

How to Sabbatical

Inside Higher Ed, May 11, 2017

<https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2017/05/11/making-most-your-sabbatical-year-essay>

Jennifer Lundquist and Joya Misra provide recommendations for making the most of your year away from traditional campus duties.

Ah, the fabled sabbatical. Perhaps the single greatest privilege for the tenured after academic freedom, it is also one of the most questioned academic practices in the eyes of the mainstream public. That may stem from the root of the word, “sabbath,” which in the biblical Old Testament was described as, “In the seventh year the land shall have a sabbath of complete rest ...”

Nonacademic people who already think professors have a cushy job may wonder, “Rest from *what?*” Many misunderstand that, in addition to teaching, professors perform substantial service work, mentoring and scholarship. Just as they might wonder what we are actually doing when we are not in the classroom, the sabbatical raises even greater suspicions.

Yet, the sabbatical, which usually occurs every seventh year in academe, is not simply rest. Rather, it is a replacement of teaching and service for a period to devote oneself entirely to the development of a new and transformative project -- whether that is writing a book, conducting fieldwork abroad or learning new teaching pedagogies.

Although colleges and universities are more often the ones adopting corporate practices these days, the sabbatical is one of the few academic concepts that some corporations are now [borrowing](#) from us. As life expectancy increases and people are working beyond conventional retirement age, companies in the creative economy are realizing that a period of intellectual rejuvenation and acquisition of new skills is key to worker satisfaction, productivity and retention.

[Studies](#) of academe show that sabbaticals are [good](#) for faculty members and the institution (and can also be a welcome break for colleagues who may be stuck with us for decades). We look at sabbatical as analogous to crop rotation (after all, we work at a land-grant university), where the land is at its most fertile when crops are periodically exchanged for a new type of growth. Sabbatical is not a vacation, but a transition into the kind of concentrated period of creative work that is difficult to accomplish on a typical academic schedule.

Some critics say that the sabbatical has become overmanaged and laden with efficiency expectations. Most institutions [now require](#) sabbatical applications and postsabbatical accomplishment reports. In fact, one professor was [court ordered](#) to repay his sabbatical salary upon determining that he misrepresented his sabbatical accomplishments. At the University of Iowa, which often faces intense scrutiny from the state Legislature (see, for example, a recent [proposal](#) for its faculty to disclose their political affiliation), sabbaticals are [now called](#) professional development awards, after legislators introduced proposals to do away with

sabbaticals altogether. Such outside scrutiny and budget cuts [have led](#) some American universities to eliminate sabbaticals for faculty members or to reduce their prevalence considerably.

Over all, the number of faculty eligible to take sabbaticals has dropped, and sabbatical salaries have diminished. The turn toward adjunctification of the academy, for example, has reduced the prevalence of sabbaticals -- although some institutions, like the [University of Oregon](#), offer sabbaticals to non-tenure-track faculty. Still, most American institutions offer sabbatical leave to those who qualify every seven years, paid for a semester or a year. And they see the benefits of it in increased productivity and happier faculty members.

Outside the United States, sabbatical policy is still quite generous in some countries, with [Canadian universities](#), for example, offering pretenure leave and fully paid one-year sabbaticals after six years of service. A positive example of still-generous sabbatical policy in the United States is Whitman College's [every-fifth-semester](#) sabbatical.

How can you make the most of our own sabbatical? Here are some of our recommendations.

Keep your expectations in check. The sabbatical is an opportunity to take on something new and risky, but many faculty members approach it as an opportunity to do the research they usually do -- just much more of it. You should think bigger. The sabbatical is not just about higher research productivity; it is about exploring new lines of inquiry and investing in a longer-term, potentially transformational project. Don't squander your sabbatical doing exactly what you usually do, only in an office somewhere else.

At the same time, be reasonable in your expectations. In retrospect, we often idealize our past sabbaticals, glossing over the day-to-day hardships when describing them to our colleagues and painting the experience in ecstatic terms. (See an exception [here](#).) But, in fact, such a perspective often comes well after the sabbatical experience -- not always during it. Some days are crappy and frustrating even while on sabbatical. Accept that you are not going to get everything done you imagine you will accomplish during sabbatical. Focus on finding pleasure in the process, not the product.

In fact, some see the sabbatical experience as the beginning of a new state of mind rather than a limited period of reprieve. One professor writes [about](#) how the end of her sabbatical year created an open door. Rather than mourning the end of the sabbatical, she writes about how it can enable you to return to the university with renewed scholarly energy and a new perspective on how to develop pathways to sustained personal and professional growth.

Apply for fellowships to enhance your sabbatical. Taking a full year for sabbatical, as opposed to one semester, is ideal. But it may be cost prohibitive if universities do not fully fund a year. As such, faculty members often apply for research or teaching fellowships, which also offer splendid opportunities for new experiences in new settings. Many fellowships are residential, but not all, and some make distinctions about where the faculty member needs to be in their career. Fulbright Awards, one of the more common sabbatical funding mechanisms, often have deadlines as early as 18 months in advance of the actual sabbatical. Since some fellowships

require sponsorship from the host institution, you should set the wheels in motion well before the fellowship due date.

Junior faculty members often do not apply for such fellowships because they are not usually eligible for sabbaticals. But that does not mean that they cannot take a leave without pay in order to accept a pretenure fellowship. It can be a wonderful opportunity to build your research capacity and networks to ensure a successful tenure decision.

If you sabbatical in place, find ways to make it feel as though you are far away. The truth is, most of us cannot leave sick or elderly parents, abandon our labs, or uproot our families and move halfway across the world for a year. Instead, we often participate in the “staybattical.” Given studies that [show](#) professors gain more from their sabbatical if they are able to remove themselves from their campus office for the sabbatical period, it is important to consider strategies for achieving this distance even while staying put.

Many people choose to work at home. But if the unstructured and solitary nature of home office work can become difficult for you after long stretches, you can seek alternatives. Some colleges and universities have research institutes that allow a faculty member to be a research associate with an office space. In some cases, there are other higher education institutions located in the same geographical area. It is often quite possible to arrange for a visiting professorship that includes office space and campus membership benefits, such as library access and an open invitation to weekly colloquia, in exchange for giving a talk or two about your research.

Another option is becoming a member of a [co-work](#) cooperative, which provides attractive workspaces for freelancers and provides community and structure to the workday. Yet once you toil in one of these environments, it may be difficult to return to work as usual. At [coworker.com](#), for example, search filter terms for available spaces include: “pool table,” “free beer,” “pet friendly” and “bean-bag seating.”

Decide how available you want to be and to whom. Most colleagues will respect the fact that sabbatical means no committee work. The line of obligation is more blurred with graduate students, however. Because student research can’t go on hiatus just because we will be away, most faculty members continue to mentor at least their primary advisees during their sabbatical. In the age of electronic communication, that is not difficult to do, even if you wish to remain physically separate from campus.

Before beginning your sabbatical, it is advisable to tie up loose ends with collaborators, staff members and other students with an email that sets boundaries on when/if you are available to attend meetings, hear defenses or give feedback on student work. An automated [sabbatical](#) email reply is also recommended, and can be set up so that recipients receive your reply just once or at specific intervals rather than [every time they send you an email](#).

Miscellaneous tips. If you will be living somewhere else during your sabbatical, you can save money by renting your home out. Faculty members often do this through informal networks of visiting or newly hired faculty or by advertising their home on a sabbatical rental website, such as [sabbaticalhomes.com](#). Leaving one’s possessions for a year often requires handling a spectrum

of minute details, such as forwarding your mail, transferring mobile phone plans, having someone at home start your car engine up at regular intervals and so on. It is often best to make sure that your bills are set up to be paid electronically.

Institutional review boards create other details to consider. For example, will your IRB approval transfer internationally, or do you need an additional IRB approval at the international institution (assuming it even has an IRB infrastructure)?

Set up a meeting with your human resources office to determine how your sabbatical will impact your benefits. It is also important for you to have an understanding of [how your taxes](#) will be impacted. If you are living abroad and receiving a paycheck from an international employer, you will not have to pay American taxes up to a certain amount of salary.

If you are lucky enough to be in a position that provides sabbatical, we hope that this advice helps you to make the most of your next one. We also welcome readers to share advice gleaned from their own sabbatical experiences in the comments section. Wishing you a slow-burn sabbatical!