

My Experience On An International Sabbatical

David A. Sabatini

**School of Civil Engineering and Environmental Science
University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK 73019**

Abstract

Shortly after receiving tenure many faculty are eligible for a sabbatical leave at their home university, at another US university or research facility, or at an international location. Typical sabbatical policies allow for one semester of leave with full pay or two semesters of leave with half pay. Taking a sabbatical leave away from the home university raises a number of questions. How will the sabbatical leave positively and negatively impact a research program? Will the benefits of a sabbatical leave outweigh the disruption to work and family life? Does an international sabbatical involve additional complications? In this paper I will discuss factors to consider when applying for a sabbatical leave. I will describe some of the transitional issues which were faced as well as discuss the professional benefits realized during my sabbatical leave. I will share the challenges I experienced as a Senior Fulbright Scholar at the Universitaet Tuebingen (Angewandte Geologie), Germany and the advantages experienced in our family life.

I. Introduction

The concept of a sabbatical year dates back to the Old Testament where ancient Jews were told that every seventh year their fields should be left untilled, debts were to be forgiven, etc. More recently, an academic sabbatical year is defined as “a year, usually every seventh year, of freedom from teaching, granted to a professor, as for study or travel”. In both cases, the sabbatical year is intended to be a year of renewal and rejuvenation.

II. Background

To quote from the OU Faculty Handbook “Sabbatical leaves of absence are among the most important means by which an institution’s academic program is strengthened, a faculty member’s teaching effectiveness enhanced, and scholarly usefulness enlarged. The major purpose is to provide opportunity for continued professional growth and new or renewed intellectual achievement through study, research, writing, and training.”

Sabbatical leave policies typically allow a faculty person to take a sabbatical every seven years of service. Generally the sabbatical can be taken for one semester with full pay or two semesters with half pay. Faculty are typically encouraged to take a sabbatical at a remote site. A variety of settings are possible including industry, a government research laboratory, an international university or another university in the U.S. On occasion faculty remain at

their home university for a sabbatical leave. During this time they will typically schedule numerous trips.

A two-semester sabbatical typically requires external funding for half of the sabbatical salary. This funding can come from a number of sources, including the following: the host university (typically involves teaching a course or some other deliverable), the government or industrial sponsor, or a sabbatical agency (e.g., Fulbright program). Sabbatical activities can focus on developing a new research or teaching focus, learning new expertise or using unique equipment available at the host location, conducting personal research, targeted reading and proposal development, etc. International sabbatical leaves have unique opportunities and challenges associated with the cultural changes experienced.

My sabbatical was supported by the Fulbright Commission. For over fifty years the Fulbright program has offered U. S. faculty, students and professionals the opportunity to study abroad and increase global understanding. The purpose of the Fulbright program is “... to increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries ... and thus to assist in the development of friendly, sympathetic, and peaceful relations between the United States and other countries of the world.” Since 1946 nearly 32,000 American scholars have lectured and conducted research in countries around the globe. The Fulbright program is just one of many programs that provide funding for a sabbatical leave.

When considering a sabbatical leave, a number of “pros and cons” may need to be considered, as summarized in Table 1 below. In terms of positives, a sabbatical leave is an opportunity to refocus and pursue new initiatives, which can be a very rejuvenating exercise. It also provides an opportunity to benefit from unique expertise and/or equipment at the host university. Personally, an international sabbatical can be a real time of bonding as a family experiences the trials and triumphs of such an opportunity. However, a sabbatical leave is not without challenges and concerns. Such a leave can be a serious discontinuity in an active research program, as the program scales down before and up after the sabbatical, or if the professor tries to manage the research program long distance (which can somewhat defeat the value of the sabbatical). Renting out the family home and finding housing in the host community can both be traumatic and costly. If school-age children are involved this can also pose a serious challenge. Locating funding for a two-semester sabbatical can be a challenge. An international sabbatical, especially in Europe, can prove to be a costly adventure. And finally, cultural and professional re-entry can be difficult after the sabbatical. These are some of the issues we wrestled with but in the end determined that the benefits for everyone outweighed the costs.

Table 1
Pros and Cons of a Sabbatical Leave

<u>Pros</u>	<u>Cons</u>
Refocus	Discontinuity
Rejuvenation	Housing
New Initiatives	Schooling (children)
Unique expertise / equipment	Funding
Family bonding	Finances
Cultural / international experience	Reentry

III. Personal experience

Transition Issues

I applied for the Fulbright award at the end of July, but it was mid-February before I received a definite confirmation of the award. An earlier notification would have been helpful because I needed to rent out our home in Norman before locating housing in Germany. In addition, this time frame required me to consider alternate funding options while I was waiting to hear. Roughly one out of ten applicants is funded by a German Fulbright award.

I was very fortunate that our German host looked for housing for us ahead of time. He identified university housing for visiting professors. This proved to be ideal for us because it was convenient to campus and shopping and because it was completely furnished. While the apartment was quite a bit smaller than our house in Norman (~ 1/3 of the size) and the rent was quite a bit more than for similar housing in Norman (~ twice), the rent was less than it would have been on the open market.

Schooling for our children was a major issue. All along we planned to put our children (ages 6 and 8) in German schools. The schools were most cooperative and helpful; however, it was still a major challenge. Two things that helped us were hiring a German tutor and getting to know other German children and parents in the children's classes. In the early elementary grades in Tuebingen, school is in session only for several hours which were quite adjustable. It was very much to our advantage to have my wife continue her work as a homemaker since this allowed for needed flexibility. Initially our daughter was in first grade, but the language and the instruction style (and possibly the teacher) made this a poor fit. We subsequently put her in kindergarten, which worked out very well. We have since learned through German teachers and friends that many German parents wait a year before putting their kids in first grade. Thus, "downgrading" children in international schools may be a wise choice.

We found the German medical doctors to be friendly and capable, and patient with our limited German language skills. However, German society and their doctors tend to be more oriented to homeopathic treatment. This can be a major adjustment for those accustomed to antibiotics more readily prescribed by U.S. doctors.

Our immediate families were supportive of our year abroad yet not without reservations. It was helpful for us to arrange telephone time together. We quickly learned that it is significantly cheaper for the calls to originate from the U.S. Frequent e-mail communications and periodic letters really helped diminish any feelings of isolation. My wife and children accompanied me to conferences and speaking engagements in a multitude of different places. As a result, there was so much diversity in our routine that there was not much time left for feelings of homesickness. It is wonderful to look back at all we saw and learned together about geography, history, art and culture. This aspect of education combined with our children's German fluency also made this year of great educational benefit to them. Both children have been able to re-enter the U.S. public school system at their appropriate grade level without any disadvantage. We all returned to American society with a deeper sense of appreciation of the differences in the U.S. and Germany. We periodically lapse into German language but more frequently miss our friends and the beautiful, more relaxed pace of living we enjoyed there.

In terms of transportation to Germany it was somewhat shocking to learn that extended-stay international tickets are significantly more expensive than short-stay tickets (~1.5 to 2.0 times). Having purchased the latter many times I was shell-shocked to learn of the cost of extended-stay tickets. It would have been nice to know this ahead of time.

We bought a used car in Germany which was used almost exclusively for trips. Traveling by car proved to be cheaper on trips (with a family of four) and made it easier to see things along the way. However, I still prefer train travel in Europe – which is quick, reliable and much less stressful.

The Fulbright Commission had an orientation meeting in Bonn in the fall, and a “progress report” meeting in Berlin in the spring. The orientation meeting was especially helpful as it eased our transition. It was also very rewarding and interesting to meet and share experiences with Fulbright colleagues in other disciplines and other universities throughout Germany. The Fulbright Commission provided an orientation booklet that documented important points from previous awardees -- for a “first timer” this information was very useful. The Fulbright Commission helped make certain transitions easier based on their past experience and their “track record” with universities and communities. It was a benefit and support for my wife to meet other spouses and discuss various issues relative to their familial, social and cultural adjustments. Additionally, the children were encouraged by playing with other American children and sharing their different experiences. These are major advantages of going overseas with a “program” rather than on an individual basis.

The Fulbright program sponsored an intensive language course but we were not able to participate in it. I took two Volkschule (night school) German courses in our host city and we also used a private tutor. The encouragement of our tutor was essential as we found that many of those attending night school already spoke the language but were there for assistance in their grammatical constructions. It was extremely helpful to our children to have the private confirmation of the tutor and the access to ask specific questions relating to understanding and social context in the school setting. I would strongly encourage those

going abroad for the first time to budget for and begin with a tutor because of the numerous arrangements that are initially required and the cultural understanding that is necessary. If I have a future return sabbatical in Germany I would go several weeks earlier to participate in an intensive course in the hometown. This could be an easier option for families with children.

Sabbatical Activities

I taught a one semester long course and one intensive course during my sabbatical; both were in English. The semester long course was Physicochemical Processes for Water Treatment and the short course was Surfactant Enhanced Soil Remediation. For the semester long course I gave my hosts several options to choose from and they selected this course because it was not available on their campus. They saw my course as an opportunity for their students to expand their training and “experience a US course without having to move to the US.” I had fifteen students ranging from pre-diplome (junior / senior) to post-doctorates. I found the students to be bright, talented and very hardworking. They were eager to learn about not only the subject matter but also life in the U.S. They were also very open to discussing education and life in Germany. While there were social differences, I found the German students to be quite similar to my U.S. students.

The students participated in the class out of personal interest but received no academic credit for the course. Thus, the students were personally motivated and highly interested in the material presented. However, they were also very busy because this was in addition to their normal load. While most were consistent in attendance their ability to complete homework and group projects was limited. As a result I distributed homework and graded it but did not expect everyone to complete it. Also, instead of assigning a term project we conducted a series of paper reviews. I did use active learning techniques and the students responded very favorably to this. These techniques included individual quizzes followed by group quizzes on selected reading assignments, small group consensus building activities on selected topics, etc. It was very rewarding to watch the students interact and become cohesive, especially since they spanned a range of ages and academic levels from pre-diplome to post-doctorate.

My intensive short course was on a technology we are developing at my home university known as Surfactant Enhanced Soil Remediation. This course was taught as a two-day intensive course to make it available to both the university community and the private sector. A total of sixteen participants were in this course. Roughly half were university students and half practitioners. It was a two day course meeting eight hours a day and included lecture material, group calculations / discussions and classroom demonstrations. The course was a good opportunity for the practitioners to see a developing technology and to provide input on its continued development. It was also an excellent opportunity for the practitioners and students to interact, both in the classroom and during break periods.

My research interests include developing a better understanding of contaminant movement in the subsurface and, based on this understanding, developing technologies to enhance the remediation of contaminated sites. More specifically, I am interested in equilibria and kinetic sorption of organic compounds with natural media, the coupling of sorption and biodegradation processes and the use of surfactants to expedite remediation of contaminated

sites. My hosts' educational and laboratory facilities were excellent and they were very generous in supporting my activities. I was able to accomplish most of my goals, but was overly ambitious in what I hoped to achieve. Two of my Oklahoma research students and I were able to take advantage of the unique expertise and equipment available at Tuebingen. For me personally, getting "back into the laboratory" was both rewarding and rejuvenating. It helped me better relate to my research students and allowed me to pursue several areas of interest. I interacted closely with several of the German graduate students and post docs and was able to contribute to their research. As a result of these collective activities we are in the process of co-authoring at least two joint research papers and are preparing several joint research proposals. I am confident that new environmental technologies will result from this ongoing collaboration that will benefit both the U.S. and Germany. My interactions with researchers, practitioners and governmental agents helped me better understand the European research and business climate and to see the unique opportunity we have to participate in the exciting changes occurring in Europe.

Personal / Professional Value of Experience

A primary personal goal was to grow closer as a family as we experienced the joys and heartaches of moving to another country, as we gained a deeper understanding of another culture, and as we developed relationships with people of varying socioeconomic backgrounds in another culture. Our experience did cause us to grow closer as a family. I also wanted my children to experience another culture at an early and impressionable age. We feel our children were a good age for this experience (6 and 8). They were old enough to remember the experience but not so old that transition into a German school was overwhelming. They were both immediately engulfed in German language. Their teachers chose not to speak English with them. Students do not begin learning English language until the upper elementary grades unless they have private lessons. Therefore, the children their ages only spoke German too. It took our children about three months to become fluent and several more months to be confident in their conversational skills. Both of them made several good friends. It was fun to watch them play with other children even though initially they were unable to communicate through language. It seems like we adults could learn from their example.

I also wanted to develop our language skills in a foreign setting, to enjoy the natural beauty of Germany and its neighboring countries, and to broaden our perspective on cultural differences in doing certain things. I made significant progress in each of these key areas although I did not have the time to accomplish everything I had hoped to.

Living in Germany greatly expanded our international awareness. Initially, when confronted with differences, we said, "Why do they do it that way?" Now we ask, "Why do we do it that way?" Through interactions and extended discussions with my colleagues, parents of our children's classmates and friends from church we certainly grew in our international awareness and understanding.

My experience at the university was very rewarding. I thoroughly enjoyed interacting with the professors there both professionally and personally. The class I taught was a pleasure

because it fostered student interaction and allowed me to try some of my innovative teaching ideas in another culture. My research activities were especially enjoyable. At my home institution I was basically supervising a cadre of research students. During my sabbatical I was able to get into the laboratory, do my own research and work alongside one of my Ph.D. students who was also in Germany. I had time to read and discuss new research areas and topics. The exposure to the geology department helped broaden and deepen my engineering background.

Adjustments Upon Return

I have been back at my home university for one semester as I write this. At this point, it seems appropriate to comment on the “re-entry” phenomenon. More obvious is the cultural re-entry we experienced when returning to the U.S. after almost a year abroad. Maybe less obvious is the re-entry at the office. Readjusting to the more constant influx of requests and time demands was challenging. As one colleague stated, “You find yourself thinking, how long until the next sabbatical?” Having been forewarned, I anticipated this adjustment, although I am not sure it made professional re-entry any easier.

IV. Summary /Re-entry Adjustments

We had many and varied hopes and aspirations for our time in Germany, both professional and personal. Most were fulfilled and many even exceeded. While it was not always easy, or fun, it was very, very good. And I think we will continue to see the fruit from the seeds that were planted. Would we do it again – in a heartbeat!

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DAVID SABATINI

David A. Sabatini is an Associate Professor of Civil Engineering and Environmental Science at the University of Oklahoma. He received his BSCE from the University of Illinois in 1981 and a PhD in Civil Engineering from Iowa State University in 1989. He has received a number of awards including the Midwest Section Dow Outstanding Young Faculty Award. During the 1997/98 AY he was a Senior Fulbright Scholar at the Universitaet Tuebingen, Germany.