Suffering Burnout but don't Want to Quit your Job? Try Finding a Teaching Sabbatical

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Abstract

After nearly fifteen years of the same basic job, the author knew that a change was needed in order to assure a continuation of new ideas and progress in his career. Two choices were available: finding a new job, or finding a sabbatical host and getting leave approved. While it is untested as to which would be easier, since only one path could be chosen, the choice to seek a sabbatical leave seemed the best, as really good career positions are not easily found.

Many items need to be considered in preparation for a sabbatical leave, and it seems that many more crop up in the seeking of just the right opportunity. Unfortunately, when one is seeking a teaching sabbatical, much of the preparation is moot when considered in light of the sheer difficulty of simply finding a suitable host for the teaching experience. The author discusses his initial failed attempts to find a suitable opportunity, including three stages of seemingly organized attempts to solve this problem like any engineering problem - calmly, logically, and with a firm grasp of the facts at hand.

A sabbatical position was finally secured by the author, and the details of finding and securing it is the main thrust of this paper. The preparation involved in earlier failed attempts was put to good use in the successful search, and persistence was a key element in the search. However, the primary factor in successfully securing the sabbatical opportunity was the realization that many Universities offer an environment in which one can revitalize one's teaching, though the circumstances offered may not exactly match expectations. This is discussed in terms of the step-by-step procedural details involved in the author's search, so that any faculty member seeking a teaching sabbatical can immediately put the information to use.

Introduction

In reviewing literature on the sabbatical leave, Boening and Miller[1] noted that "To address motivation, job burn-out, career advancement, and personal satisfaction, those who have taken sabbatical leaves view them as powerful tools for improving their careers." They also noted: "Sabbatical leaves ... are seen as of tremendous benefit to faculty as they seek self-improvement in ... teaching ... ." No wonder, then, that I felt that the solution to curing burn-out and to improving my teaching was to simply take a sabbatical leave from my position. What follows is primarily a summary of the experience of finding the right opportunity for that leave.

Background and Preparation -

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To begin with, my timing was all off. Receiving my Ph.D. at age 38, with children already in school, I was in trouble from the start. Why? Because, at the time I first became eligible to take a sabbatical leave the oldest of the children were in high school. This is **not** a good time to ask them to pull up their roots and spend a year in a place strange to them, no matter how much adventure is involved. It could have been a time to take a year off from dealing with them, leaving my spouse to handle the chore alone, but fairness was an issue. In addition, I was unwilling to miss all the activities the children were involved with at the time.

By the time my youngest child graduated from high school, thirteen years had passed, with my job remaining essentially the same for the entire time. Needless to say, a certain staleness and burnout had crept into my performance, and a sabbatical leave became more a necessity than a privilege or perquisite. Attendance at conferences was only an occasional event. Teaching ratings were suffering. The occasional good idea was still popping into my brain, but all too often popping right back out again with no action taken. Worse, with attendance at conferences slacking off, the good ideas that were happening always seemed to be taking off at some obtuse angle to where everyone else seemed to want to go. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, mind you, but it ultimately led to frustration and further inaction.

Two choices came to mind to shake things up and revitalize my teaching - finding a new job, or finding a sabbatical host and getting leave approved. Leaving my job was out of the question, after all, there is a certain amount of pride in being a tenured faculty member at a top-notch engineering school. There were also family considerations, too complicated and too private, and yet too boring, to go into. A sabbatical leave was the only hope for overcoming the staleness and burnout As noted earlier, it also offered the opportunity for self-improvement, and I was certainly interested in improving my teaching.

At this point of my reasoning, it was not necessary for me to charge into the process blindly, but I charged in anyway. After all, I thought, I have a Ph.D., and I didn't come by that credential casually. I, or more accurately my ego, reasoned that I must therefore be prepared to handle this. Besides my ego, who else did I listen to? I asked colleagues about sabbatical experiences, and read about some of the education research going on in engineering schools around the country. I read about wonderful new experiences being provided to engineering students at other schools. I heard glowing reports about what a refreshing experience the sabbatical can be, and the literature seemed to support this view. Boening and Miller[1] observed "Those who took sabbatical leaves overwhelmingly reported the experience as a positive one." Also, from Sorcinelli[2]: "Faculty agreed that opportunities to learn new things and to take on new challenges and responsibilities were essential to maintaining faculty vitality." This sounded like just the exposure I needed, though my naivete may have been getting the better of me.

Filled with enthusiasm, I began the process of actually finding a sabbatical leave opportunity. Specifically, I sought an opportunity to be hosted by another university for a year, with some limited financial support and the usual office space and logistical support. Initially, my unbounded optimism, my inexperience, and my ignorance of reality nearly combined to pitch a shutout against me. Fortunately, to jump ahead to the end of the story, I found a wonderful opportunity at San Jose State University, to whose College of Engineering and Dean of Engineering I will always be extremely grateful.

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Approach, or Strategy

I roughed out a sabbatical proposal and followed this with a frenzy of activity focused on locating the literature on how to find a sabbatical leave opportunity. Alas, there was virtually nothing in print, or even on the internet at that time detailing how to go about this monumental task. Strike one!

I asked colleagues how they obtained their sabbatical opportunities. Generally, through research ties or through their "networking" were the common responses. Because a teaching sabbatical was the objective, the research ties were out, not to mention the fact that, as a first-year engineering program teacher, my hard core research was mostly ancient history, so there weren't any ties anyway. Networking was a possibility at one time, but most of that went by the wayside when my conference attendance began to slack off. Strike two!

Next came the precision approach, identifying promising venues by reviewing the education literature to see who was doing interesting things that might jump-start the vegetating brain. Not much was found this way, though two universities were contacted. Nothing came of these contacts. Strike three!

Not willing to be called out on strikes in this important matter, I recalled a strategy from my younger days, used for finding the best available graduate program for pursuing my PhD. This strategy took advantage of my professional experience and previously completed MS degree, finding a position paying at the instructor level rather than the TA level. With a young family to feed, this strategy hit the mark, and the family ate. The strategy might be termed the shotgun approach, but was definitely not random, rather requiring a great deal of research on issues important to the success of the sabbatical leave.

A target list of universities had to be developed, based on a number of key criteria. Defining the target involved a great deal of decision-making, including selection of the geographical areas I would be interested in seeing for a year, the size of the engineering programs I was interested in joining, the university size, the distance I was willing to relocate, and the climate I wanted to endure for a year. The details are presented in the following.

One of my first tasks was that of identifying schools with sufficient student body and faculty size for a sabbatical opportunity to be at least feasible. After so many years in a program admitting over 1600 new freshman students every year, it would have been too much of a shock to my system to go to a program with fewer than about half that. I also felt that existence of a Freshman Engineering department, or a similar organization, would be a plus in terms of my assimilation into the program. I found much useful information about enrollments and organization online in the ASEE Engineering College Profiles. Not only was I able to determine, within a reasonable tolerance, the size of the engineering program at any potential host site, I was also able to view the available engineering majors and the distribution of students among them.

University size was less important to me than the size of the engineering program, but I wanted to find a host university where engineering was not a dominating program on campus.

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University culture was also important to me, in that I wished to experience a culture different from that to which I had become accustomed. To that end, I favored those schools considered to be primarily teaching institutions. It was also important to me that the host was one with great cultural diversity.

Narrowing the list based on geography and other factors was more complex, but more fun in some respects. For example, I wanted to be near mountains, if possible, after living where there were none for so long. Initially, I wanted to live within a one-day drive of my home, but my college-aged daughter talked me into including some schools from much further away from home, perhaps as a means of obtaining a place for her to stay on an extended road trip. I also tried to avoid climates more harsh than that to which I was accustomed, in fact striving for much more favorable climates to the extent possible.

The net result of all this effort was a first list of fifteen institutions, with a back-up list of twenty-five more. Knowing how unscientific the development of these lists was, I had no up-front reservations about spending a year at any school on either list.

The Details

By now, it should be apparent that my process for "finding" a sabbatical opportunity had little to do with specifically **looking** for such an opportunity. Nowhere in this process did I spend more than a casual effort to check advertisements for such opportunities, though they were occasionally advertised. In reality what was being developed was a process by which a faculty member in need of a teaching sabbatical could **create** such an opportunity through an agressive campaign of self-promotion, focusing on those institutions where a teaching position has the most potential to feel comfortable. The need to develop such a process arose because of the lack of sufficient numbers of advertised opportunities, and because of the lack of any suitable process predefined in the available literature on sabbatical leaves. Even *The Sabbatical Book*[3] failed to provide a systemmatic means for finding suitable opportunities for a teaching sabbatical.

With the target schools established it was time to fire away. I refined my draft sabbatical proposal, added a brief vita and a cover letter, and sent the package to all fifteen schools on my first list. Following a time of watching the mail, it became time to make a file for the ding letters, and to bemoan the "no responses". It seemed for a time that I would need my backup list, but the search was a success before a second mailing was needed.

Now came the difficult part - negotiating assignments, establishing funding and work load agreements, and working out details such as office space, computer equipment, and other such necessities of life on the job. In addition, finding a place to live, and making it comfortable to do so, were non-trivial tasks. These were undertaken with eager anticipation, and ultimately were handled satisfactorily.

Because most faculty are perfectly capable of ferreting out data on engineering programs and on geography and climate, the foregoing description of a perfectly workable method of "finding" a sabbatical opportunity should suffice. However, it is still necessary to make the

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opportunity fit. To that end, I offer the following points, which go beyond merely "finding" a sabbatical:

- *Don't put off the sabbatical too long* – When this happens, it is usually for all the right reasons, such as family, research, or teaching commitments, and the like. I believe, in retrospect, that my sabbatical experience would have been better had I taken my first sabbatical **before** any traces of staleness or burnout had appeared in my teaching performance. Taking a sabbatical closer to when first eligible can help reduce the likelihood of allowing yourself more "vacation days" than you would have taken at home. These relaxing days may help in the "renewing and refreshing" aspect of the sabbatical experience, but their effect on writing productivity is obvious. If one is hesitating for family reasons, I suggest involving the family in the decision, with the opportunity for the leave to be a family "adventure".

- *Don't bury yourself in teaching to get better at it* – Certainly, one can become a better teacher by practicing, and if teaching is a priority, then teaching **should** be part of the sabbatical. However, to the extent practical, make certain that the teaching to be done is truly a learning experience, and plan other activities, such as seminars and workshops on teaching, assessment, and related topics, to assure a well-rounded overall experience. In negotiating the terms of the sabbatical with the host school, be sure to avoid duplicating sections of the same course, opting instead for a variety of experiences, to assure that you don't become overloaded and jeopardize writing objectives.

- *Don't take on an excessive workload in order to meet funding needs* – One must eat and pay rent, but if the workload exceeds the amount one can reasonably learn from, then the benefit from the sabbatical may be substantially diminished. In negotiating teaching duties, seek opportunities to write special reports or perform special studies in lieu of doing "extra" teaching, and have their monetary value to the host school taken into consideration in your funding agreement.

- *Don't spend too much time on email and other communication related to your "real job"* – Staying in touch is nice, and may even be required of you. Know what is expected before you leave, so that your sabbatical objectives reflect a realistic load, and so that you don't return to an angry department head or dean. If students ask about contacting you while on sabbatical, use your head as well as your heart in answering, and if you expect to be writing letters of recommendation for your students while on sabbatical, factor this activity into your plans. All of the above activities involve a time penalty, and will exact a corresponding hit on your writing output.

- *Take into account differing departmental or campus "cultures"* – Some are better than others for productivity in writing and research, particularly with regard to collaboration with peers and the like. During negotiations with the dean at the host institution, be certain to find out whether any of the faculty there are looking for a collaborator on issues near and dear to your heart. Find out how faculty workloads are measured there, and how the faculty perceive their loads. If most seem to feel overloaded, collaboration will likely have to come from another source. It is all too easy to assume that someone will be interested in collaborating with you on your hot research or teaching paper idea, but the reality is that most faculty are not looking for

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collaborators. Those faculty focused primarily on teaching generally have more work than they need, thank you very much, and they would welcome a way to reduce, rather than increase, their load. **Expecting** to find a partner for your sabbatical writing may be more than a bit optimistic.

- *Consider the differences in office operations at different institutions* – rules differ on long-distance telephone usage, photocopy machine operation, and fax machine usage. Do it yourself? Find a secretary? You need to know. Staff support, or lack thereof, can also make a difference. What differences exist in computer hardware support? Software support? Secretarial support? What must the faculty do for themselves, and how does this compare to "home"? Productivity may be hampered in teaching, writing, research, or any work effort by simply not knowing how to go about getting routine tasks accomplished. Deal with this up front by simply asking what the rules and procedures are, and plan to work with or around them.

- *Plan for the time lost in learning a new city* – Habits can be time-savers. If you don't believe that, think about the time you spend on routine tasks such as buying gasoline for your car, buying groceries, going out to dinner, buying clothing and other necessary activities that you do **habitually**. You needn't even think about where to go, who to contact, whether you need dinner reservations, or which credit cards are accepted at which institutions. In a new location, these habits need to be relearned, and this takes valuable **time**! It doesn't take much imagination to visualize where the time will come from. However, this can be part of your (and your family's) adventure. To speed the process, search the web for "welcome wagon" type organizations, and contact them as soon as you arrive at your new location. In addition, before you relocate, learn as much about the city as you can from web sites, and study maps to learn commute routes and shopping center locations. If your family accompanies you, delegate some of the decision-making about shopping and routine to family members.

- *Don't be tempted to think you can go it alone without difficulty* – Leaving your spouse and/or children behind can leave you dazed and confused, to say the least. While the peace and quiet can be calming, it can also leave you wondering what you should be doing, instead of getting it accomplished. Development of a family routine takes place over years, and to be in an environment without them requires development of a new routine, which will need to be "undone" after the sabbatical ends. Also, communication that usually takes place in the household during routine activities must be scheduled, and can consume significant time, during which nothing else gets done, routine or otherwise. In addition, homesickness is a harsh reality, even for us older folks. The solution? Try not to do this. Having said that, I didn't have a choice, as my spouse had a job she couldn't give up, and my children were already adults when I finally took my first (and only, so far) sabbatical leave. Many faculty are in a similar situation, in that a spouse or significant other has job constraints preventing concurrent leave. Going alone should be a last resort, with all negotiating effort possible being made with the spouse's employer before a go-alone decision. Other alternatives, such as taking one or more children without the spouse, are dependent on one's family situation, but may offer an adventure for at least part of the family.

- *Plan to spend some time adapting to a new "home" environment* – Your "home away from home" is still **not** your home. It takes real time to get acclimated to new living quarters. The location of telephone jacks, the best place for your computer, the best place for your television,

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where to put your toothbrush – these all have an impact on your efficiency in your new environment. If your home is truly "wherever you hang your hat" you are to be envied for your adaptability, but not for your lack of real roots. Reduced efficiency has an immediate and profound effect on your time available for writing and other sabbatical activities.

- *Plan time for your hobbies!* – Hopefully, anyone taking a sabbatical has sufficient foresight to take along the trappings of her/his hobbies, e.g. the bicycle or the trumpet. Staying sane may depend on finding outlets for the hobbies, such as a bicycle club, soccer club, gym, or municipal band. This too takes time, but looking for such outlets should be greatly eased by the proliferation of web sites related to these and other activities. To avoid needless modification of routine, a web search should be done prior to the move to the sabbatical location, then followed up on arrival by telephone contacts as needed. **Failure** to get involved in such activities can be the source of great frustration, perhaps even to the extent of reinforcing any other homesickness resulting from the relocation. **This failure can result in even greater time loss than the time otherwise spent on your hobbies.** Leaving the hobbies behind for a year is a false "economy".

The Return

Whether you realize it or not, you will not return to your old job as the same person who left it. Hopefully, that is a good thing, and the sabbatical leave worked its expected magic. In any case, you will bring a new, or at least slightly revised, set of skills, attitudes, and accomplishments to your old department upon your return. It is **imperative** that you expect your department head or dean, and your colleagues, to have revised expectations of you. While this can be frightening, it can also be exciting. The courses you taught while on sabbatical may make it advantageous for you to teach a different set of courses on your return. Your writing while on sabbatical may suggest special projects your department head wishes for you to take on. You may be suited to a revised set of committee assignments.

In addition to being faced with revised duties because of changes in you, things at home have changed, too. While you were gone, someone else was teaching "your" courses, someone else was running "your" programs, and someone else was advising "your" students. It may be better for your department for that person to continue, while you get treated somewhat like a newly hired faculty member, at least with regard to your flexibility. Even if you get "your" courses and programs back, they will be forever marked with someone else's footprints.

So, what effect does this have on your sabbatical activities? Not too much, unless a component of your sabbatical activity is related to "your" courses or programs at home, and you learn during your sabbatical leave that some component of your workload is going to be changed upon your return. Your motivation can take a large hit, especially in light of the fact that your sabbatical activity should be done in collaboration with whichever of your colleagues is taking on what was formerly "your" work. This makes it very difficult to write with any efficiency at all. To avoid this scenario to the extent possible, before even writing your sabbatical objectives, discuss with your department head or dean just what your job will be when you return. You may be surprised. Certainly, you're better off being surprised before you leave than after you return, and you will avoid writing sabbatical objectives related to programs that will be someone else's

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when you return. It may even give you some good ideas for learning objectives during the sabbatical, in preparation for your new assignment upon return.

Finally, what of the host institution on your return home? Certainly, after creating this opportunity for yourself, you wish to leave the door open for future possibilities; you may wish to visit for a year in another seven or so. One of your colleagues may wish to visit that institution for a sabbatical. Leave on good terms! To accomplish this, conduct yourself at all times as if your future employment depended on it. Be an ideal guest - don't complain, don't gossip, don't slack on assignments. On the positive side, do attend faculty meetings if you're invited, do offer positive insight while avoiding being critical, and do offer a parting report on your observations from your teaching (and other) assignments at the host institution. The net result of all this is that you are likely to leave behind a program that would love to have you come again and stay longer, a dean who would gladly offer a letter of recommendation when needed for a promotion, and, possibly, the opportunity to visit again as an invited lecturer.

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