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Making the Most of Your Sabbatical

By Jennifer R. Galovich, Charles R. Hampton, William A. Marion and Thomas Q. Sibley

Sabbatical! No students banging down your door, no grading, no lectures to prepare, no committees, no campus politics, no whining, and you get paid (sort of). What's not to love? Together the authors represent a total of twelve successful sabbaticals, but that success is not automatic. Here are some pointers from our collective experience:

Advance Planning — Nuts and Bolts

Most places won't just let you walk out the door every seventh year. There is probably some kind of application process. Find out what it is. Make sure that you know all the details regarding deadlines, procedures and criteria, as well as the less tangible institutional traditions and standard practices. (Ask senior colleagues about this if you are not sure.) Keep all these factors in mind as you put together your proposal, and don't hesitate to consult if any part of the process is unclear. Once you have determined that you are in fact eligible (check your faculty handbook), have decided on one vs. two semesters (we recommend two — see below), and have some idea what you would like to accomplish, we recommend that you consult with your department chair. You will need her support, and this is when you can find out if your project or timing will need tweaking in order to be aligned with some departmental or institutional need of which you are not aware.

Institutions will (quite reasonably) be disposed toward supporting projects that benefit the institution. That said, it is critical to choose a project that you are aching to tackle. The authors have engaged in projects such as writing a text, developing a bioinformatics curriculum, monitoring and analyzing gerrymandering and redistricting after the 1990 census, studying of the philosophy of mathematics, auditing



Cartoon by John Johnson

courses in theoretical computer science and pursuing those items listed in the "future directions for research" chapter of the dissertation. Whatever you choose, without daily deadlines to spur you on, you will need the project to call you. And institutional agendas can change, sometimes without warning. Ultimately, what's good for you is good for the institution, but it can be helpful in the application process to understand how to make those connections explicit.

Not all institutions are able to fund all applicants, so the process may be quite competitive. Your written proposal is your chance to make your case — why is this project good for you, why is it good for the institution/department, and why should anyone believe you can do it? You will need to provide convincing evidence that you are serious about your

project, know how to make it happen, and can accomplish your objectives in the time available. (This is yet another reason to choose two semesters.) If you are going away, you will need a letter of support or invitation from the host institution; if you are engaged in a writing project, you may need a letter from your editor or publisher. Your institution may also require letter(s) of support from colleagues regarding the value of your project and your preparedness for it, as well as a letter from your department chair.

Ideally, your sabbatical project has its roots in some idea(s) you've already begun to ponder. What additional preparation will you need in order to accomplish your project? If you are changing fields, you may need to audit a course, do some additional reading and writing, or attend a professional meeting or workshop in the new area. If you are writing a text, you will want to have a prospectus and some initial chapters already in the works. If you are picking up an old project, set aside time to review (and find) your old notes and papers. Your proposal should have enough detail to be compelling, but it should not be voluminous.

Keep your audience in mind as you write. At smaller institutions, the members of the committee reviewing proposals may come from a variety of disciplines. You may need to explain (briefly) how research in mathematics differs from research in, say, biology or English literature. Finally, as with any writing project, follow the guidelines and run your proposal by a disinterested third party before you send it off.

Though you may not need to put it in your proposal explicitly, we recommend that you have a backup plan, in case you find a counterexample in your first week, or the project turns out to be more like Mt.

Everest than Mt. Shasta. (Or, as happened to one of us, someone publishes your idea before you were finished thinking about it. The lemonade from those lemons was a series of ultimately successful undergraduate research projects.)

Go Away

The authors are unanimous in their advice to take full year sabbaticals and go away from your home institution if at all possible. One of us has even taken several sabbaticals abroad. We know that going away can be difficult — in most institutions, you will take a significant pay cut for a full year sabbatical compared to a semester sabbatical, and if you go away as well, the financial challenges are magnified. Sometimes this can be addressed by advance planning — some host institutions may be willing to hire you (or your spouse/partner) on a part-time basis. (However, be warned that even part-time employment will dilute your energy for your project, unless it is directly related.) Or your project may be just what some funding agency is looking for and you can apply for a grant. (Don't forget the Fulbright folks for sabbaticals abroad.) We also note that there are significant tax advantages (a sabbatical qualifies as a job away from home), and recommend a pre-sabbatical consultation with a professional and/or purchase of one of the tax guides for college teachers, such as the one published by Academic Information Service, Inc.

Other challenges are presented by family circumstances. These vary so much that it is hard to give advice. However, we do report that the same factors that make it work for you can also make it work for your family. Finding housing and deciding what to do with your own house can be a bit nerve-racking, but on both fronts we recommend faculty bulletin boards, the always helpful secretary to the Dean or Provost, and <http://www.craigslist.org>. Of course, taking your children out of school and placing them in a new school environment can make for a difficult transition, but is potentially a very enriching experience for them.

However, the advantages of going away are many: Ideally, you return from your

sabbatical renewed and refreshed — hard to do when you are surrounded by the same old same old. Going away means not only taking advantage of new opportunities but also being able to decline the old ones. And you may have access to books, journals and software that are not easily available at your home institution, not to mention the interactions with many colleagues who will share and spur your interests.

You probably have some ideas about what kind of place would work best for your project — perhaps you have some specific places in mind. You may be drawn by the opportunity to work with a particular person or research group, or perhaps the institution supports a special project such as the IMA at the University of Minnesota, MSRI at UC Berkeley, or the MBI at Ohio State University. However, it is worth discovering (perhaps through colleagues) the nature of the work climate at your host institution. If you are expecting to do a lot of collaboration and everyone is a Lone Ranger, you could be sadly disappointed. Depending on your project, a non-academic institution may appeal to you, but in our experience, corporations and laboratories are not tuned in to the rhythms of academic life. In particular, you may be expected to be more immediately available than your institution's application process permits. In any case, if you choose a non-academic setting, be sure that your mutual expectations about what you will do and when you will do it are in sync.

Wherever you go, make a connection with someone there, by e-mail, shared acquaintance, or just introduce yourself at a meeting. Find out what the host institution's procedures are, and what they will be able to offer you. In our experience, most institutions are quite welcoming, though less accommodating the more you ask for. Visiting scholar status, parking permits and access to libraries are easy (though parking may not be free). An office (even shared), phone, computer and secretarial services are a bit harder, but most places are willing if these are available at all. In general, we have found that it is fairly easy to wrangle an invitation someplace as long as you don't want any money.

Making it Work

Academics typically work too hard, with grading and class preparation regularly spilling into the evenings and weekends. Sabbaticals are an opportunity to interrupt that cycle and make a clean break from the distractions of campus politics and requests from colleagues to help with chores. Find a new rhythm that fits your project, and doesn't wear you out. Work on your project regularly, but don't feel guilty about taking time off if that's what you need. Galovich and Sibley have a rule that you can't bring work home from the office.

In any case, whether or not you go away, don't isolate yourself. Make time to enjoy your surroundings (whatever they are), exercise, and take advantage of serendipitous opportunities, such as travel, auditing a class or working on a side project that you stumble on. If you are going to a new place, e-mail the chamber of commerce, get a city map, check out the local newspaper (e.g., on-line). You could also resurrect old interests — get that clarinet out of the attic and join a community orchestra or other music or drama group. Or you could take on a new interest, such as getting involved in a community service project.

Whatever you do and wherever you do it, refresh, renew, learn and enjoy!

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