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Re: Summary of Research on Sabbatical Leaves

Faculty sabbaticals are often held to be critical to faculty career development, personal and professional renewal, faculty morale, recruitment, and retention as well as contributing to university missions, teaching excellence, and research productivity (Boenig & Miller, 1997; Eells & Hollis, 1962; Miller & Kang, 1998). Yet there are persistent suspicions about the value of sabbaticals given the unregulated nature of these leaves, institutional difficulties of funding them while covering teaching and other duties, and perceptions among the public and state legislators that sabbaticals are really paid vacations. Adding to these suspicions are charges that faculty may fail to fulfill pre-sabbatical plans and that the purposes of sabbaticals, their claimed benefits, and even the reasons for awarding them are often overtly abstract or furtively political. For faculty, issues include a lack of transparency about how the university values and grants sabbaticals, the importance of scholarly autonomy over productivity (for example, pursuing a line of research "for the sake of knowledge"), and the need for more creative approaches to sabbaticals including hosting rather than visiting with collaborators, internships, pedagogical development, or service experiences.

Scholarly research into the benefits of sabbaticals to faculty performance, productivity, and well-being has been limited. Much commentary takes the form of anecdotal advice and narrative accounts and we offer a list of such essays published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Inside Higher Ed*, and *Academe* at the end of this report.

The following summaries focus on social science research and not on narrative accounts. We summarize scholarly studies on sabbatical leaves in three areas: pre-sabbatical rationales and policies; post-sabbatical benefits for scholarship, teaching, and service; and post-sabbatical assessments.

Taking a Sabbatical: Who, Why, and How

The rationale for sabbaticals and the process for taking a sabbatical are neither agreed upon nor transparent. We highlight a recent study documenting gender differences in sabbatical access and award but we also survey studies documenting the wide range of purposes and practices structuring academic sabbaticals.

A study conducted at a research-intensive university examined obstacles in accessing sabbaticals and included gender differences in perceptions of the sabbatical (Smith, Spronken-Smith, Stringer, & Wilson, 2015). Academics viewed sabbatical as important to career progression, but reported issues of access, including a lack of transparency and gatekeeping.

Women reported greater concerns over gatekeeping and access than did men as well as the adequacy of the leave. Some had no access because of their employment status (e.g., part-time or fixed-term contracts) and those who had access tended to take fewer and shorter sabbaticals than did men. Impediments to taking sabbaticals included family circumstances such as children or partners' jobs and the requirement to ensure one's workload is covered during the sabbatical. Funding inadequacy is another barrier. These authors recommended that universities reconsider who has access to a sabbatical given the gendered nature of contractual work at universities. They also recommended that the sabbatical process be more transparent, the application process easier, and that gatekeepers such as department heads be trained and monitored so that sabbaticals are uniformly applied across the institution.

Sima (2000) reviewed studies of sabbatical purposes, policies, and benefits. She found that there were multiple purposes designated for sabbaticals in university policies and faculty applications although "university administrators and faculty members agree that the leave period should have a clear purpose and should result in outcomes that are of long-range benefit to the university. . . [and] productive and important from the faculty member's own viewpoint" (p. 70). While sabbatical has been restricted to tenured faculty, a growing trend is the junior faculty leave to support pre-tenure research. Benefits of sabbatical leave include: rejuvenation and renewal; professional reflection on teaching, research, and service goals; acquiring a fresh perspective through travel and research; building new professional relationships; acquiring cutting-edge knowledge and taking on new career challenges; infusing classroom curricula with new scholarship. Benefits to the institution include: "increased faculty efficiency, versatility, and productivity; strengthened institutional programs; enhanced learning environment, improved morale; enhanced loyalty to the institution; enhanced faculty recruitment and retention; enhanced intellectual climate; and enhanced academic reputation" (p. 73).

The purpose and awarding of sabbaticals is a site of inconsistency and interpretation. Miller, Bai, and Newman (2012) found that the language of sabbatical policies and practices are often vague and dominated by subjective interpretations of the purpose and value of sabbatical leaves, providing faculty with inconsistent guidance about their applications and accountability. Mamiseishvili and Miller, drawing on data sets from the NCES nation-wide faculty studies of 1999 and 2004, found that despite lip service to the contrary, sabbaticals were more often awarded on the basis of past performance, service, and scholarly achievement than as a strategy of faculty development and improvement.

Tansy and Enyeart at The Education Advisory Board compared faculty sabbatical and professional leave policies across six four-year public universities and one private university. All were classified as high research activity universities with undergraduate enrollments ranging from 14,300 to 24,400 and total enrollments ranging from 17,500 to 28,000. All reported university-wide policies for sabbatical leave with eligibility based on post-tenure, full-time status and increments of six years of continuous full-time service. Salary and funding differed

although most offered one semester sabbaticals at full salary or two semesters at 50-60 percent of annual salary. Most required faculty to commit to staying at the university at least one academic year following sabbatical. Proposals for leave were submitted to and approved by department and/or college review committees made up of tenured faculty and granted by the provost. The number of sabbaticals awarded differed: one university typically awarded only half of proposed sabbaticals while another awarded sabbaticals to all faculty with approved proposals. One university imposed a limit of "5 percent" of the total faculty as the limit for awarded sabbaticals regardless of the worth of proposals. Most ranked proposals on the importance of the proposal to the overall mission of the college or department. All universities required a post-sabbatical report which ranged from 1-5 pages but these reports were rarely scrutinized by chairs or deans. The argument was that yields from sabbaticals may take considerable time. However, these reports were typically consulted when a proposal for another sabbatical was considered. Finally, funding sabbaticals followed different models. One university centralized the savings from sabbatical salaries centrally to cover other sabbaticals across campus while another required the department to manage sabbaticals and replacement teaching costs.

Miller and Kang (2012) conducted a content analysis of sabbatical application and operation policies from 75 colleges and universities. Almost all had policies in the faculty handbook and included general statements about the purpose of sabbaticals as "improving faculty performance for the welfare of the institution." While several used terms like "renewal," others specifically prohibited using sabbaticals as "rest periods." Funding strategies all included reducing faculty salaries over the sabbatical period and some institutions required faculty to find external funding to support their sabbaticals. Approval levels for proposals varied: some involved a chain of approvals from department chair through provost and chancellor; some located decision approval at the level of the provost while a few required governing board approval. Application materials varied as well: many required structured forms and a detailed plan; some applications were one page while others required multiple items (application, work plan, vita). A few institutions required the faculty member to sign a contract detailing the plan and committing the faculty member to a subsequent year at the university. A quarter of the institutions did not require post-sabbatical reports. The authors conclude, "the vast majority offered unspecific expectations. . . . broad statements, minimal application guidelines, and little accountability for the leave period . . . ." They recommend that institutions clarify selection criteria and policies, identify performance outcomes, mentor sabbatical candidates, and develop sabbaticals as a human resource development tool.

Effects of the Sabbatical

In "Sabbatical Leave: Who Gains and How Much?" (Davidson, et al., 2010) using a sample of 129 faculty on sabbatical and 129 controls, sabbatical leaves were examined as a form of respite and effects on well-being were assessed. The faculty on sabbatical reported gaining rather than losing resources during the sabbatical (including personal characteristics, objects, conditions,

and energy) and their well-being increased as compared with faculty who were not on sabbatical. Additionally, they reported greater performance levels following the sabbatical. This study confirmed the beneficial effects of sabbaticals in terms of enhancing well-being. Faculty reported their sabbaticals as being a positive life event. The authors also examined moderating factors and suggested that sabbaticals should be tailored to individual abilities and needs and that faculty should choose to do sabbaticals in countries that are easy to adjust to and should work on detaching such as minimizing contact with their back-home workplace.

In a case study focused on the University of Alabama's sabbatical program, Miller and Kang (1998) found that while faculty reported that their sabbaticals benefited their teaching and scholarship, objective measures of teaching and productivity did not support these perceptions. Miller and Bai (2006) investigated the effects of sabbatical on teaching effectiveness as perceived by students. They examined 2-3 terms of pre- sabbatical teaching evaluations and 3-4 terms of post- sabbatical teaching evaluations for fifteen social sciences faculty at five universities in a major university system that emphasizes both teaching and scholarship. They found no immediate improvement in teaching performance after sabbatical leaves. The only statistically significant change in performance was a decrease in student satisfaction.

Benshoff and Spruill (2002) conducted a thematic analysis of survey responses by 45 academic counselors who had taken at least a one semester sabbatical. They found that faculty reported personal, professional, and institutional benefits with professional growth and improving morale as major reasons for taking a sabbatical. The most beneficial aspects were reported as research-related but stress management and personal renewal were second and professional networking was third. Participants saw institutional prestige, status, and publicity benefits from their sabbatical-facilitated accomplishments.

Flaxman, et al. (2012), investigated why some faculty report increased well-being after sabbaticals while others do not. They hypothesized that the benefits of a work respite like a sabbatical are affected by certain personality dimensions often characterizing academics, specifically, self-critical perfectionism. They also examined whether worry and rumination about work during a respite would affect post-respite well-being. They conducted a series of surveys with 158 academics during an Easter holiday. While the study involved a brief holiday rather than a sabbatical, they found that perfectionist academics reported the same level of well-being during their respite as did nonperfectionists even though they also experienced more anxiety about their work. In their post-respite responses, they reported that the benefits of the respite faded quickly once they returned to work and their thoughts about performance and productivity focused on stressors and problems. The authors suggest that intervention programs like mindfulness-based training might be offered to all faculty especially before a break like a sabbatical.

Post-Sabbatical Assessment

Post-sabbatical assessment is most often based on faculty self-reports although there tends to be over-emphasis on quantifiable results and immediate products (articles, books, grants, etc.) and little long-term follow-up (for example, the persistence of benefits or realization of contributions after three or four years). One research team published a pilot assessment instrument (Kang, Miller, & Newman, 2000; Miller & Kang, 1998; 2003) based on criteria identified by senior administrators but there has been little evidence that such an instrument is in widespread use. We concur with the observation of Miller and Kang (2006b) who pointed out that both faculty and administrators are too often guided by an idealized version of the sabbatical so that there has been "little meaningful conversation about how to use a leave of this nature" to the benefit of both faculty growth and institutional quality.

Conclusion

Who can take sabbatical, when, and why should be both transparent and inclusive given changes in employment status of many faculty and research scientists as well as vagaries of funding and resources for covering courses and other duties. Differences abound across universities as to who is eligible and when, the chain of approval process, the proposal requirements, the criteria for awarding sabbaticals, how funding is managed, how duties are covered, the expectations for and obligations of faculty granted sabbaticals, how returning reports are evaluated, and the basis and value of post-sabbatical assessment. While sabbaticals are acknowledged to have multiple purposes, it is often only those that are quantifiable and result in tangible products or yields that are formally valued. The question of whether sabbaticals are a faculty entitlement or an administrative incentive remains ambiguous and has become a focus for increased scrutiny and debate. Research indicates that faculty value professional reinvigoration and personal renewal yet these are not sufficient either as proposed reasons for sabbatical nor as results. There is inconsistent evidence for claims that sabbaticals enhance research productivity and teaching effectiveness. While we have not reviewed the anecdotal advice and narratives documenting sabbatical experiences, this experiential perspective should not be ignored. Finally, the institutional value of sabbaticals is twofold: as a human resources program for both recruitment/retention and quality of worklife (sabbaticals originated in 1880 at Harvard as a recruitment incentive; see Eells & Hollis, 1962) and as a reputational enhancement in research, teaching, and service areas. Our review of research suggests that these two benefits may not always coincide.

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