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Academic Leadership Journal

Sabbaticals as a Form of Faculty Development

The quality of a college or university's faculty is directly correlated to an institution's reputation and effectiveness. When faculty members are active in governance and embrace activities that improve their teaching, the entire institution's reputation and quality can improve. When faculty conversely avoid attempts at improving instruction or their other activities, the quality of the institution can be seen as falling and the value of the degree is lessened. This very notion of institutional quality being correlated to faculty abilities is a necessary vision that higher education leaders must accept on some level if they are to believe that institutions transform student lives. And if that assumption is accepted, that faculty quality reflect institutional quality, then faculty development activities must be seen as essential to maintaining institutional quality (Bai, 1999).

There are a substantial number of faculty development strategies, ranging from in-service workshops and professional conferences to auditing courses and seminars that have received at least nominal validation through anecdotal reporting from participants. One of the increasingly visible and most costly strategies for faculty development is the sabbatical leave program. Sabbaticals allow for faculty members to have time away from traditional academic duties to reflect on practice, participate in various activities, focus time on research or service, and renew the energies necessary for being an effective teacher (Sima, 2000; Toomey & Connor, 1988; Zahorski, 1994; Foreman, 1976). The number of administrators who leave their positions and assume 'sabbatical experiences' has largely tainted the intent of the modern sabbatical, and has resulted in several state legislatures regulating what and who can be considered for a sabbatical (Bai & Miller, 2001; Lively, 1993).

Sabbatical leave programs are problematic for the contemporary university in at least two primary areas. First, they are unregulated and lack any substantial method of assessment. Most research focusing on sabbatical assessment has concluded that summative measures are the most commonly used tool for evaluation, yet there is agreement that more should be done to justify the time and expense related to a sabbatical (Bai, 1999, Sima & Denton, 1995). The second problem is associated with public opinion and what those in decision-making roles see as the value of a sabbatical leave. When too many administrators depart high visibility positions and are reported to take 'sabbatical leaves,' the idea of what a sabbatical can and should be used for is changed substantially. Several years ago the Colorado state legislature became involved in regulating sabbatical leaves as a result of too many administrators reportedly taking 'sabbatical leaves' while on full-administrative salary. The result was the implementation of a complex, politically motivated piece of legislation that today regulates who in the Colorado system of higher education is eligible to take a sabbatical and what they can do during that time away from campus while receiving a salary.

These two driving issues point to a more fundamental issue that has emerged during the past century for higher education. The sabbatical was first used as a hiring incentive at Harvard University, and was continued to be seen as a unique benefit to life in the academy to combat salaries that were not competitive with private industry (Toomey & Connor, 1988). When higher education opened to the

general public, however, more institutions adopted and put sabbatical leave programs in place for all faculty members, and while regulations were often clearly articulated (every seven years, half-pay for one year or full-pay for one semester, etc.) the overriding mission of the sabbatical leave was not.

Mythical versions of sabbatical leaves continue to be reported in anecdotal writing where faculty describe time to read books and articles from different disciplines and to think in unstructured patterns about teaching, research, and academic life, and somehow, this experience returns the faculty member to campus as a better teacher, scholar, and citizen. Contemporary sabbaticals have become more closely tied to work with grants or other soft-money contracts and productive activities, such as producing formal products like books, patents, works of art, etc. In this contemporary vision, there is no overriding conceptualization of what the institution wants, needs, or gets from faculty leaving for sabbaticals. Yet, by identifying who is responsible for the sabbatical leave's impact, that is responsible in addition to the faculty member, institutional leaders will be both better able to develop and restore faculty expertise using sabbatical leaves, and to use this tool more effectively in coaching faculty and helping them establish meaningful criteria, activities, objectives, etc., for sabbatical leaves.

Sabbatical Leaves: Reward or Renewal?

Sabbaticals were first introduced to higher education in the 1800s as a hiring incentive to prominent faculty members. Throughout the first half of the 1900s, these leave programs became increasingly popular, especially in public higher education, and were slowly transformed from a hiring bonus to a developmental activity (Meehan, 1999; see also Zahorski, 1994). The notion of a sabbatical as a developmental activity for faculty members has been highlighted in such research as Sima and Denton (1995) and Miller and Bai (2003) where both projects focused on the tangible benefits or products of taking a sabbatical leave. These might be books, articles, original research, improved performance in teaching or a technical area, etc. In some cases the outcome is nothing more than the accomplishment of having taken a sabbatical, which raises the rather substantial question of what the intent is of a sabbatical leave or entire sabbatical leave program.

Bachler (1995) argued that sabbaticals in higher education were initially structured as a benefit because other compensation, including salary levels, was inadequate to lure high-quality faculty to higher education. He also argued that sabbaticals are effective tools for combating burnout, morale problems, and stress. Douglas (1995) took an ideologically similar stance in defining the need for sabbatical leave programs, with a more intellectual-focus than an employee-management focus. Referring to them as a 'pause' from academic duty to 'recharge batteries,' Douglas indicated that sabbaticals should be opportunities for faculty members to examine disciplines, ideas, scholarship, etc., from a different perspective, one which has no specific predetermined outcome. Douglas' column incited a number of letters to the Chronicle of Higher Education defending the ideals of sabbatical leaves as something that should not be quantified into specific outcomes. These letters to the editor were consistent with much of the anecdotal literature praising sabbatical leaves (Wilson, 1999; Patrick, 1991; Reynolds, 1990).

The increased public scrutiny of higher education behavior and administrative uses of sabbatical leaves have, however, greatly called into question the functioning and expectations of sabbaticals. The term 'sabbatical' has been broadly used to encompass any number of administrative leave packages ranging from re-tooling to return to a classroom teaching assignment as an excuse to provide salary for dismissed administrators. The range of uses outside of faculty development have become so

commonplace that state legislatures have become involved in their regulation.

The result of these administrative uses has driven the conception of three distinct types of sabbatical leaves being awarded. The first are those that are awarded to a faculty member based on past service, almost as a political award. This type of sabbatical leave was alluded by Boening (1996) who studied sabbatical application and award patterns over a ten year period of time. The second type of sabbatical leave awarded is one based on developing the faculty member who is in the greatest need for some form of improvement. This conceptualization was based loosely on Meehan's (1999) replication of Boening's work and his finding that at a teaching-intensive institution, the primary focus of a sabbatical leave award was teaching improvement. The third conceptualization of sabbatical leave awards is one of administrative transition, based primarily on popular press interpretations of administrative announcements. Regardless of individual category, sabbatical leaves are designed to produce a positive change among the faculty member, and the system of higher education organization currently in place has responsibility for that change. A substantial question, however, has to do with who within the organization is responsible for seeing that the change is indeed positive, and that it is within the mission, scope, or purpose of the institution. There are several key professionals, including the individual taking the sabbatical, the department chair who oversees the individual, and the academic dean who oversees a grouping of departments are possibilities for this responsibility. The current study was designed to identify first what criteria were important to determine the success or failure of a sabbatical leave, and second, who in addition to the faculty member on sabbatical should have a role in seeing that the sabbatical objectives were completed.

Research Methods

A total of 150 colleges and universities were selected from a comprehensive listing of four-year institutions in early-2004 using a table of random numbers. No exclusively online institutions were included in the study. Using web-based data from college and university homepages and assigning random numbers to academic units, one academic dean and one department chair (or head) was selected from each institution. The selections were not intended to be matched in any way. Surveys were distributed in a pen-and-paper format with a cover letter via traditional mail services.

The survey instrument used in the research project was a derivative of an instrument that was based on assessing sabbatical leaves (Miller & Bai, 2003). The original survey was designed to assess the extent to which a faculty member's behaviors had changed upon a return from a sabbatical leave. The instrument stems were reworded to reflect a somewhat different question, instead of assessing whether or not a faculty member's behavior did change, but rather who should be responsible for seeing that the type of change should occur.

The instrument included a total of 15 items that requested two separate responses for each. The first was how important the individual item was for a faculty member's sabbatical to be considered important. This response was to be rated on a 1-to-5 Likert-type scale, with 1=Strongly disagree that it is important progressively to 5=Strongly agree that it is important. The second question was who in addition to the individual faculty member should be responsible to see that this type of objective or behavior change take place, either the academic department chair or the academic dean.

The revised survey instrument was pilot tested with chairs and deans at one university that was subsequently removed from consideration to be included in the sample population. Revisions were

made for clarity in the instructions, and the instrument was determined to be reliable and valid. The instrument was distributed in the summer of 2004.

Findings

A total of 194 surveys were ultimately returned (64.6%), but only 182 were determined to be usable, resulting in a 60.6% response rate. This response rate was deemed acceptable based on Hager, Wilson, Pollack, and Rooney's (2002) observations on response variance. Over half of the respondents (n=118; 65%) were department chairs and the remainder self-identified themselves as academic deans (n=63; 35%). Due to the discrepancy of respondent cell size, no comparative analyses were attempted.

Respondents were first asked to rate their perceptions of the importance of sabbatical leaves in five areas: objectives, teaching, research, campus citizenship, and overall benefits. Each of the five categories contained three descriptive areas that were rated by respondents on a 1-to-5 Likert-type scale, with 5=Strongly Agree, 4=Agree, 3=Neutral Perceptions, 2=Disagree, and 1=Strongly Disagree. As shown in Table 1, in the sabbatical objectives category, all respondents agreed most strongly that the sabbatical should be viewed as meaningful (mean 4.47), followed by the accomplishment of sabbatical goals (mean 4.19), and objectives that are unique to the sabbatical experience (mean 4.09).

The next three categories to be rated focused on the faculty roles of teaching, research, and campus citizenship. The most important objective for sabbaticals in terms of teaching was identified as making the faculty member a better teacher (mean 4.05), and the sabbatical was identified as a tool for providing the faculty member on sabbatical with a better grasp of cutting edge issues (mean 4.18). None of the three items to be rated in the campus citizenship category had an overall mean rating above 4.0, and the highest rating – that is the most agreed upon important objective of a sabbatical in this category – was making for a higher quality campus participant (mean 3.69).

For the overall criteria identified as objectives for sabbaticals, the most agreed upon objective was making for a better attitude about working at the institution (mean 3.69), overall making the faculty member 'better,' (mean 3.57), and making the faculty member inspire others to do better (mean 3.41).

Respondents were next asked to determine who should be responsible for seeing that the sabbatical addressed each of the items identified in the five categories. Although the nature of the sabbatical leave program strongly encourages individual responsibility for accomplishing work and self-identified tasks, the study was constructed accepting the assumption that faculty development activities can not be successfully completed in a vacuum, and that the administrators who have a responsibility for assuring quality faculty performance have a role and expectation to participate in determining what sabbaticals are used for. Respondents were subsequently given two choices for determining who should have the most responsibility for collaborating with the faculty member on sabbatical to see that the objectives are accomplished.

As shown in Table 2, department chairs were identified as the primary person of responsibility on 14 of the 15 objectives. Departmental chairs were particularly identified by over 70% of the respondents in the following three areas: helping the faculty member get better at student assessment (73.9%), helping the faculty member providing more up to date teaching material (72.7%), and helping the faculty member develop a better grasp of cutting edge issues (70.7%). The faculty member's academic dean

was identified as the key person to help the faculty member become a more participative campus citizen (38.6%).

Discussion

Data collected revealed some interesting trends about how sabbaticals are used and what can be accomplished through them. First and foremost, however, it will prove meaningful to the entire academic community to replicate this study with a larger sample that includes a more even distribution of respondent types as well as incorporating faculty feedback. This study does, however, contribute an important first-step in assigning faculty development responsibilities to department chairs, and indicates that although deans may be increasingly focused on external affairs, still have an important role in assuring faculty quality and continuous improvement.

The data generally revealed some obvious elements of what is important to a sabbatical, elements that have been speculated about in anecdotal literature but have not been documented before in any sort of objective manner. This includes the most basic agreement that sabbaticals should be viewed as meaningful and that the faculty member on sabbatical should judge success by completion of specific goals. What this finding does not reveal, though, is the rather important contention that there must be agreement between the faculty member going on sabbatical and the needs of the institution or academic unit.

Secondly, there was general agreement that sabbaticals keep faculty up-to-date on important issues, help them to be more productive scholars, and makes them better teachers. What is particularly interesting about this finding is that it is in direct contention with Boening's (1996) and Miller and Bai's (1998) findings that specifically found research productivity to drop post-sabbatical and that teaching performance awards are consistently awarded to faculty members before they take sabbaticals – faculty do not win the awards post-sabbatical when theoretically they would have had time to improve their teaching. What this suggests, then, is an idealization of what sabbaticals should be about, while in fact there continues to be little meaningful conversation about how to use a leave of this nature in a manner that helps the institution improve. The consequence, unfortunately for higher education institutions, leaders, and faculty, will be the intrusion of state governments, as in Colorado, and the creation of statutory law to regulate this type of program. Another very real fear will be the elimination of sabbaticals in favor of other faculty development activities that can more precisely document performance enhancement.

There is also the larger issue of who owns faculty development, and whether this ownership is rooted in faculty regulating their own behaviors, as in peer review processes, or if administrator oversight plays a dominant role in determining faculty quality. The realistic response to that observation is that a happy medium between faculty and administrators need to be identified, and responsibility for faculty quality needs to be grounded with both. As such, faculty members using sabbatical leaves need to look beyond self-interests and ask how the leave improves performance or institutional life. The idealization of a sabbatical leave for personal reflection can still be possible, but the contemporary corporate university demands that there be some result from this time off. Faculty members today can either work to create their own mechanisms for determining if leaves are successful and contribute, or they can continue to wait for trustees and legislatures to become even further involved in university life.

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Table 1.

Importance of Sabbatical Leave Program in Meeting Selected Objectives

n=182

Mean Min Max SD

Sabbatical objectives

Achieve the goals set for a sabbatical 4.19 2 5 .888

Objectives unique to a sabbatical experience 4.09 3 5 .695

Sabbatical is viewed as meaningful 4.47 3 5 .761

Teaching performance

Makes the faculty member a better teacher 4.05 2 5 4.05

Provides more up to date teaching material 3.66 1 5 1.045

Makes the faculty member better at student 3.24 2 5 .845

assessment

Research Performance

Makes the faculty member a more productive 4.17 1 5 .925

scholar

Provides the faculty member a better grasp of 4.18 2 5 .848

cutting edge issues

Sabbatical makes a significant contribution to the 3.90 1 5 1.041

profession

Campus Citizenship

Makes a more participative campus citizen 3.61 2 5 .874

Makes a higher quality campus participant 3.69 2 5 .784

Makes the faculty member more willing to take 3.01 1 5 1.136
on leadership roles in campus service

Overall Criteria

Makes a better attitude about working at the 3.69 1 5 1.326
institution

Makes the faculty member inspire others to 3.41 1 5 1.340
do better

Makes the faculty member better 3.57 1 5 1.441

Table 2.

Administrative Responsibility for Collaborating with Faculty Member on Sabbatical Objectives
n=182

Administrator who should be responsible

Chair OR Dean

Sabbatical objectives

Achieve the goals set for a sabbatical 86 (46.7%) 51 (27.7%)

Objectives unique to a sabbatical experience 100 (54) 37 (20.1)

Sabbatical is viewed as meaningful 82 (44.6) 55 (29.9)

Teaching performance

Makes the faculty member a better teacher 115 (62.5) 38 (20.7)

Provides more up to date teaching material 132 (71.7) 21 (11.4)

Makes the faculty member better at student 136 (73.9) 9 (4.9)

assessment

Research Performance

Makes the faculty member a more productive 109 (59.2) 36 (19.2)

scholar

Provides the faculty member a better grasp of 130 (70.7) 23 (12.5)

cutting edge issues

Sabbatical makes a significant contribution 114 (62) 23 (12.5)

to the profession

Campus Citizenship

Makes a more participative campus citizen 66 (35.9) 71 (38.6)

Makes a higher quality campus participant 75 (40.8) 64 (34.8)

Makes the faculty member more willing to take 80 (43.5) 57 (31)

on leadership roles in campus service

Overall Criteria

Makes a better attitude about working at the 101 (54.9) 44 (23.9)

institution

Makes the faculty member inspire others to 104 (56.5) 42 (22.8)

do better

Makes the faculty member better 81 (44) 59 (32.1)