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Emily Faulconer

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, emily.faulconer@erau.edu

Beverly L. Wood

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, woodb14@erau.edu

Stephen George-Williams

University of Sydney

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From Crossing Campus to Crossing Continents: Faculty, Chair, and Global Partner Perspectives on an International Sabbatical

Faulconer, E., Wood, B., & AUSTRALIA FACULTY

A sabbatical – a period of paid leave granted to faculty for research or study - is a construct in higher education that has experienced ebbs and flows in its favorability, though there are persistent arguments that it is important for research-active faculty (Pietsch, 2011). Early career faculty are focused on achieving tenure as this is high stakes at most institutions. Once tenure is achieved, the next goalpost is full professor. The day-to-day responsibilities of faculty can distract from and dilute efforts aimed at strategic planning, long-term planning, and reflection necessary to achieve this level of promotion. So it follows that faculty place a very high value on sabbatical leave time for its impact on career progression, with one study ranking sabbaticals second only to successful external funding (Smith et al., 2016). Faculty and institutions can benefit from sabbaticals through collaborative ideation to reveal new research ideas, development of new expertise, strategic dissemination efforts, support of student research, and much more. Individual faculty members who have engaged in a sabbatical report stronger engagement with colleagues and sense of social responsibility, with a higher tendency towards teamwork, creativity, and innovation (Shirbagi & Gholami, 2020). Sabbatical could also serve as a tool to combat imposter syndrome and reduce the gap between academics and non-academics through “experimental” sabbaticals (e.g., a year of consulting) (Bothello & Roulet, 2019). It is important to note, though, that benefits to students are not inherent in sabbaticals, as one now-dated study reported no difference in student evaluations of teaching before and after faculty sabbaticals (Miller & Bai, 1998). Faculty overwhelmingly agreed that sabbatical improved their attitude, making them a better faculty member (Miller & Kang, 2006).

The process of taking a sabbatical can be complex due to departmental and institutional factors as well as external factors. Departmental factors like teaching commitments, service appointments, and joint appointments can reduce flexibility for faculty seeking a sabbatical. Furthermore, faculty must consider how their leave will impact their existing research activities, including graduate and undergraduate research supervision and student advising. Faculty perceive the Department Chair as having both positive and negative influences on their ability to take a sabbatical and as having notable oversight over the faculty responsibilities while on sabbatical (Miller & Kang, 2006; Smith et al., 2016). External factors also influence faculty ability to seek sabbatical, including family and social responsibilities like childcare, eldercare, flexibility of partner's career for travel, and community obligations.

International sabbaticals can offer a unique life-changing opportunity for cultural immersion that can provide crucial context for teaching and research while building a more robust professional network (Bowman, 2020; Fell & Kim, 2012; Sabatini, 1999; Soltis, 2013). After all, if we wish our students to develop 21st century skills to succeed in a global marketplace, we must be able to model them. For this reason, an international sabbatical is in direct support of the UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 to ensure

inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. An international sabbatical also allows insight into similarities and differences in a profession globally. Some studies report increased scholarly productivity as a result of international research collaborations (Castillo & Powell, 2020; Lee & Bozeman, 2005). International sabbaticals can also bolster your name recognition, landing speaking invitations at prestigious events (Fell & Kim, 2012). Additionally, interdisciplinary and diverse research teams increase funding success (Lungeanu et al., 2014).

In spring of 2023, I formally requested my international sabbatical for the purpose of establishing professional relationships with faculty at multiple institutes of higher education outside of the United States who are active in the scholarship of teaching and learning and/or disciplinary-based educational research within STEM learning environments. The stated objectives were to: 1) network with STEM faculty at multiple Australian higher education institutions, 2) attend an international education conference, and 3) establish an interdisciplinary research team focused on undergraduate STEM education (either focusing on high impact practices or humanizing online learning).

The Planning

Sabbaticals were not a part of the culture within my college, or even within other colleges at my campus. Upon first inquiry, I learned that there was no formal process to follow, with no form to fill out or policy to follow, beyond a very brief mention in the faculty handbook. My experience reflects research findings that the application process for a sabbatical can be frustrating because of unclear and inconsistent processes (Smith et al., 2016). However, I viewed this as an opportunity to forge a path without preconceived notions of what the application process might look like.

While the process of requesting and planning any sabbatical will have challenges, the process for an international sabbatical is notably more difficult (Bowman, 2020). Some suggest it can take 18 – 24 months to plan an international sabbatical (Schulz, 2009), though I planned mine in 5 months. I submitted my proposal without having formed any preliminary relationships to leverage, though my proposal did include background research on high-value points of contact at several Australian universities. This approach felt daunting but it encouraged me to forge a network from scratch rather than potentially limiting my network by relying on existing connections.

There was a negotiation with administration regarding the scope of my work and my intended deliverables, which is a normal process in balancing the needs of the faculty member and the needs of the institution (Miller & Kang, 2006). Once I had approval, the real planning for the international sabbatical occurred. Tasks included including securing visas for me and my immediate family, exploring the health care coverage and addressing coverage gaps, ensuring up-to-date immunizations, procuring an international driver's permit through the U.S. AAA, securing lodging, and enrolling my son in virtual education for his 4th grade year. I established property management for my time abroad, packed much of my belongings, and acquired

long-term pet care. I wish that I had discovered Bowman's book "Modern Sabbatical" before planning mine as it covers so many steps of the planning process in helpful detail, as well as considerations once you land at your destination and re-entry after sabbatical.

Some faculty feel that international sabbaticals should have increased funding provisions (Smith et al., 2016). My institution did not take the nature of my sabbatical into account. Faculty at my home institution receive their standard income for either "one-term" (half of an academic year) or half of their standard income for a "two-term" (entire academic year) sabbatical. This approach to support is fairly typical for institutions (Sabatini, 1999; Schulz, 2009). The level of financial support could impact faculty decisions regarding when or where to travel, but this was not a factor in my international sabbatical. Faculty can seek funding programs for faculty exchange, including the U.S. Fulbright Scholars program (<https://us.fulbrightonline.org/>) or certain NSF programs like the Partnership for International Research and Education – Use-inspired Research Challenges on Climate Change and Clean Energy (22-546) or International Research Experiences for Students (20-598).

The Outcomes

Faculty Perspective

Overall, I feel that my international sabbatical was a success for me, my institution, and my global partners. From the stated sabbatical objectives, I developed the following Research Goals:

1. To explore strategies to lead an international conversation on humanizing undergraduate STEM teaching and learning environments
2. To engage in research contributing to the larger understanding of humanized STEM education in an international context
3. To share my sabbatical experience with relevant academic communities

Goal 1. In support of leading an international conversation on humanizing undergraduate STEM education, I set an objective to lead in the publication of a special issue of a journal focused on the topic. I secured co-guest editors from the University of Sydney and Monash University and the *International Journal of Innovation in Science and Mathematics Education* approved the proposal for publication in September 2024. A second objective for this goal was to engage in inter-institutional events as an ambassador for humanized STEM teaching. I discovered an existing highly connected network of STEM education researchers that spans many Australian institutions. Through this network, in November 2023 I was invited to present at the University of Technology Sydney's Learning Lunchbox Series for their Mathematics and Physical Sciences Department. I was also invited to present in October 2023 to the Science in Australia Gender Equity Committee. I also attended as a participant at ten other events at multiple Australian institutions.

Goal 2. In support of engaging in humanized STEM research, I set an objective to form an international research team to explore the impact of a small-scale course redesign effort to implement culturally responsive teaching (CRT) in the discussion prompts in a general chemistry course. Two faculty members at two institutions agreed to serve as reviewers of the CRT implementation in the course redesign, one drawing on their expertise in equity and inclusion, the other drawing on their expertise in chemistry education. That project is currently in the data collection phase. The second objective for this goal was to submit a funding proposal to launch a student-submission blog that would allow for public sharing of artifacts created in humanized STEM classrooms so that their efforts would not end at the gradebook, measuring the impact of this action on STEM identity, STEM attitudes, STEM career ambitions, and their sense of personal social responsibility. This four-institution international proposal was submitted to the Spencer Foundation's Small Grant Program in December 2023.

Goal 3. In support of sharing my sabbatical experiences with relevant academic communities, I established an objective to share my experiences on forming international SoTL and DBER research collaborations. This editorial is currently in progress. The second objective was to share an editorial on my experiences engaging in an international sabbatical, which I am doing here. And finally, I set an objective to facilitate a round table discussion at a conference for planning for and engaging in an international SOTL/DBER research sabbatical. The proposal was submitted to the 2024 Lilly Asheville conference in November 2023.

Future Work. In the future, I would like to utilize my newfound research network to prepare a narrative review article on humanizing STEM education within international contexts. To further engage the educational community regarding humanized STEM education, I would like to work with my new research network to craft an infographic for humanizing STEM education. Furthermore, I am curious about forming an international virtual research group for Humanizing Undergraduate STEM. I am optimistic that future as yet unknown project collaborations will also come from continued engagement with my Australian research network.

Reflection. It was informative to witness the lived experiences of faculty in higher education at another institution and within the cultural context of another country. While I am aware that the residential campuses in the United States tended to revert back to in-person teaching in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, I had not given much thought to this trend globally. It was interesting to learn of their experiences as governments and institutions in Australia responded differently to the pandemic. For example, the University of Southern Queensland evaluated the conditions post-pandemic and decided to place value and resources behind a high-quality in person experience.

While many U.S. institutions have a core curriculum (general education), not all do, such as Amherst College, Brown University, University of Rochester, Vassar College, and Wake Forest University (*11 Open Curriculum Schools*, 2023). I found that the

University of Southern Queensland, Monash, and _____ do not have a core curriculum.

One of the notable challenges of my sabbatical was my lack of access to travel funds, which limited my networking opportunities. I was invited to attend a conference where multiple contacts in my new network would be, but without institutional funding, I could not attend. Additionally, all travel related to my sabbatical was covered out of pocket, without mileage or per diem that would typically accompany work-related travel. This resulted in notable personal expenses, but I planned the scope of my work to fit within my personal budget for the in-person meetings necessary for my sabbatical objectives, including attending research meetings, networking events, professional development events, and in-person collaboration sessions.

Impact of sabbatical on academic and personal growth

Department Chair Perspectives

- Role in facilitating/supporting sabbatical
- How DC contributed to success of collaboration
- Obstacles faced

Global Partner Perspectives

- Describe role in collaboration
- Anecdotes for experiences with traveling faculty
- Benefits of international perspective
- Challenges / valuable lessons

The Impact

The successes and achievements that resulted from sabbatical, shared through my perspectives as well as those of my department chair and international collaborators outline the widespread benefits at multiple levels. As modern academia is very outcome driven, I have presented the formal outcomes of my international sabbatical in Table 1.

Table 1

Outcomes of International Research Sabbatical in Fall 2023

Deliverable	Description
IJISME Special Issue Proposal	DEI in undergraduate STEM education OR Humanizing undergraduate STEM education
Literature review	Lessons for Ugrad Research online post-COVID
Funding proposal	Student run blog

Editorial	Commentary on use of sabbatical for international research collaborations
	Intl J for SoTL – essay on process of forming international research collaborations on SoTL topics
Conference presentation	Lilly
CERP perspectives submission	Topic?
Editorial	Collaborating w/ student researchers, cognitive presence, chemistry anxiety, chemistry inclusivity
Research paper	CL from applying feedback
Study Abroad proposal	

The research connections I established during my international sabbatical resulted in short-term deliverables but also demonstrate a clear path towards a productive mid- and long-term future for the collaborations. [More here....ideas for what's next?](#)

For faculty who are aimed at promotion to Full Professor, engaging in an international sabbatical can help establish an international research network that will increase name recognition and reach. While international sabbaticals have additional challenges to consider, I am hopeful about the future of this opportunity for faculty to engage in collaboration while learning new skills sets and developing cultural competencies.