



Evidence Summary

Sabbatical Options for Academic Librarians in the U.S. Vary Widely

A Review of:

Flaspohler, M. R. (2009). Librarian sabbatical leaves: Do we need to get out more? *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 35(2), 152-161.

Reviewed by:

Heather Ganshorn

Librarian, Health Information Network Calgary, Holy Cross Site

Calgary, Alberta, Canada

Email: heather.ganshorn@ucalgary.ca

Received: 2 Mar. 2010

Accepted: 14 Apr. 2010

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Abstract

Objectives – To gather data on what proportion of U.S. academic libraries provide sabbatical opportunities to librarians, and to explore library directors' perceptions of the effectiveness of sabbaticals and barriers to sabbatical-taking among librarians at their institutions.

Design – Online questionnaire.

Setting – Academic libraries in the U.S..

Subjects – Directors of 403 academic libraries.

Methods – The author reviewed the literature on sabbatical leaves in the library profession. She then developed an online survey using the University of Washington's *Catalyst* system (a tool similar to SurveyMonkey). The survey contained both closed and open-ended

questions, in order to generate quantitative data as well as to gather more in-depth information on respondents' views.

A sample of American academic library directors was generated by choosing every eighth entry on a list of 3037 academic libraries generated by lib-web-cats, an online directory of libraries (<http://www.librarytechnology.org/libwebcats/>). The survey was sent to 403 academic library directors based on this selection method. The author received 101 successfully completed surveys for a response rate of 25%.

Main Results – The author found that just over half of respondents (53 libraries, or 52%) indicated their institutions offered sabbatical leaves to librarians. Thirty-six per cent indicated they did not, while 12% indicated "other" (many of these respondents

commented with clarifications about what other leave programs were available to librarians). Of the 53 institutions that reported offering leave programs, only half (27 respondents) indicated that library staff members had taken a sabbatical leave.

Open-ended questions generated some insight into the barriers to sabbatical leaves at academic libraries. Differences between institutions in terms of availability of sabbatical leaves appear to be due to a combination of librarian status (whether or not librarians have full faculty status); funding issues (in some institutions, the library, and not the college administration, has to cover the costs of a sabbatical); and availability of other staff to cover the duties of the individual taking the leave.

Respondents also noted a discrepancy between the length and timing of librarian sabbaticals compared to other faculty (i.e., the professoriate), with librarians more often required to begin their leaves in the summer. Librarian sabbaticals were also sometimes shorter than those of other faculty; in some institutions a summer-length sabbatical was available, but not a six-month or year-long sabbatical, even though these options were available to other faculty.

In terms of impacts of sabbaticals, most respondents who had experienced a staff member taking sabbatical felt that the sabbatical benefited the staff member and the institution; positive results include improved morale, publications that raised the profile of the library, and learning that was applied in the workplace. Some respondents, however, had negative experiences to report, the most common being that the sabbatical had had no effect. Some respondents noted staff who had taken sabbaticals had failed to meet the goals that had been set for the sabbatical. When asked what could be done to enhance sabbatical programs, respondents at institutions with these programs had some interesting suggestions, such as aligning sabbatical programs more closely with institutional goals, or promoting the pursuit of

more collaborative research while on sabbatical.

Conclusion – The author notes that while it's dangerous to over-generalize from such a brief survey, many of the issues raised in the responses, such as faculty status, funding shortfalls, and staff shortages echo themes raised elsewhere in the library literature. These issues probably need to be addressed if we are to see any increase in the number of librarians taking sabbatical leaves.

The author's other conclusion is that librarians must be more accountable for demonstrating how a sabbatical could add institutional value, and for meeting the goals set in their sabbatical plans. The author conducted this study while on sabbatical herself, and concludes it "provides one example of how a librarian might create a manageable, research-based project that more closely marries academic rigor to personal experience" (p. 160).

Commentary

The author of this Evidence Summary used Lindsay Glynn's Critical Appraisal Checklist to estimate the overall validity to be around 50%; therefore no generalizable conclusions can be drawn from this study, though it raises some interesting issues for future research.

The author has chosen an interesting topic; as she demonstrates in her literature review, there isn't much research on librarian sabbaticals. What research is available does not analyze barriers and enablers, outcomes for the individual and institutions, or even the actual uptake of sabbatical leaves in institutions that offer them. In that sense, the author's study has the potential to add to our knowledge of these issues, and provide directions for future study.

The author doesn't address some important first premises in her article, such as the purpose of sabbaticals (among teaching

faculty, they are for research, and not for burnout or continuing education, as she seems to imply). It is also unclear whether sabbaticals are in fact universally offered to teaching faculty at all post-secondary institutions. There is no comparison in this study of how the library's sabbatical policy may differ from the same institution's policy for other faculty.

The author is to be applauded for including her survey instrument as an appendix (available in the online but not the print version of the article). This makes it much easier to appraise her article, and also provides an example for other researchers who may wish to adapt her study. Unfortunately, the author does not indicate that her survey instrument was pre-tested or validated.

Most of the survey questions address only those institutions where there is a leave program; given that the author's literature search had identified a lack of sabbatical programs in many academic institutions, it would have been useful if the survey had included more questions specifically for those without a program. The author mentions wanting to keep the survey short to increase response rates among busy library directors, but these additional questions would not have increased the length of the survey as respondents could have been routed to different series of questions depending on whether or not their institution offers sabbatical leave.

There were also issues with the sampling method used in this survey. The author used the directory of libraries at lib-web-cats. There is no way to determine how accurately this directory reflects the actual number of academic libraries in the U.S., though it does seem quite comprehensive. Still, one might question why the author did not instead contact the Association of College and Research Libraries for a list of member institutions, or perhaps try to obtain separate lists in niche areas (for example, a list of all the tribal colleges in the U.S.).

While not strictly randomization, the author did employ a reasonable approach to obtaining a study sample, choosing every eighth library from the alphabetical lib-web-cats list. It might also have been worthwhile to use a stratified sampling method to ensure representation from different types of colleges.

The selection of sample size was problematic. The author states, "from the start I planned to survey about 400 libraries, hoping for a strong response rate while maintaining a data set that I felt was still manageable for one person" (p. 154). There are problems with this approach. Most researchers with experience in survey design would advise against hoping for a large response rate. It's better to prepare for a low response rate by increasing your sample size. Sample size should not be determined by what the researcher feels she can handle as a data set, but rather by statistical considerations of what size is required to provide usable data. Perhaps the author could have considered sending the survey to more libraries when it became clear her response rate was low. Given that sabbatical programs are not something that changes rapidly over time, a delay in survey administration should not have affected the integrity of the data.

There was one small mistake in the use of figures. The author used a line graph rather than a bar chart in Figure 5 (p. 156) to illustrate the number of librarian sabbaticals over the last five years by Carnegie institution type. Since this is nominal and not continuous data, a bar chart would have been more appropriate.

The open-ended responses raised some interesting questions that need to be answered. How do we define a successful sabbatical from both the employer and employee perspective? How can programs be structured to ensure that the candidate and the employer have the same understanding of the goals of the sabbatical, and to ensure accountability on both sides (support from the institution and the meeting of goals by the candidate)? To what degree does faculty status determine the availability and nature of

sabbaticals at an institution? Given that many institutions have a sabbatical program in theory, but in practice nobody ever applies to it, what are the barriers and enablers to librarian sabbaticals? This is fertile ground for future survey research, and could also possibly benefit from some more qualitative research methods that explore the reasons behind some of the more successful programs.

References

- Glynn, L. (2006). A critical appraisal tool for library and information research. *Library Hi Tech* 24(3), 387-99.