

How to have an effective academic sabbatical: 10 recommendations for what to do and what to avoid

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Abstract

Sabbaticals – i.e., academic sabbaticals, sabbatical leaves, sabbatical semesters – provide faculty members with a unique opportunity to engage in scholarly projects. Often ranging from a few months to a year, these time windows – usually free of rigid day-to-day obligations – can be powerful means to reflect on past and present projects, to renew perspectives, and to receive fresh impetus for both your research and teaching.

When reading the literature on sabbaticals, it is somewhat surprising that a relatively small amount of space is devoted to this important part of academic life. Here we provide practical recommendations [1-4: pre-sabbatical; 5-8: intra-sabbatical; 9-10: post-sabbatical] for making your sabbatical a satisfying endeavor.

A sabbatical is an opportunity for professional development that not every academic is allowed to take and, surprisingly, of those who are offered a period of paid leave, very few actually take one [Jarecky and Sandifer, 1986]. In the medical arenas, the most common cited reasons for passing up an extended period of leave include clinical responsibilities and finances [Mulrow 1986]. With careful planning and proper communication, both of these hurdles can be overcome. Importantly, those who have opted to take advantage of their institutions' sabbatical leave program, look upon their period of absence as a productive and positive experience [Jarecky and Sandifer, 1986].

RECOMMENDATION 1: DEFINE YOUR GOALS

Chances are good that you have established your position within and beyond your faculty through a series of successful research projects. After all, you are unlikely to be granted an academic sabbatical, a sabbatical leave or a sabbatical semester [hereinafter summarized as 'sabbatical'] if that were not the case. The goals you want to define for the sabbatical may include wrapping up facets of past and present work which your obligations at home have not permitted you to do so far. Presumably, and more importantly, the sabbatical agenda should include developing medium- and long-term project plans which mature once you are

free of time-consuming day-to-day obligations at your home institution and through the course of speaking and thinking with colleagues from different disciplines at the host institution. In addition to defining realistic research objectives, a less-frequently voiced – but nevertheless important – goal is to get impetus and ideas for your teaching, for instance by exposing yourself to, and interacting with, gifted lecturers at the host institution.

Overall, with a view on the necessary work-life balance, which you may want to nurture or re-establish, you should identify both academic and personal goals for your period of leave.

RECOMMENDATION 2: IDENTIFY WHEN AND WHERE

The timing and location of your sabbatical are key ingredients for a maximum effect. In most instances, both “when” and “how long” will be determined by the time window in which your sabbatical is feasible in practice – always strive for a compromise with regard to when it makes (most) sense. The “where” – both abroad and in your home country can be fruitful environments – depends of course on the goals you set for yourself and for your work. Importantly, Recommendation 3 suggests as to how the “where” and “when” can be (co-) determined by social aspects.

RECOMMENDATION 3: INCLUDE YOUR FAMILY

If you are married and/or have children, you should include them in the planning process, as your time away from home will also affect your immediate family. Remember, your sabbatical should aim to renew your outlook with respect to research and teaching, to explore new fields and to broaden your professional skills. Reducing stress on the home front will certainly make the entire experience all the better. Indeed, including your spouse in the planning process will lighten the organizational work load. Check if there is a possibility for her/him to work near your temporary residence and what schools/activities are available for your children.

Often, family camaraderie tends to be strengthened by the experiences shared while preparing for, settling, and living in a foreign social and cultural environment. Such increased family companionship can subsequently prove to be a significant asset of a sabbatical.

RECOMMENDATION 4: DO YOUR HOMEWORK

As the proverb says, “he who fails to plan, plans to fail”. Since your sabbatical is a finite, and rather short, period of time, it is best to take care of as much as possible before the clock starts ticking. The more you do beforehand, the more time you will have onsite to meet your goals.

The overall planning process may seem overwhelming at first and there are indeed a lot of aspects which

you must consider – especially when going abroad. Nonetheless, in particular in today’s world of rich internet options, (almost) everything is possible and manageable from home – before your sabbatical actually starts. Some general and time-consuming points to keep in mind include visas/permits, health care, care of your current home, where to live during your leave, insurance, such as travelers’ and auto, schooling and transportation.

On the empirical basis of a questionnaire completed by 129 sabbatees and 129 matched controls in Israel, New Zealand and the United States, Recommendations 5, 6 and 7 are derived [Davidson 2010].

RECOMMENDATION 5: TAKE CONTROL

The level of your perceived control during your sabbatical can greatly affect its outcome. In addition, your perceived control can influence how well you re-enter daily life upon returning home. In line with Karasek’s demand-control model [Karasek 1979] of occupational stress and strain, perceived control will likely be proportional to the reduction of stress and the increase in resource gain. In other words, the higher the control latitude, i.e., the more control you have over your projects and time, the lower your stress levels and the greater your positive gains promise to be [Davidson 2010].

Therefore, it is worth considering to keep your schedule as flexible as possible and to develop your list of goals so that each goal is realistically achievable within your chosen time frame. This will allow you to devote your time as needed without putting yourself under unnecessary pressure.

RECOMMENDATION 6: MAINTAIN SELF-EFFICACY

If you have the confidence that you are able to cope with the challenges and meet the demands you may face during the sabbatical, the results suggest that your sabbatical will be more beneficial than if you lack this confidence. This may, of course, be part of the equation of setting realistic goals, on the one hand, and choosing a host institution which fits your status and academic potential to begin with, on the other.

Depending on the degree of your self-efficacy, you must consider also in which cultural setting you will spend your sabbatical. In fact, cultural settings which differ greatly from your home setting will require a higher level of self-efficacy from you – and presumably from your family [see Recommendation 3] – in order to produce the same benefits as a setting which is culturally similar to your home [Davidson 2010].

RECOMMENDATION 7: LIMIT CONTACT WITH YOUR HOME INSTITUTION

Overall, keeping the responsibilities at the host institutions separate from those at the home institution will be a key determinant with respect to well-being for the duration of your sabbatical. In this vein, Davidson et al. advocated, “sabbatees should be encouraged to minimize contact with their back-home workplace. Employers and colleagues should let them detach by not using ‘electronic tethers,’ such as cell phones and e-mail, for the sake of the sabbatees’ well-being” [Davidson 2010].

It is good to check in with your home institution every now and then. Recall, however, that your sabbatical is a time when your primary focus is the set of goals that you outlined from the beginning. For those who might think that their home institutions couldn’t possibly do without them, a quote from the philosopher Bertrand Russell may be making an important point: “One of the symptoms of an approaching nervous breakdown is the belief that one’s work is terribly important” (quoted in [Mulrow 1986]).

RECOMMENDATION 8: RELAX

While it may appear to contradict your work ethos, the sabbatical is also – and should allow you – to relax and enjoy while doing measured loads and various types of projects. This is “a time for renewal, reflection and rejuvenation” [Newbold 2007], not a ‘pack-as-much-as-you-can-in-a-sabbatical’ vocation.

RECOMMENDATION 9: SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCE

Share with your home institution what you learned and instigated with regard to future work. What will you bring back home from your host institution? What projects did you complete? What others did you start or plan? At their best, sabbaticals are for individual revitalization but they can also provide “an important mechanism for revitalizing faculty” [Mulrow 1986]. Finally, don’t forget to thank those – both at your home and the host institution(s) – who granted and made possible the special gift of a sabbatical.

RECOMMENDATION 10: NURTURE THE CONTACTS YOU HAVE MADE

Not only do sabbaticals provide you with an opportunity to peacefully collect and develop thoughts, i.e., at your pace and at your convenience, about past and present research projects and to identify future research interest and stimulate your teaching; they also facilitate open collaboration with peers with whom you might otherwise not be able to work with.

Over the last couple of centuries, many collaborative scientific breakthroughs have occurred in which at least one of core team members were only visiting the institution of origin, albeit not necessarily on sabbatical leave, but interim nonetheless.

One collaboration that started with a young American woman’s sabbatical and resulted in a long, healthy scientific relationship (and marriage) to German biologist Theodor Boveri, ultimately contributed to the introduction of Boveri’s chromosome theory of cancer to the English-speaking world [McKusick 1985].

Great accomplishments can be made when scientists from different institutes and geographical regions come together. Whether key findings are born during your sabbatical or not, it is good to open new doors to facilitate the realization of future academic goals.

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