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If it is negotiated, will it be used? An investigation into the use of sabbatical leave provisions by librarians

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If it is negotiated, will it be used? An investigation into the use of sabbatical leave provisions by librarians.

Presentation to CLA 2007, 2007 May 24

By Leona Jacobs

I am a librarian at the University of Lethbridge and I have now reconciled my mid-career, mid-rank, mid-life status. In 2006, after by that point, 17 years of service, I took my first ever sabbatical leave or study leave, as it is called at Lethbridge. I was, in fact, three times lucky. I had contemplated it twice before but it was with 14 years of service under my belt and suffering from a bump in my work life, I submitted a letter of intent in October 2003 determined this time to follow through. The letter of intent was the easy part. The hard part was coming up with a proposal that would meet my need for a leave while passing muster with my colleagues and ultimately with the VP Academic.

In the course of my time at the University of Lethbridge, there have been roughly 12-15 librarians at any point in time. To the point of my leave, there had been only 6 librarians to have taken leaves. What had they done for their leaves? One had produced bibliographies and 5 had pursued leaves that, from my vantage point, could be classed as educational in terms of pursuing formal studies either with the goal of a second degree or as upgrading of existing skills related to their assignment. Two of these five were administrative leaves and three were actual study leaves. So at the point that I was drafting my proposal, these examples composed the frame of reference to be used in its evaluation but none of these examples was anything I wanted to emulate for my own leave.

I remember sitting in my living room one April afternoon in 2004 (the dreaded deadline for the proposal was April 30). I sat with a blank paper in front of me, prepared to jot down the ideas as I hoped I would think of them. I think I sat that way for an hour before

I finally got up, stomped around the house, and screamed out to no one in particular, “what do other people do?!” ... and then I thought, “maybe that is the question” ... and then I started think about it. What did other people do? Did other librarians have as much difficulty a) deciding to take a leave and then b) deciding on a project? I was well aware of the challenges facing librarians at Lethbridge – mostly attitudinal – did other librarians face similar challenges? What were their challenges?

A quick literature search revealed only a few remotely relevant articles, mostly promoting the idea of leaves. The only real reference I found to barriers confronting librarians wanting to take research leaves was by Gloria Leckie and Jim Brett in their 1997 article on job satisfaction among Canadian academic librarians. (Leckie & Brett, 1997) In this article, they mention that, while study leave provisions exist, many academic librarians were “actively discouraged from taking research leaves because of institutional constraints such as inadequate staffing.” (p.46)

With the advice and help of a faculty colleague in Sociology, I wrote my proposal for study leave for 2005-2006. I finally submitted my proposal—late—on June 30. By September I had not heard regarding its approval but I was told it had been recommended by both the Library’s Study Leave Advisory Committee and the University Librarian and was sitting with the VP Academic. Finally on December 17, 2004—remember my leave was proposed to begin the following summer—I had my “audience” with the VP Academic. After a series of verbal thrusts and parries, he acquiesced and my leave was approved.

Why did I tell you all about this? I told you this to illustrate my own experience contemplating and applying for a study leave as a mid-career librarian. The good news is that my and my library’s experience with study leave is not unique. The bad news is that my and my library’s experience with study leave is not unique. And, reflecting on the

theme of this conference: Retain, Recruit, Restructure—Regenerating the Library Community, it is my contention that we in the academic library sector in Canada, have some work to do in terms of restructuring our work to facilitate leave-taking, especially if we are to retain, not only the mid-career librarians but also those we are most currently recruiting.

Now I want to clarify up front that for the purposes of this particular project, my target population under study is Canadian academic librarians working in libraries within English-language (or bilingual) CAUT-affiliated universities where librarians are part of the faculty or academic staff association. The focus on English-language universities is more a reflection of my own linguistic inadequacies than a lack of interest in the experiences of Francophone Canadian academic librarians. As well, establishing this boundary does not preclude some future exploration of Canadian academic librarians employed in college libraries or those employed in universities where librarians do not hold academic status.

Another point of clarification is what it is that I am talking about. While what is commonly referred to as “release time,” or, annual short term leaves of a short duration, showed up in the context of my research, my focus was on non-annualized leave of longer duration, anywhere from 4-6 months to 8-12 months, which is applied for after some period of eligible years of service, approved, and typically used for the purposes of pursuing some scholarly activity, however “scholarly activity” is defined by the institution or by the library. Now when it comes to what this kind of leave is called, I discovered there is no uniform name assigned. So far, I have heard or seen it referred to as:

- 1) study leave
- 2) research leave
- 3) sabbatical leave

- 4) academic leave, and
- 5) professional leave

Sometimes the term used in the context of librarians is the same as the term used in the context of faculty; sometimes it is not—meaning, for example, faculty may have provision for “academic leave” while librarians have provision for “professional leave.” Regardless, for the purposes of this project, I am going to impose a bit of authority control and standardize on the term “sabbatical leave.”

Finally, I am also going to standardize on the use of the term “university librarian” to describe all the variations of this position that exist: VPs, deans, directors, chief librarian, and university librarian.

As alluded to earlier, my proposal was to study the use of sabbatical leave provisions by Canadian academic librarians: What provisions exist and are they used? Are there patterns of use? If the provisions are not used, then why not?

The Project

- to compare collective agreements as to the sabbatical leave provisions available to Canadian academic librarians.
- to conduct interviews with Canadian academic librarians to understand some of the challenges facing librarians with respect to using their sabbatical leave provisions
- to survey Canadian academic librarians as to the collective experience in using sabbatical leave provisions.

2007 May 24

L. Jacobs; CLA2007

2

There are three parts to this project:

- to compare collective agreements as to the sabbatical leave provisions available to Canadian academic librarians.
- to conduct interviews with Canadian academic librarians to understand some of the challenges facing them with respect to their use of the provisions
- to survey Canadian academic librarians as to the collective experience in using sabbatical leave provisions.

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2007 May 24

L. Jacobs; CLA2007

3

The focus of this particular presentation is to provide a preliminary report on the second of these objectives, namely the interviews.

The intent of the interviews conducted was to get some sense of the experiences librarians had in deciding to take (or not) a sabbatical leave as well as the experience of applying for and using their sabbatical leave provisions. To do this, I used CAUTLib and CACUL-L to extend an invitation to participate to the Canadian academic library community.

Neither the membership of CAUTLib or CACUL-L is exclusively librarian or exclusively academic librarians nor are they comprehensive in reaching all the academic librarians in Canada. One would think that CAUT would be a logical place to find CAUT-affiliated academic librarians – my target population. The answer was yes, if a librarian is CAUT-affiliated, they receive the CAUT Bulletin so they will be on file but, unfortunately, not readily identifiable as librarians. So to compensate, I used the two national email lists that I knew about and asked recipients of the invitation to feel free to forward it as they saw fit.

The invitation was sent out twice, about six weeks apart. While the initial response was good, I felt the need to send the invitation again, highlighting that I was also looking for the participation of librarians who had NOT taken a leave despite being eligible to do so. Interestingly, one librarian that I met, who had not taken a leave ever and would have been a really good participant, didn't respond to the invitation despite receiving it, her rationale being that she thought the discussion was better left to those who had taken a leave or who were more research oriented.

Sampling Criteria

- Representative gender split
- CARL vs. non-CARL
- Leave vs. no leave
- Mid-career librarians
- Had waited to take a leave
- Focus (i.e., educational vs. research)
- Proximity

2007 May 24

L. Jacobs; CLA2007

4

In total, I had 56 librarians volunteer to participate from across the country. As mentioned above, there is no definitive list that would indicate the real number of academic librarians in Canada. In 1995, Leckie & Brett cobbled together a list from various sources and came up with about 1500+ academic librarians (Leckie & Brett, 1995) and last year, David Fox at the University of Saskatchewan attempted to survey almost 1300 CARL librarians alone. (Fox, 2007) So is 56 respondents a good response or a bad response? At first, I tended to think “bad” but for reasons I will get into later, maybe it wasn’t so “bad” after all.

From this pool, I did purposeful sampling using the various criteria listed on the slide. I was aiming to interview between 10 and 20 librarians. I attempted to arrange interviews with 18 librarians. 15 of these arrangements came to fruition.

Page 7 of 52

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Gender

n=15

- Female = 9 (60%) (CAUT split ~ 70%)*
- Male = 6 (40%) (CAUT split ~ 30%)*

* Based on 2004 CAUT Librarians Survey as reported at 2005 CAUT Librarians Conference.

2007 May 24

L. Jacobs; CLA2007

5

In terms of criteria used to sample my pool of respondents, I was interested in having some sense of proportion with respect to gender. I ended up with 9 females and 6 males, which was slightly off the reported CAUT gender split for academic librarians as it was reported at the 2005 CAUT Librarians Conference.

CARL vs. Non-CARL

- 12 CARL perspectives
 - 8 unique CARL libraries represented
- 4 non-CARL perspectives
 - 3 unique Non-CARL libraries represented
- Sometimes more than one librarian per library was interviewed
- Sometimes one librarian interviewed had multiple library perspectives.

2007 May 24

L. Jacobs; CLA2007

6

I also wanted to ensure that librarians from both CARL and non-CARL libraries were represented. I ended up interviewing librarians from a total of 8 CARL libraries and 3 non-CARL libraries but because I sometimes interviewed more than one librarian per library or the librarian had experience with more than one library, I ended up with 12 perspectives based on CARL experience and 4 perspectives based on non-CARL experience.

Leave vs. no leave

n=15

- One or more leaves = 11
- First leave anticipated = 2
- No application made for leave = 2

2007 May 24

L. Jacobs; CLA2007

7

I tried to identify only those librarians who had actually taken sabbatical leaves that had passed through the application process rather than those whose leaves were administrative or who had used release time provisions.

I also tried to avoid librarians who had used their leaves for educational purposes. I felt these librarians were driven less by the idea of the sabbatical for the purpose of “research” (whatever that might mean) and more by their educational objectives. As well, based on my experience at Lethbridge, I felt that having an educational focus to a sabbatical leave project was less likely to be challenged during the approval process than a “research” focused application would be. In the end, however, and despite my best attempts, there were librarians included who used their leave for educational purposes. As it turned out, this was okay as their issues and challenges did not come across as that dissimilar from a “research” focused leave.

Page 10 of 52

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Of the 15 participants, 11 of them had taken one or more leaves, two were anticipating their first leaves and two had never made application for a leave.

Mid-career "ness"

Years as a librarian (at time of interview)
→ 11 to 38 years

Years of eligible service to point of first leave
for 4-6mo leave: 3 to 18 yrs
(n=3; AVG=12yrs)
for 8-12 mo leave: 7 to 27 yrs
(n=10; AVG=12yrs)*

*2 librarians applied for longer leave and voluntarily reduced the period at the point of leave

2007 May 24 L. Jacobs; CLA2007 8

I specifically wanted to focus on those librarians who had not taken a leave as soon as they were eligible to do so or who had NOT taken a leave DESPITE being eligible to do so. In this regard, I was not entirely successful in that one and perhaps two of the interview participants, depending on how you interpret things, took leaves as soon as they were eligible.

The range in years of experience, at the time of the interview, was from 11 to 38 years. However, more to the point, sabbatical leaves are based on years of eligible service acquired at one's current library which is usually considered to be 3 years of eligible service in exchange for a 4 to 6 month leave or 6 years of eligible service for an 8 to 12 month leave. As you can see, some of the librarians interviewed were quick to apply

while others waited a good long while before ever applying. Interestingly, the average years of service to the point of first leave was 12 years for both 6mo and 12 mo leaves.

Proximity

n=15

- Atlantic provinces = 1
- Quebec & Ontario= 12
- Western Canada = 3

2007 May 24 L. Jacobs; CLA2007 9

The last criterion considered was proximity since I was doing in-person interviews. Thanks to CAUT offering me the position of Visiting Scholar for 2005-2006, I was able to situate myself in Ottawa and within range of a number of universities and potential interview participants. In the end, I had participants from the Atlantic provinces, Quebec and Ontario as well as points west.

So now you have some idea of the technical demographics of the interview participants.

The interviews conducted ranged from approximately 40 minutes to, in some cases, almost two hours, the average being about 1.5 hours. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Each transcription was reviewed for accuracy before I embarked on coding

(even if I was the one who had done the transcription). As I coded, I re-listened to the recording and as I did so, I summarized what I was hearing and reading. This summary was sent back to the participants who were asked to review it and to confirm that I had, indeed, heard what they wanted me to hear. 14 of the interview participants have responded that I had heard them correctly with 4 of these 14 offering additional clarification and updates.

The Interview

- Tell me a bit about yourself
- Tell me about the culture of research in your library
- The sabbatical leave application process
- Tell me about your leave experience (actual or anticipated)
- Other related comments

2007 May 24

L. Jacobs; CLA2007

10

The interviews were unstructured, qualitative interviews that explored five topics:

- the background of the individual librarian
- the culture of the library
- the sabbatical application process at their library
- their sabbatical leave experience, or in the case of those who had not taken a leave or were just anticipating their leave, what they expected the leave to be like

- and, finally, anything else they wanted to say on the topic of sabbatical leaves

I identified the five topics to the participants at the beginning and then, with minimal direction on my part, they were free to take me where ever they wanted to go. As a result, there was a lot more covered than simply their views on sabbatical leaves.

Perspectives were also offered regarding librarians and academic status, librarians and research, librarians and the relationship with and to faculty; librarians and the relationship with library administrations. I could have gone there but instead, I have chosen to stick to the perspectives they have offered on the use of sabbatical leaves. Occasionally, I may touch on some of these other issues but only to the degree that I believe doing so informs the conversations that took place with respect to sabbatical leave-taking.

So to recap: I have covered why this topic, how I chose my participants, and what these people looked like demographically. For the rest of the presentation, I want to talk about

- personal factors, actual or perceived as well as cultural factors within the library that are perceived to influence leave taking
- the benefits derived from sabbatical leaves
- then I will rap up by channelling some of the advice imparted by the participants and by offering a thought of my own on the topic.

The general impression ...

“refreshing”
“fantastic”
“fabulous” “great experience”
“great” “excellent”
“energizing”
“Hard work but...quite interesting”

2007 May 24

L. Jacobs; CLA2007

11

- refreshing
- fabulous
- fantastic
- great experience
- excellent
- great
- energizing
- hard work but quite interesting

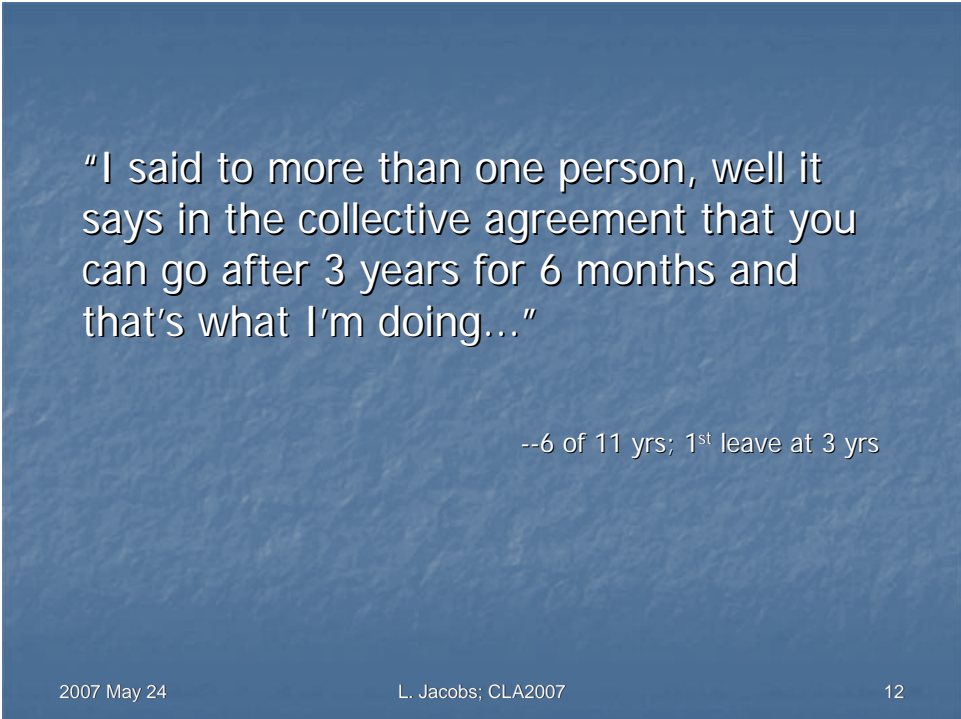
I didn't hear any discouraging words, not that I really expected any. Once they had taken their first leave, those participants were enthusiastic about the experience. Those anticipating their leave were looking forward to it. Those who had not taken a leave could imagine the benefits but were intimidated at the prospect.

Page 15 of 52

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As noted above, most collective agreements allow that a sabbatical leave can be taken after 3 or 6 years of service while these librarians, ON AVERAGE, waited 12 years before they made their first application. So what was the tipping point for them? What caused them to seek out a sabbatical leave?

I wouldn't say that there was any single thing that tipped the scales for these librarians but rather a combination of opportunity—either in terms of a project that happened along that needed undivided attention or a breakpoint in their working life—combined with personal feelings about their work.



"I said to more than one person, well it says in the collective agreement that you can go after 3 years for 6 months and that's what I'm doing..."

--6 of 11 yrs; 1st leave at 3 yrs

2007 May 24

L. Jacobs; CLA2007

12

In some cases, the librarians simply exercised their right under the terms of their collective agreement.

Page 16 of 52

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NOTE: the first number on the “signature” of the slide relates to the accumulated years of service at the librarian’s current library, the second number indicates their total number of years as a librarian (to illustrate their “mid-career-ness”) and the number after the semi-colon relates to their years of service (at their current library) accumulated to the point of their first leave.

“...like I took a one or two courses and said, I definitely want to take more and doing it part-time is not going to be enough for me.”

--16 of 28 yrs; 1st leave at 8 yrs

2007 May 24 L. Jacobs; CLA2007 13

The need to spend some concentrated time re-tooling was mentioned.

“...I never felt the particular need for renewal but once I got all these papers, to try and deal with them, because I’m not very good with papers, um, ah, meant I probably needed the time to research in the archives.”

--38 of 38 yrs; 1st leave at 27 yrs

2007 May 24

L. Jacobs; CLA2007

14

There were projects that literally dropped onto their desks that necessitated time to deal with them.

"...it was working with a colleague who had kind of encouraged me and said, you know, we could do this..."

--22 of 22 yrs; 1st leave at 18 yrs

2007 May 24

L. Jacobs; CLA2007

15

Sometimes it was as simple as being encouraged to take the plunge.

“Exhaustion was definitely a motivation because I think if I hadn’t [taken a leave], I would have had—I was at a point where I felt I had to do something—I had to get out of my rut somehow and I think if I hadn’t thought of going for a leave, I would have either thought it was time to change careers or, you know, at least change type of library or *SOMETHING...*”
[emphasis original]

--14 of 20 yrs; 1st leave at 9 yrs

2007 May 24

L. Jacobs; CLA2007

16

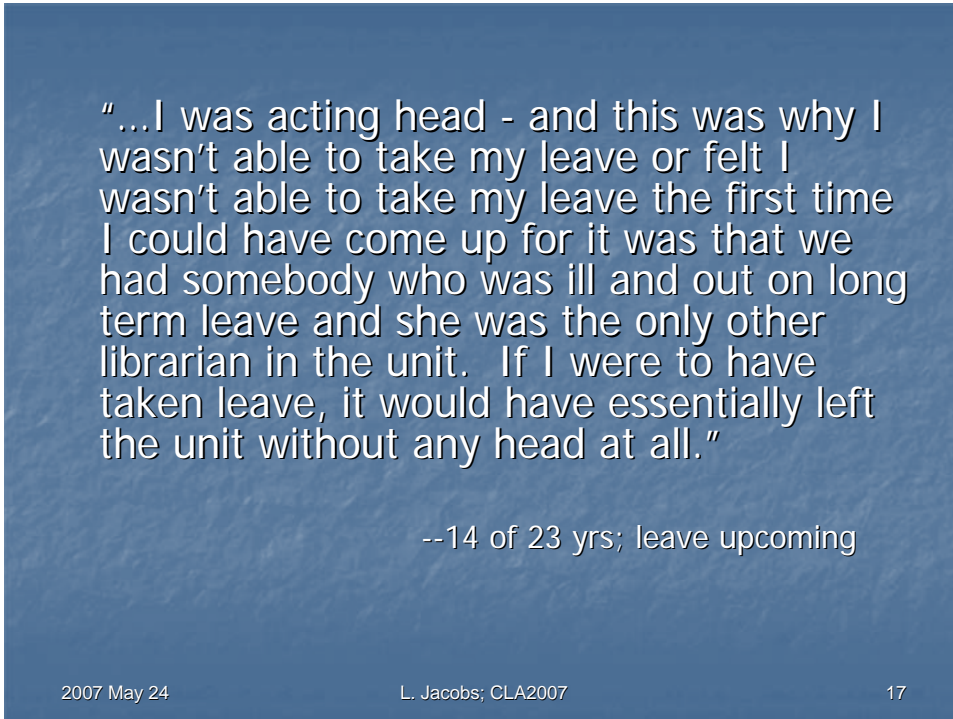
Other times, it was accumulated exhaustion and the sabbatical leave relieved the pressure to take more drastic measure.

My research coach and colleague back in Lethbridge often reminds me to look for what is not there. What I didn’t see in the reasons given by the librarians interviewed was reference to the necessity of taking a leave because an EXISTING research agenda demanded the time—in the same way that a research agenda seems, at least, to prompt the faculty member to apply for leave. In some cases, the projects done by the librarians were one-off projects, started and finished within the period of the leave. In other cases, the leave project ended up being the seed that blossomed or had the potential to blossom into a scholarly agenda, an agenda that informed future leave applications. However, relative to the application for that first leave, working on an existing research agenda was not among the reasons discussed.

Page 20 of 52

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Rights. Upgrading and projects. Collegial encouragement. Professional turning point. If these were the factors that motivated the librarians into action, what were these factors up against? Why had the librarians postponed applying for a leave despite being entitled to do so?



Some of the librarians, whether they had taken a leave or not, talked about their feelings of guilt about leaving the library short-staffed and with additional workload.

"...one reason I think that the leave issue came so late for me because I was doing something different—it was always fresh..."

--22 of 22 yrs; 1st leave at 18 yrs

2007 May 24

L. Jacobs; CLA2007

18

On the other hand, some didn't think about applying for a leave simply because they didn't feel the need to do so—changes in their assigned responsibilities kept them renewed.

"I've always done fine on the research and publication part of my job responsibilities but I tend to be a more applied sort of person, so I'm not -- I would do things like the professional contributions to professional associations, papers, short articles, and things like that was my more preferred mode and didn't really require a leave.

--23 of 24 yrs; 1st leave after 23 yrs

2007 May 24

L. Jacobs; CLA2007

19

And finally, there was the feeling that the type of scholarly activity pursued "didn't really require a leave."

"...I think I was the first one because someone had told me that did you know you're the first one who got the self-initiated [sabbatical] leave for scholarly purposes. And I went wow, that's cool. Since then, others have followed."

--17 of 26 yrs; 1st leave after 16yrs

2007 May 24

L. Jacobs; CLA2007

20

Remember those original 56 respondents to my invitation? Good response rate? Or bad response rate? I was curious as to the participants' impressions of the use made, in general, of sabbatical leave provisions in their respective libraries—not administrative leaves that librarians might be entitled to by default but sabbatical leaves that are applied for and approved through some process. There was one participant who believed that there had been a librarian on leave for each of the years that they had access to sabbatical leave provisions and another felt that the record of leave taking had improved over the last ten or so years. Most, however, were of the belief that leave provisions have generally been under-utilized in their academic libraries. Two participants claimed to be the first librarians to take sabbatical leaves in their respective libraries. So maybe my response rate wasn't so bad. That said, I got the impression that there seemed to be an emerging interest, by librarians, in the idea of sabbatical leave.

Page 24 of 52

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Why was it, that librarians were reluctant to take sabbatical leaves? Top of list was reference to workload whether it had to do with the perceptions about the quantity of work, leaving work undone, or guilt about leaving others to shoulder the burden of the absence. The suggestion was also made that some librarians may consider themselves irreplaceable and still another suggestion was made that public service librarians may be more pre-disposed to taking leaves than technical services librarians because of their exposure to faculty colleagues.

Then there was the suggestion that librarians couldn't envision what to do for a leave project. Could I ever relate to that one!

One participant, one who had been thinking about taking a leave but had not taken the plunge, offered an interesting insight into their own deliberations. First this slide...

"Part of not taking one [a leave] is a bit of reluctance to give up what I've got now. ...I'm in an area where there are lots of interesting things going on. Things are changing all the time. There are probably younger librarians out there that would knock me on the head on the street to do what I'm doing. I've had intimations of that."

--9 of 14 yrs; no leave

2007 May 24

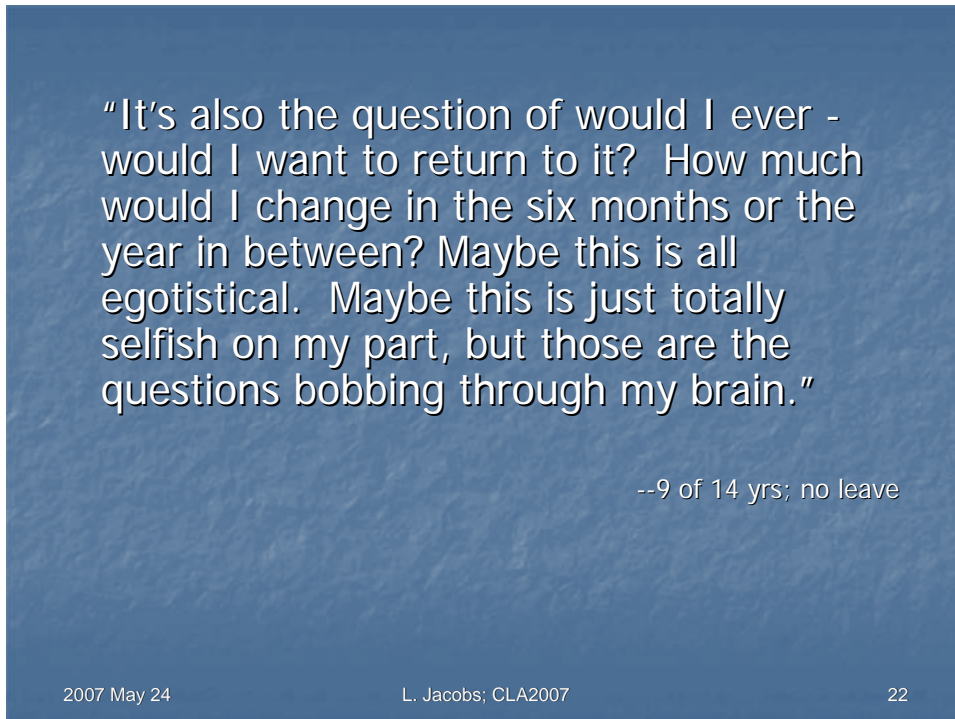
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21

Page 25 of 52

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Here the participant is talking about the fear of losing a position they enjoy.



Later, the same participant expresses the concern that maybe they wouldn't want to come back to the same position. I love this set of quotes because it so illustrates how defined we become by our work. Moving on, this same person offered yet another reservation:

"I don't necessarily -- would I be out of the loop? How much would I be out of the loop on this if I take a leave? Especially if...what I'm doing research on is directly connected to my job. And that job is changing all the time -- the issues and what have you are changing. How would I be out of that?"

--9 of 14 yrs; no leave

2007 May 24

L. Jacobs; CLA2007

23

Now the scholarly activity of this person was very closely linked to the assignment of duties so they wondered if by stepping out of the assignment for some period, it actually would be more detrimental than beneficial.

"...I mean, you know, they [the sabbatical leave committee] spent all this time denying and, in fact, they rarely, in fact, sat and did anything because no one had ever applied. Why would you apply if you're not going to—whatever. I mean the culture wasn't there."

--17 of 26 yrs; 1st leave at 16 yrs

2007 May 24

L. Jacobs; CLA2007

24

Let's set aside the personal reasons individual librarians might have for not taking sabbatical leaves and examine the library's culture around leave taking. One of the greatest deterrents to sabbatical leave taking seemed to be a library culture that was generally ambivalent about the whole idea.

"...some people's supervisors have laid this guilt trip on them. You know, 'why would you consider doing this; you're going to leave everybody in the lurch.'"

--14 of 20 yrs; 1st leave at 9 yrs

2007 May 24

L. Jacobs; CLA2007

25

Participants described cultures that were, if not outright discouraging, then definitely not ENCouraging of librarians using leaves.

"...I would say for the first 12 or maybe longer since years that I was here, first 15 maybe, it was honoured more in spirit than in fact. People did take leaves sometimes but it was...up to you. It wasn't a right. It was like something that if operationally it could be accommodated, it would be."

--22 of 23 yrs; leave upcoming

2007 May 24

L. Jacobs; CLA2007

26

They talked of things like the onus being on the individual to put it all together in terms of ideas, application and, as this slide points out, also in terms of timing it around operational issues.

"...at one point when he was temporarily back—you know, away from the law library and back in the [humanities & social sciences library]—he was told that his project, which could be seen as history as well as being seen as law, was not related to his job enough to be a [sabbatical] leave project because he wasn't the law librarian any more."

--14 of 20 yrs; 1st leave at 9 yrs

2007 May 24

L. Jacobs; CLA2007

27

They talked about the politics around leave taking.

They talked about a culture where it wasn't widely known who was going on leave or what the projects were proposed. In the same vein, accomplishments coming out of the leaves didn't seem to be acknowledged or shared widely. However, what was interesting to me were comments about how projects that were, for whatever reason, perceived to be less than successful seemed to become, themselves, challenges to future leave takers.

LJ: So [research as a part of being a librarian] not well understood by the administration or, and/or I guess, is it not well understood by the individuals?

P(participant): Both the administrators and the individuals. I think there are some individuals who do understand it but probably, as a blanket statement, no, it's not well understood by the individuals. And I think that probably comes back into why we...see less than half of our members choose to take leave although they could.

--14 of 23 yrs; leave upcoming

2007 May 24

L. Jacobs; CLA2007

28

The last challenge I want to highlight, but definitely not the least among the challenges highlighted so far, is the place of research or scholarly activity of some sort in the library, which I believe, informs the attitudes of librarians towards the use of sabbatical leaves. This participant feels there is a tight correlation between how research is understood and integrated into the expectations for librarians and the use made of sabbatical leave provisions. Before we go much further though, we should take a look at what kind of projects were undertaken by the participants.

What did they do (or plan to do)?

- Analysis, compilation of primary (archival) documents (e.g., personal papers)
- In-depth analysis of special (local) collections
- Citation analysis
- Creation of online tools
- In-depth evaluation of software
- Literature surveys on specific topics
- Environmental scans, field trips, best practices relating to library services
- In-depth committee work on specific topics
- Upgrading in support of assigned duties
- Study towards degree

2007 May 24

L. Jacobs; CLA2007

29

Without going into a lot of detail which might compromise the confidentiality of the participants, the leave projects of those interviewed who had or were anticipating a leave could be described as including one or more of the following:

1. analysis and compilation of primary documents
2. in-depth analysis of locally-held special collections with a view to making the collection more accessible to researchers
3. citation analysis relative to assessing instructional success
4. creation of online tools for potential use within the library or university
5. in-depth evaluation of particular software products relative to the library's use of these products
6. literature surveys on specific topics of professional interest
7. environmental scans and field trips regarding best practices in library services
8. in-depth professional committee work on specific topics

9. upgrading of skills, formally or informally, in support of assigned responsibilities
10. formal study towards a second degree (not necessarily in library science)

In some cases, for example, the upgrading of skills, the relationship between the project proposed and the assigned responsibilities of the librarian or the organizational needs of the library was quite direct and acknowledged. In other cases, the project was of professional interest but not necessarily of immediate relevance to the library or the librarian's assigned responsibilities. And in yet other cases, the project was pursuit of a personal interest with little, if any, direct (key on "direct") relevance to the library or even to the profession.

In some cases, a common understanding among the librarians within a work environment seemed to govern the choices of leave projects undertaken.

"...there was quite a heated discussion at our librarian council and I think the consensus was that if someone is going off on leave, it should, in some way benefit the organization...in the sense of...people are picking up extra duties; that it's not just a...personal interest that's being pursued."

--16 of 28 yrs; 1st leave at 8yrs

2007 May 24

L. Jacobs; CLA2007

30

On one hand, there was a sense that the project should be less about personal interests and more about paths of inquiry that related back to the library's organizational objectives in some way. This said, at this particular library, it was made clear to me that librarians were free to propose pretty much anything as a leave project. However, the percentage of compensation was tied to the relevance of the project to the organization.

P: ...we've spent a lot of time arguing with ourselves... There's still some things..., like creative work—whether we should be doing creative work on a sabbatical and what represents creative work.

LJ: So, what was the intention of creative work being part of the list?

P: ...Could you use a sabbatical to write a volume of poetry...if you were a writer? Because it's not directly related to your work. Does it have to be related to your work? Can it be related to your field of study?

LJ: So the field of study being the undergraduate field of study?

P: I guess, or if you had a masters degree...

--10 of 16 yrs; 1st leave at 7 yrs

2007 May 24

L. Jacobs; CLA2007

31

On the other hand, some libraries kept the definition fairly loose and open to interpretation although having such a definition remained controversial within the work environment. In this case the compensation scale was based on the years of service accumulated since the last leave and had nothing to do with the relevance of the project to the library. Still you can see from the quote, that the question is being asked, “does it have to relate to your work?”

Page 35 of 52

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So in some libraries, the librarians have had the discussion and there is an awareness of what constitutes an acceptable project. Personally, I was impressed by libraries that had done this homework. In other libraries, the worth and acceptability of the leave project seemed to be much more vulnerable to attitudes and opinions of particular key individuals, supervisors and, perhaps, more importantly, the university librarian. Whether they were the final arbiters of the application or simply a step in the approval process, their opinions and attitudes towards research and leave-taking were key to the attitudes of the rank-and-file librarians.

P: As I say, the University wishes to change the [leave] policy and we have a [university librarian] who probably wishes to place a greater focus on librarians doing professional things and not engaging in independent research of their own. She thinks, perhaps, that's the faculty's role.

LJ: ...So by professional things, ...what does she mean by that?

P: Doing your job. Service to users. [E]xamining better ways to serve users perhaps. Spending hours reading the professional literature ...and, you know, our primary role should be to help users whether faculty or students and that's where we should spend our time and efforts.

LJ: ...do you get sense that there's an interest in, in librarians publishing at all? Be it in the library profession or ...

P: I think she...would approve of them writing, you know, on the profession. Articles like how we've developed something or done something in relation to libraries. It's just my type of thing, which has nothing to do with librarianship, is now perhaps original research.

--38 of 38 yrs; 1st Leave @ 27 yrs

2007 May 24 L. Jacobs; CLA2007 32

So here we see a university librarian who wants to draw back from what has been a rather open definition of what is acceptable in order to focus leave-taking on more of the applied research end of things much to the detriment of this particular librarian.

"...I'm concerned that right off the bat [the university librarian is] not going to get original research—that it...has to have the word 'library' in it somewhere at the very least in order for it to be valid."

--6 of 11 yrs; 1st leave at 3 yrs

2007 May 24

L. Jacobs; CLA2007

33

In this case, this was a librarian who very much valued original research and felt that all leave projects whether or not they had relevance to the library (or to the profession) should be worthy of consideration. In the past, it had been the university librarian who defended this opinion but as a different university librarian takes over, all bets are off.

Page 37 of 52

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"...in the past there were 2 or 3 librarians who took research leaves and nobody else did. And, the management culture in the library, at that time, was, you know, research is scholarly and scholarly research doesn't have that much to do with your day-to-day job but if you want to be a really great professional librarian, you be scholarly and do your scholarly research.

--18 of 19 yrs; no leave

2007 May 24

L. Jacobs; CLA2007

34

This slide illustrates the flip side of things. Here the university librarian sends the signal that the only acceptable project is one that is scholarly and applied research projects, the kind of thing this particular librarian, it turns out, is interested in, need not be proposed. As one of the participants pointed out ...

"...I think we'd be really caught if there was a really narrow definition of scholarly endeavour just because most people aren't going in that direction."

--16 of 28 yrs; 1st leave at 8 yrs

2007 May 24

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35

...while some librarians have that scholarly bent, the majority of us do not.

Page 39 of 52

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Cultural challenges...

- Ambivalence about the whole issue
- Active discouragement
- Onus on the individual to make it work
- Politics
- Lack of acknowledgement about projects upcoming or projects completed
- Attitudes about the basis of acceptable leave projects

2007 May 24

L. Jacobs; CLA2007

36

To summarize, the cultural challenges identified from the interviews are:

- organizational ambivalence, in some cases, outright hostility about leaves
- in some cases, if self-flagellation was not enough, we have active DIScouragement from supervisors and university librarians
- the lack of support and co-operation given to individuals seeking to take a leave
- politics...always politics
- lack of acknowledgement about the projects proposed or those completed.
- and, finally, differences of opinion about what makes an acceptable leave project.

There were other challenges put forward that I consider “technical” in the sense that they were about levels of compensation, application timelines, etc. I chose instead to focus your attention on the cultural challenges because the technical issues tend to be situational and related to either the collective agreement or to the internal library

Page 40 of 52

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procedures. They are, in my opinion, the easy issues to resolve, especially as librarians gain more experience with leave-taking and come to understand how they might want to tweak things. However, first they have to have the experience and that means addressing cultural challenges if we are to encourage librarians to do so.

It's time to turn to the benefits derived from taking a sabbatical leave. In my coding, I was prepared to code the negative experiences as well as the positives. When I hit the end of the coding, there wasn't anything I found that I could say was a negative.

The benefits discussed ranged from quite personal to quite pragmatic and work-related. It is tempting to think of the primary beneficiary of a leave being the individual and I would agree, especially when we think back to some of the reasons the participants gave for taking a leave (for example, exhaustion and mental well-being). You might also be tempted to think that unless the project is specifically applicable to the library or to the profession, there is no benefit to the library. On this, the participants would beg to differ.

"I was just absorbed...was so self-absorbed and focused. It was great..."

--17 of 32 yrs; 1st leave after 12 yrs

2007 May 24

L. Jacobs; CLA2007

37

Some of the librarians talked about having the benefit of being able to focus and concentrate on only one thing, the time to explore and learn.

"...the idea of something where I can actually have a tangible output that is useful to somebody but you know hasn't had a lot of political or emotional overtones with my part is, you know, that's pretty compelling"

--23 of 24 yrs; 1st leave at 23 yrs

2007 May 24

L. Jacobs; CLA2007

38

The talked about the sense of accomplishment that resulted from their work. They spoke of the welcome break from office politics. They spoke of the sense of rejuvenation they had experienced or seen in others who had returned from leave.

"I remember saying that everyone should be required to go after 3 years just because you are in a completely different headspace and you look at things differently."

--6 of 11yrs; 1st leave at 3 yrs

2007 May 24

L. Jacobs; CLA2007

39

They spoke of gaining perspective about themselves and their relationship to the workplace. One of the participants discovered that work had carried on quite nicely during their absence in that other librarians assumed responsibilities for which the participant had previously had sole responsibility, some tasks were automated and delegated and, best of all, the participant discovered they really could be absent without guilt! Another librarian pointed out that coming back to work felt like starting with a clean slate work-wise; things that were deemed important hadn't been touched during the absence and weren't so important or urgent after all.

"...make new contacts. Like, the people that I met this last time, you know, like I feel that if I had a real problem or an issue, I could call them up. One of the things that was really interesting is that the issues that I perceive exist here, when you talk - I mean you're talking with university libraries that have 400 staff and ...they have EXACTLY [emphasis original] the same issues and perceptions so you sort of - you know, the fact that you can, you've established a broader network.

--16 of 28 yrs; 1st leave at 8 yrs

2007 May 24

L. Jacobs; CLA2007

40

They spoke of meeting new people thereby extending their professional networks. Related to this, whether it was part of the leave project or not, was simply having the time to visit other libraries to see how they handled various common challenges.

Regardless whether the leave project was directly related to library services or not, there was a definite sense among the participants that the leave experience paid off for the library in terms of improved or enhanced services that resulted from bringing a fresh perspective and new ideas to some problems. Some also talked about enhanced relationships with faculty and students, either directly because they had worked with some faculty and students while on leave or because the enhancements made to existing services captured the attention of faculty and students.

Page 45 of 52

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"...when I'd been here 6 or 7 years, I stepped into fairly challenging managerial role with quite a span of staff and services. And I got that opportunity and it was hugely helpful for me for in terms of knowing whether it was what I wanted to do or could do, and really useful for the library. People see you in a different light if you've done that, and you've been fairly successful at it ..."

--23 of 24 yrs; leave upcoming

2007 May 24

L. Jacobs; CLA2007

41

Some of the more senior librarians interviewed spoke from their own practical experiences as librarians supervising other librarians. They spoke quite eloquently about the advantage of librarians going on leave, in terms of providing opportunities for other and perhaps junior librarians to try on a different professional role within the library; to test drive different types of work to see how they liked or didn't like it. They admitted that, yes, there is a cost to this experimentation in terms of the learning curve involved and the loss of some productivity but these participants felt it was a healthy for the staff and the library.

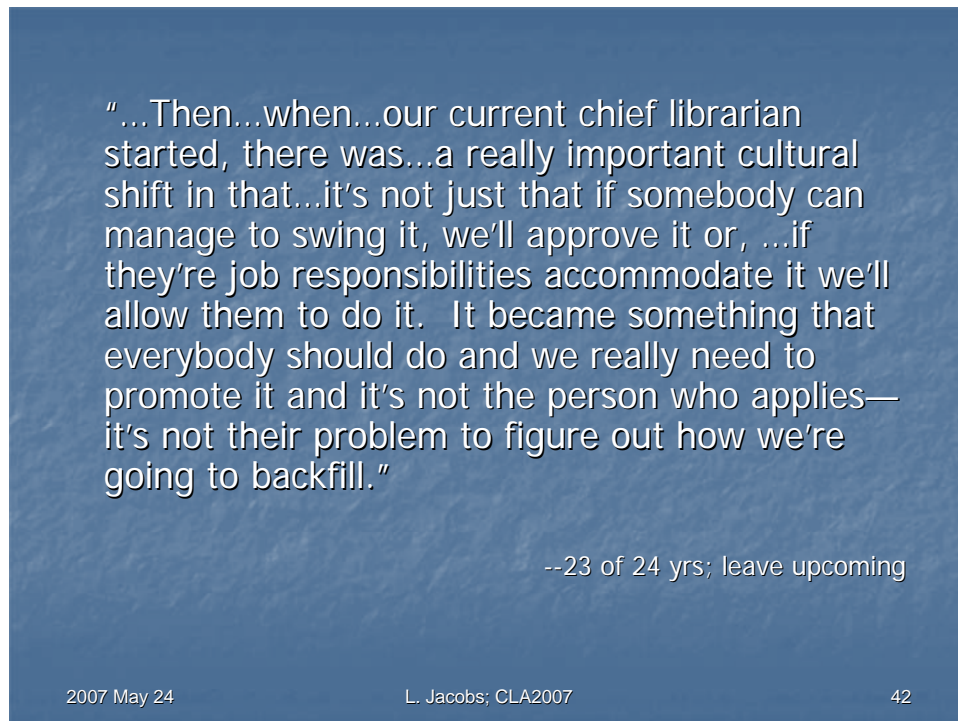
I hope you can see that this is not all about rank-and-file librarians. There is payback for the library in terms of having healthy staff, fresh perspectives on things, and developing staff—if the leave absence is seen as an opportunity rather than a crisis.

Page 46 of 52

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Earlier, I noted that the participants generally had a sense that the idea of leave taking was catching on despite it not being well used in the past. To what might this increased interest be attributed?

Well the biggest cultural change that the participants talked about was the leadership of the library—the university librarian specifically and/or the librarian’s immediate supervisors...



- in terms of their willingness to accommodate—to make the leave taking a joint opportunity between the individual and the library.

“...she has been encouraging the librarians who report to her to think about research, to take a research leave, and to do evidence-based librarianship.”

--18 of 19 yrs; no leave

2007 May 24

L. Jacobs; CLA2007

43

- in terms of their encouragement to do research of what ever sort and, by extension, to consider taking leaves to do so,

P: The other thing I think we're seeing more of is...some of the senior administration now is taking leave and you would never have seen that before."

LJ: So there's different behaviour being modeled?

P: Yeah.

--16 of 28 yrs; 1st leave at 8 yrs

2007 May 24

L. Jacobs; CLA2007

44

- in terms of modeling the behaviour.

One participant from a library with a very good track record of leave taking talked about having a sabbatical plan, a kind of rolling three-or-so year plan that allowed not only the librarians to know when they might take a leave relative to each other but it also allowed the library to know who to expect would be out on leave in any given year. For me, this linked with the idea from some other participants who suggested that libraries might plan the various big work projects, those projects where a particular librarian had a major role to play, better to work around absences due to leaves.

A couple of participants from libraries that were actually in the midst of their cultural shift talked about backfilling—the ways that they handled the left-over duties after higher-level responsibilities had been reassigned. These libraries seemed to negotiate the leave period to account for slower periods and actually had funds set aside to hire entry-

level or intern positions to cover those entry level tasks—part of the organizational willingness to make it work.

This was what participants—those participants where there was a positive experience in leave taking—this is what had been observed. One additional suggestion that came up as a “we don’t do this but...” was the idea of promoting or celebrating the outcomes from leaves through an in-library presentation, not only to share the results but to illustrate the possibilities of leave projects to others.

On purpose, I have not offered much beyond truly presenting preliminary results from my study—mostly because I am still too close to the data and have not had the time to step back and fully reflect the findings in the context of the literature. That said, I did come away from the interviews with one thought.

Academic status for Canadian academic librarians was officially adopted by CLA and CAUT in 1975—just 32 years ago. (CAUT, 1975) There were universities that had proactively taken the step of conferring academic status on librarians prior to its official adoption in 1975, Lethbridge being but one example. Although today most CAUT member universities acknowledge librarians as members of the academic staff, there remain a few universities and affiliated colleges that do not.

The official adoption of academic status in 1975 was, in fact, related to a bigger event taking place across Canada during the 1970s, namely the unionization of university campuses and, hence, the clarification of “communities of interest” for the purposes of establishing units of collective bargaining. (Schroeder, 1975) Basically librarians needed to be categorized and the options seemed to be administrative/professional staff or academic staff; the will that prevailed on most campuses was for librarians to become members of the academic staff. This is not to say that a university had to be unionized

for librarians to be declared academic staff; only that that relationship started the ball rolling for academic librarians across Canada—institutional peer pressure so to speak.

After listening to these stories and having delved into the history of academic status for Canadian academic librarians, I came to the conclusion that no one blame for the historical under-use of sabbatical leaves. For some, it is easy to lay the blame at the feet of university librarians and say they don't get it—that is academic status, research, leaves. However, I have a different take.

Most of the librarians who are now serving in library administration were themselves, relatively new librarians at the point that academic status was officially adopted. Because of the pragmatism of the move vis-à-vis university campuses, I suspect (more than I know) that likely life carried on and not much was done to acknowledge this shift in expectations for librarians.

When I came along almost 18 years ago, the idea of academic status was a bit more developed but still not mature. Now 18 years later, the pressure is being applied for librarians to better conform to the norms established by faculty and, yes, I am talking about research. My sense of this was shared by some of the interview participants. Some of this pressure is internal to the profession, with the arguments showing up in the interviews. Some of the participants suggested they felt there were external forces being applied. Regardless, participants commented on the shift and the impact it had on us mid-career librarians in particular, those of us who signed on to be, as one participant framed it, consumers of information more than producers of it. Not so with the newest generation of librarians; the majority opinion of the interview participants is that the younger generation is mostly hitting the research ground running.

Academic status happened 32 years ago and this sector of librarianship has been undergoing a transformation ever since. What this study suggests is that we need to step back and reframe our understanding of sabbatical leaves; to see them as collective opportunities to develop the staff in our libraries and not simply as selfish disruptions to be tolerated. Thank you.



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