The Academic Sabbatical

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The Academic Sabbatical: A Voyage of Discovery.

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Sabbaticals are important to faculty and to higher education for a great many reasons, as this book reveals. There is evidence in this volume of significant productivity in terms of research and dissemination, as well as program development, dedication to graduate students, and intellectual sharing among professors. Research and dissemination are foundational to higher education, and the evidence in this book is clear: Sabbaticals build stronger and deeper academic connections. We see this book as a collection of narratives about the academic sabbatical, but also as a collective voice that, like a flower arrangement, is enriched by the diverse experiences and perspectives our authors share in their chapters. In the end, we have an entire sabbatical garden.

**Historical Emergence of Sabbaticals**

Initially, we thought the history of sabbaticals was straightforward—sabbaticals began in the mid-1800s, with Harvard University being identified as the instigator of this benefit. It was a strategy to attract faculty to an institution. As we considered this academic origin story, questions arose about the beginnings of the concept of the sabbatical itself; why it was rapidly adopted across many institutions, and whether its value extends beyond attracting faculty. Our exploration of the possible roots of sabbatical are connected to agricultural
and religious notions of lying fallow, rest, reflection, and renewal. This approach made one thing apparent: We are not scholars of agricultural history or religious histories! We are simply scholars of education doing our best to make sense of the academic sabbatical.

Much of religion and agriculture collocate in ways we may only vaguely recall. “For it was agriculture that allowed the settled division of labour which produced the classes that codified our religions, and in explaining their deeper intents, religious writers used metaphor from the main occupation of their day, agriculture” (Falvey, 2005, p. 2). Both agriculture and religion share concepts of rest, renewal, and sustainability. We will briefly explore these origins and shared beliefs.

### Agricultural Origins

The tradition of sabbatical has some important roots in agricultural fallowing, a process for ensuring sustained productivity in crops that has been in use at least since the Bronze Age (Bakels, 2009). Fallowing likely began as part of a strategy to address the depletion of nutrients in soil that can happen over time when there is continuous planting of few crops. Soil nutrients are known to deplete when not replenished. Before chemical fertilizers, farmers would shift cultivation to different locations to take advantage of better soil conditions. In time, the availability of space became an issue. The practice of fallowing individual plots (i.e., letting a growing area lie dormant for a time) was used and a variety of fallowing techniques emerged (Gleave, 1996). Fallowing also occurred in pharaonic Egypt as a pragmatic need to give soil time to recover from flooding or deficient water (Butzer, 1984). The variety and timing for fallowing is not consistent and varies according to the conditions of the soil and demands placed on the soil by the crops (Gleave, 1996), which is consistent with the historical record. Agriculture and farming were important to changes in our stories as a human race. While many cultures continued with hunting and gathering, other cultures chose to gather in a region and learned to use the resources that were nearby to develop and sustain a lifestyle (Diamond, 1997).

### Religious Origins

The agrarian usage of laying fallow, rest, restoration, or renewal of land appears to have either preceded, migrated from, or paralleled the application of the same principle to humans. Its occurrence with
humans is evident in the records of various religions, but, while there is clearly a parallel, the details of how that transition took place is not clear. World religions are thousands of years old. It makes sense that texts used to describe concepts of sustainability are tied to agricultural images and practices as these understandings were familiar, and connected to survival itself. In particular, the application of the principle to humans clearly developed some standardization of practice with regular intervals that do not parallel agrarian applications.

We will venture to demonstrate some connection without attempting an in-depth interpretation. A detailed accounting of the religious underpinnings of the Sabbath and its interpretation for the sabbatical can be found in Kimball (1978), Endres (2001), and Burton (2010).

**Judaism**

The concept of a sabbatical developed to parallel the ancient Hebrew practice of the Sabbath and linked directly to agricultural practices. The Hebrew scriptures in the Bible address sabbatical several times. Genesis is the very first mention of sabbatical (Genesis 2:2–3), where the seventh day is one of rest, and includes values of holiness and spiritual renewal. Sabbatical also is part of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:2–17; Deuteronomy 5:6–21). Depending on the version of the Bible, it may appear as the fifth, fourth, or third commandment, but its presence is constant. For some, these commandments were written “with the finger of God” (Exodus 31:18; Deuteronomy 9:10). Multiple biblical references occur, making the presence of a Sabbath, or *shmita*, a Sabbath year, far more than a passing idea.

The book of Jeremiah references a freeing of individuals from servitude after seven years (Jeremiah 34:13–14: “At the end of seven years ye shall let go every man his brother that is a Hebrew, that hath been sold unto thee, and hath served thee six years, thou shalt let him go free from thee”). In the end, there are a great many references to the Sabbath and the concept of sabbatical as periods of rest, reflection, and renewal.

**Islam**

The Quran also identifies Sabbath rest with Jumu’ah, the Friday prayer. While not a full day of rest, there is a nonwork element to this time. The Jumu’ah occurs weekly (every seven days) and is a time to step out of daily work tasks and engage with sacred elements.
Christianity
The same principle arises in the idea that one works six days of the week and rests and worships on the seventh.

Non-Religious Practices
The notion of working six days and resting on the seventh has had cultural influence as a societal norm that goes beyond the details of specific religions. For example, in Canada the Lord’s Day Act embedded the religious notion until it was struck down as contravening the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1985.¹ The period when the Act was in force aligns with many older people’s childhood experiences of when stores were closed on Sundays—a day of rest. Older individuals in North American and European communities recollect those days were quiet, with less traffic and more focus on family. There was, in our experience, some societal coherence in sharing a common experience of rest from work and routine on the seventh day.

Concluding the Historical Emergence
For individuals, sabbaticals arise according to when they were hired, whether they choose to take a sabbatical, along with any deferrals or delays that may take place. Sabbaticals do not occur simultaneously for all, but there is a sense of a common experience. The common experience is recognition of the change of pace that arises because sabbaticals often include flexible hours and change of routine. It is a common experience lacking significant details.

The agricultural notion of leaving fields to fallow may be a better parallel, but the agrarian details are not common knowledge. For instance, it does not mean ignoring the fields. There is, as we understand it, a need for ploughing and harrowing the fields to keep them arable. There is a need for organic material to be tilled into the soil, which as it denatures reduces viability of pathogens that can harm crops.

While the religious and agricultural history is informative about the origin of the concept of sabbatical, it is more germane to investigate sabbatical in the modern academy. Endres (2001) follows the parallel, arguing that the Bible does not demand that the farmer return to the field in year eight or provide evidence of a fallow year being productive—a point that does not help clarify the current understanding of the academic sabbatical. The use of parallels ultimately loses clarity, and does not provide a fundamental
conceptualization of sabbaticals that can resolve questions such as whether they are a privilege or a right in the academy (Otto & Kroth, 2011).

**Academic Sabbaticals**

From the inception of this book, there has been an unusual tension. From the earliest days it was clear that the sabbatical has received little attention as an academic topic (Carraher et al., 2014; Flaspohler, 2009). A literature review conducted for the book proposal revealed a small body of scholarship about sabbaticals, but much more could be done. The literature has been described as “atheoretical” (Carraher et al., 2014, p. 296), filled with many anecdotal accounts. Yet anecdotal accounts provide qualitative details. Burton (2010), for example, highlights how muddy the process of beginning a sabbatical can be.

The lack of literature is surprising given sabbaticals have existed for nearly a century and a half. Kang and Miller (1999) explain that the academic sabbatical began in 1880, in the United States, after a decade of experiments using leaves of absences. It began at one institution and slowly expanded; in 1930, there were 178 institutions offering sabbaticals. Bennett and Scroggs (1932) reported a rate of 48 percent of universities offering sabbaticals based on a sample in or about 1932. Daugherty (1980) reported that in 1972 the occurrence was 64 percent of regionally accredited two- and four-year institutions that had sabbaticals, and that the figure had increased to 73 percent in 1979. By 1982, all the universities studied had sabbatical programs (Kang and Miller, 1999).

Despite the progressive history of adoption there were challenges finding academics who were interested in writing about their sabbatical experiences. The number of faculty who take sabbaticals is low. Numerically, if every eligible faculty member took a sabbatical every seven years (or a half sabbatical after three or four years) then, on average, one-seventh (=1 year per 7 years or 0.5 years per 3.5 years) or roughly 14 percent of faculty would be on sabbatical in any given year. However, the actual rate reported (see table 1) is 3.8 percent, with 68 percent of sabbaticals being one semester as opposed to a year (Kang & Miller, 1999). Weintraub (2008) mentions a 5 percent cap on sabbaticals granted in any given year in some institutions. Flaspohler (2009) cites a statistic from 1979 that only 35 percent of academic librarians eligible for a sabbatical took advantage of it. This figure represents one-third
of the 14 percent who are eligible, resulting in an overall rate of sabbatical taking of 4.9 percent, consistent with other figures.

Boening (1996) gives substantial details about sabbatical rates at the University of Alabama based on a ten-year period, from 1986 to 1996, when the Faculty of Arts and Science had requests of 6.3 percent per year and approved 5.4 percent per year, while the Faculty of Education had the lowest percentage approved, at 2.9 percent per year. These figures pool semester sabbaticals with full-year sabbaticals. Distinguishing the two types of sabbaticals, one-semester sabbaticals were requested at a rate of 8.1 percent per year, with 6.5 percent per year approved, while one-year sabbaticals had a request rate of 1.7 percent per year and 1.4 percent per year were approved. (This is an 82 percent rate of one-semester sabbaticals and contrasts with the 68 percent figure Kang and Miller reported.)

Table 1
Reported rates of sabbaticals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic discipline</th>
<th>Sabbaticals requested by type and approval</th>
<th>One year</th>
<th>One semester</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Requested</td>
<td>Approved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts and Science</td>
<td></td>
<td>8.1%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library Science</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Easteal and Westmarland (2010) argue that the low rate of sabbatical taking arises because faculty do not have equivalent capacities for activities or access to sabbaticals. They propose addressing the inequalities of access by using virtual sabbaticals to promote international travel and collaboration opportunities. This may be valid but contrasts with Weintraub (2008), who indicates she did not apply for a sabbatical because she could not identify a focal purpose. Additionally, it contrasts with Brazeau and Van Tyle (2006), who claim sabbaticals are underutilized in professional schools, such as in schools of pharmacy. In other words, there are multiple explanations for the low rate of sabbaticals, but the rate is historically and consistently low.

In addition to the low sabbatical rate, among faculty who have taken sabbaticals there seemed to be reluctance to write about
them—we wondered if sabbaticals caused academics to focus within their own area of study and avoid broader academic thinking and scholarship or if there was something else taking place. We had to extend our efforts, and, in the end, it took roughly double the time we expected to gather a representative group of authors for the chapters in this book. The existence of this tension—a lack of scholarship, but also a struggle to engage scholars in an area needing scholarship—served to reinforce the view that this book would address both the need for scholarship and the need to understand the tension.

In the context of academia, sabbaticals are negotiated structures that provide an option for faculty. With the tripartite model of academia (teaching/research/service), the sabbatical ideally provides a period with no teaching or service roles, so that the academic can focus on their research. Variations of this model exist; for example, alternative foci such as course or program development among bipartite (teaching/service) faculty occur. The application process for a sabbatical, the duration, and amount of financial remuneration during the sabbatical vary as well. Despite the variations, the basic structure is fundamental, is available at most institutions, and seems to be appreciated among academics who take them. Yet the details can include political interactions, student and service commitments that do not easily stop, research dynamics, and myriads of other complexities.

Miller et al. (2012) used stratified international sampling to examine and detail many policies pertaining to sabbaticals and show there are variations. In many instances there is oversight by an administrator, but peer review is also used (Thompson & Louth, 2003; Weintraub, 2008). Miller et al. (2012) take issue with subjectivity and identify a lack of accountability and effectiveness evidence. However, establishing policies of accountability and effectiveness requires that foundational issues are reined in when, as one example, there is no consensus on whether sabbaticals are a privilege or a right (Otto & Kroth, 2011).

Beyond the most cursory description, sabbaticals are a valid option within higher education. They are earned periods of self-directed focused work. This is why we were surprised to find a tension—where the dearth of academic study about sabbaticals was clear but so was the reluctance to provide a written reflection on them. We suspected it might be related to the complexities that arise from the wide variety of personal details, as evident when reading the chapters of this book. However, the commonality and shared sense
of what sabbaticals are among academics seemed to defy the tension. We wondered if perhaps there was a sense that when the complexities are removed there might be little left. We also wondered if there may be psychological components where academics, as high achievers, may aim for the stars and decline to write about not reaching them.

Interactions with other academics have highlighted shared experiences within sabbaticals. Many have remarked about an initial stage of putting their feet up and genuinely resting for a week or two. It is not uncommon to hear of a stage, not long after that, when there is a realization that—to achieve everything that was planned—requires becoming focused on their objectives. Others mention travel, including lingering at the destination before or after a conference to gain a deeper experience. While these anecdotal experiences are common, they are not universal, and they most certainly do not define a sabbatical or place its importance within the academic context.

Our aim was to gather a cross-section of experiences and have authors narrate them, along with their reasoning. Our hope was that the self-selection to submit chapters would be a proxy for the range of experiences which academics have. We wanted to see the natural balance that came from narrative accounts about sabbaticals. We feel we have been successful in this endeavour. There are, however, a couple of significant challenges that deserve mention. The first is that academics are loath to make some of their workplace struggles public. It is simple self-preservation, as their places in academia will persist for longer than the writing of a chapter for this book. We were apprised of various issues and will raise them in due course, but they will lack the contextual connection to the authors, to respect their desire for self-preservation.

A second challenge is the relatively small number of academics who have contributed to the literature, which constrains the representation of issues known to exist. We, therefore, aimed for detail of the sabbatical experience and looked for the richness of the experience rather than have multiple authors clarifying the details of any single dimension of sabbatical experiences.

The result achieves several significant outcomes. The individual narratives show a diversity of experiences that promote thoughts about activities that academics might pursue in future sabbaticals. On more than one occasion, there were reflective moments in the editing process. Collectively, the voices show the richness and power of the sabbatical as a structural feature of the academy. And while it is not
without its challenges and tensions—it is, without a doubt—sabbaticals are a beneficial and productive tool for academics.

Lastly, this book follows two others, also published by the University of Ottawa Press. The Academic Gateway: Understanding the Journey to Tenure (Sibbald & Handford, 2017) and Beyond the Academic Gateway: Looking Back on the Tenure-Track Journey (Sibbald & Handford, 2020). The two earlier books along with this book show a progression of academic activity. There is a longitudinal aspect, where six chapters in this book have contributors who were included in the prior two books. This opens a door to a research opportunity where the longitudinal record can be examined, whether by the interested reader or in a more rigorous effort, to address the need for theoretical contributions in the research literature.

Organization of this Book

The contributors to this book are varied in academic disciplines, are at different career stages, and are at different sized, and differently oriented, universities. Organizing within this diversity required attention to the different thematic approaches that academics often pursue. The examination of approaches represents the general nature of the experiences described. It is not an exhaustive or comprehensive review of approaches. This led to sectioning of groups of chapters that fit several themes. Each section includes an introduction, but by way of overview they are: first sabbaticals, first sabbaticals with significant travel, and perspectives of more than one sabbatical.

The organization is pragmatic, corresponding to significant themes among the chapters. The first section focuses on first sabbatical experiences with limited travel. The experiences include some travel and a chapter where the COVID-19 pandemic removed the opportunity for travel. This section is focused on travel, when feasible, for dissemination of research and attending conferences as opposed to a defining feature of the sabbatical. The second section of the book includes contributions where travel was a defining feature of the sabbatical. The third section includes contributors who have, or are on the verge of, experiences with more than one sabbatical. The authors in this section provide a longer view and have had the additional experience of years after returning from the sabbatical, which doubtlessly contributes to a focused sense of the sabbatical experience within the broader scope of academic endeavour.
Endnote

1 See https://canliiconnects.org/en/summaries/28387

References


