such as 80% of a salary for a full year sabbatical if the faculty member had been employed by the institution for at least ten years, 75% if the faculty member had been employed at least seven but not 10 years, etc.). Other policies required a negotiation between the sabbatical applicant and an academic administrator (ranging from the department head to the president). These negotiations were commonly described as

"...sabbaticals may be granted providing funding is available, and compensation for the sabbatical applicant will be negotiated between the applicant and the dean contingent on the number of sabbatical requests and funding available. Sabbatical recipients may be funded at a reduced salary rate to accommodate multiple sabbaticals." (masters institution)

Three institutions, including two bachelor's degree granting institutions, required the sabbatical applicant to present proof of external funding prior to receiving a sabbatical. The doctoral institution indicated that the external funding must be research-related, and the bachelor's degree institutions indicated that the institution provides no salary support during the sabbatical period and that the individual must present proof of alternative salary funding to be approved and to continue participating in institutional sponsored human resource benefits.

Approval: Nearly half of all sabbatical applications are first approved at the department level by a chair (or similarly titled position, such as department head), and progress through a dean, provost, chancellor chain of approvals. Eight institutions initiated approval at the decanal level, and at 15 institutions, the provost was the first line of approval. At three institutions, the approval of a sabbatical application was required by the trustees or similar governing board, and at one doctoral institution, the sabbatical application had to be approved by the university system office.

Application Materials: Nearly two-thirds (72%) of the institutions identified required applicants to submit a structured application with information such as name, mailing address, contact information, classes to be missed, etc. Over half (57%) then required a detailed plan of work for the sabbatical period, and approximately one-third (31%) required a curriculum vitae to be submitted with the application materials. These were all exclusive of each other, as some application protocols required submission of multiple items (such as an application, detailed work plan, and curriculum vitae), while others required an application as simple as a one-page on-line application that had space for a one-paragraph statement of sabbatical work proposed.

Sample application statements and questions included:

"please attach a detailed description of your proposed activity as well as its professional usefulness to the university and your career."
(a master's institution)

"profile the following information, appending additional pages as necessary: (a) Describe in detail the professional development activities you wish to pursue during the leave period. (b) State how both you and the University will benefit from receiving this leave." (a

master's institution)

"Please Attach the Following Documents: A definitive detailed plan for the scholarly or professional use of the sabbatical; A statement of the anticipated future values of completion of the sabbatical to the applicant, students, the department, and the University; A complete vita, including a record of all professional activities; A description of any fellowship, grant, or other arrangements that would aid in financing or otherwise supporting the proposed project." (doctoral institution)

Additionally, eight (11%) of the institutions required the sabbatical recipient, as a condition of accepting the sabbatical, to sign a contract detailing both the context of the sabbatical leave (what the individual would be doing), and requiring the return of the individual to the institution post-sabbatical.

Elements of applications included statements of benefit to the institution (n=25; 33%), notation of previous sabbaticals received (n=21; 28%), details on grant funding in support of the sabbatical request (n=3; 4%), and at six institutions, a projected listing of specific outcomes, such as books and articles, from the sabbatical leave period.

Post Sabbatical: Three-fourths of the institutions required the submission of a written report upon the completion of the sabbatical leave, and nearly the same number had a specific statement in their policies that required a return to employment for a period consistent with the length of the leave (one year return service for a one year sabbatical). One institution utilized a broader statement indicating that the sabbatical recipient must turn in a final product (including syllabi, photos of art work, etc.), and nine institutions required some form of public report, such as a lecture, colloquium, showing of art work, etc. All of these institutions were bachelor's degree granting institutions, and one of them indicated that the dean of the faculty hosted a colloquium week where faculty who received a sabbatical leave had to give a public lecture on the leave and what was accomplished. One institution's policies had no statement on submitting anything from the sabbatical leave.

Implications for Academic Leaders

Findings of the data analysis support Sima and Denton's (1995) work over 15 years ago and suggest that institutional leaders do not have substantial expectations for sabbatical leaves. Although some institutions were very clear about why sabbaticals were granted and how individuals had to report on their time away from campus with pay, the vast majority offered unspecific expectations for the sabbatical leave. Broad statements, minimal application guidelines, and little accountability for the leave period may well be at the heart of public criticisms of sabbatical offerings.

The policies explored in this study did suggest that there are at least some efforts to specify sabbatical leave policies. The simple inclusion of leave guidelines in a handbook or coordinated from a provost's office, for instance, demonstrate that there is an effort to formalize or regulate the leave granting. The variation among institutions, and among institutional types, however, illustrate that there is little common ground for the

discussion of how to maximize the outcomes of sabbaticals.

Findings for the study do, however, offer some direction for academic leaders that might prove helpful if an institution is interested in cost effectiveness while protecting a valued tradition of the academy. These recommendations for academic leaders include:

Designing sabbaticals to maximize professional development:

Sabbatical applications should relate and specify activities related to particular developmental areas. Not all sabbaticals need to be directly linked to a performance deficiency, but they should clearly be tied to an aspect of a faculty member's workload and should be directed at enhancing ability in that area.

Clarify selection criteria and policies: The process of awarding a sabbatical should be clearly delimited in the policies and procedures of the application. This would not only clarify for potential applicants what to look for in the application process, but would better define the institution's expectations for leaves.

Identify performance outcomes: Similar to the concerns raised about the purposes of offering sabbaticals, academic leaders need to look specifically at what they want to get out of their investment in sabbaticals. For example, academic leaders might provide a focus or theme to each year (sabbaticals that focus on writing books, that focus on obtaining large scale federal grants, that make use of sponsored research, that improve teaching in the sciences, etc.), and use sabbaticals to strategically improve some facet of the institution.

Create mentoring for potential sabbatical leave candidates:

Academic leaders have the potential to draw connections between and among faculty members. By holding positions that can capture a variety of disciplines, academic leaders need to take on a coaching-philosophy that brings faculty members with similar (or conversely, complimentary) skill sets together to advance the investment of the sabbatical.

Ultimately, all sabbatical guidelines reviewed acknowledged that sabbaticals are a form of human resource development, and those giving their time to the sabbatical may well benefit from having a mentor to guide them through the technical, as well as the emotional and developmental, phases of the sabbatical.

Use sabbaticals to re-energize and negate burn out among faculty:

As a human resource development tool, sabbaticals can be powerful tools for the improving the morale of an institution. Academic leaders need to look critically at their faculty and where improvements need to be made in either the skills or the talents of individual faculty members. In some instances, sabbaticals might be a very effective tool for rewarding faculty members for years of service or difficult academic work, or, they may be powerful experiences for simply helping faculty feel better about their environments and their own personal work.

There is a continued need for further exploration and scholarship on the subject of sabbatical leaves, specifically looking at linking sabbatical outcomes to the application process, and perhaps documenting several case study institutions over time as to what faculty members are applying for and the long term consequence of the leave. Additionally, the notion of time away from routine and work needs to be explored in connection with the one semester (four month) leave as compared to the one year leave, and, how the three month summer term away from campus compares to academic-year based leave programs. Best practice research would also prove helpful for academic leaders looking to make the most of their sabbatical programs.

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