Sabbatical FAQ

Preparation

1. Drafting an excellent sabbatical plan:

An excellent sabbatical plan will take several drafts to develop. Having your supervisor and one or two additional readers review each draft should bring clarity to the process as well. The person supervising the sabbatical should be included in the application’s development. This interactive application process will highlight the most important objectives for the sabbatical and reduce the initial wish-list, do-it-all draft. It is wise to begin drafting the application 6-8 months before the sabbatical is to begin, more if the sabbatical involves graduate classes. Reading Henri Nouwen’s The Genessee Diary gives insights into a sabbatical from the author’s experience.

Once the sabbatical plan is in its final form, it must be signed by each supervisor listed. At the completion of the approval process, the approval page is sent to HR. You do not need to send the detailed plan to HR. Your supervisor must send a Staff Profile to HR indicating when the sabbatical begins and another when it ends.

2. Choosing the type of sabbatical:

InterVarsity offers four types of sabbaticals, each with its own purpose. It is essential to identify what you need in discussions with your supervisor. As this opportunity comes only once every 7 years, it is a unique experience. First ask, what do I need? Is it rest, or learning, or a project or...If it seems that God is calling you to ministry as a lifetime vocation, seminary training is very valuable for learning and as a credential, should you leave InterVarsity. Other degree or certification programs may be considered as long as they relate directly to your InterVarsity responsibilities. Is there some internal work to be done, perhaps on thoughts/attitudes/life rhythms that have surfaced within the pressures of ministry? The discipleship sabbatical allows for this kind of work. The project sabbatical allows for learning in a hands-on project, here or overseas, as an opportunity. The combination sabbatical allows two of these to be joined, for example a study and a restorative sabbatical. In this example, 1-2 courses plus time for reflection and some interior work or the introduction of spiritual disciplines would work.

The type of sabbatical may determine the season of the year you take your sabbatical. Are you looking at summer school or fall term? Are you planning activities that require activity outside like gardening which also allows for reflection?

If planning a study sabbatical and coursework towards a degree, beginning in the summer can provide an advanced start on required work, especially language requirements. A study sabbatical for up to one year is permitted if you are enrolled in a program from a degree-granting institution.

3. Sabbatical coherence:

A thematic approach to sabbaticals gives internal coherence to the sabbatical and deepens the impact of the time. A combination sabbatical that has New Testament course work focusing on Sabbath, combined with a variety of ancient and contemporary readings on Sabbath keeping, plus time with a spiritual director on learning to rest, gives more value than a New Testament course on Paul, personal reading about ancient Israel and no outside counsel. Sometimes travel can introduce new understanding, perhaps a trip related to the study theme. This may not be reimbursable.

4. Setting reasonable goals:

Sabbatical applications generally begin as a wish list and require some strong editing. This occurs in the dialog between the staff and the readers of the application. Generally, staff want to read dozens of books. You may need help in identifying the theme of your sabbatical, personal
and ministry needs, and other considerations. This is an opportunity to read broadly, perhaps out of one’s area of expertise, to explore fiction, poetry or other genres not often explored. Projects may be included in a sabbatical, provided they are of reasonable size. Plans to re-model the kitchen, build a shed or other large tasks often take much more time than anticipated and can sabotage a sabbatical or make it a depressing failure in an area where change was hoped for. Choose only small and mutually agreed-upon projects that compliment the thrust of your sabbatical.

5. Working with blocks of time; setting a weekly rhythm:

While a sabbatical application does not require an hourly accounting of time, thinking about work in blocks of time often helps. For example, you might use mornings for study (9 am to noon), afternoons for planned projects and exercise, and evening for relaxation. Setting aside part or all of Friday for reflection on the current week and God’s activity in your life can be a way to further increase sensitivity to God’s voice. The blocks of time allow for an overall sabbatical rhythm which can be modified along the way, if needed.

Your sabbatical can also have an overall, monthly flow. For example, if you have a four month sabbatical, the time frames might be: month 1 -> disconnect from ministry and enter into the sabbatical rhythms; months 2 and 3 -> focused work of your sabbatical; month 4 -> reflect on the sabbatical learning, write your sabbatical report and begin reentry.

6. Vacation:

Staff on sabbatical continue to accrue vacation and, with their supervisor’s approval, can include vacation as part of the sabbatical or as an add-on to the agreed upon sabbatical time. Sometimes the intensity of interior work or academic load suggests a vacation for respite. Ending a sabbatical exhausted creates reentry problems. Supervisions may permit you to add vacation time to a sabbatical to lengthen it and thus help distribute the sabbatical work over a longer period of time.

7. Balance of mental/physical/emotional goals: time for fun and friendship:

Balance in the mental, physical and emotional components of a sabbatical is valuable. Taking a holistic approach to sabbaticals gives you the opportunity to grow in many areas. Academic study balanced by work with a trainer at the gym helps you learn new rhythms for the future. Tackling a Project Sabbatical that allows for guided reflection times will enrich the work time. Sabbaticals also offer the opportunity to reconnect with friends over coffee or a leisurely meal. There is time to finish a conversation. Allowing time for activities that are fun for you is important due to the demands of ministry.

8. Conversation, counsel, spiritual direction:

Sufficient time to process God’s work during sabbatical is essential and should be part of the application. Sabbaticals offer time to reflect on personal things that might ordinarily be overlooked in the haste and busyness of life. A wise friend, a counselor or spiritual director can offer insight to what you are experiencing in the unfamiliar terrain of a sabbatical. Sabbatical time also allows for reflective time after an appointment to think about what was said, perhaps journal, and to take the conversation to a deeper level by exploring the questions raised. After 7 or more years of ministry, this is an opportunity to reflect on how you have changed, joys and disappointments, what strengths and weaknesses you observe in your ministry and possible next steps. How is God leading you in what you hope to become and at what aspect of ministry you would like to excel?
9. The unexpected:

During a sabbatical it is not unusual that there would be a serious disruption in your plan that will require your attention. This disruption may be God’s way of getting your attention about certain issues in your life. On occasion, this may, with supervisory approval, mean a re-ordering of your sabbatical plan. While unexpected to you, it is not unexpected to God. There may be an invitation to growth here that the more relaxed pace of a sabbatical has allowed to surface.

10. Catching up on tasks at home:

Stuff accumulates, piles increase and there are always things that don’t get done quite as well as one would hope. With an agreed-upon sabbatical plan and using the block format, evenings should be free to catch-up with life’s accumulations. If there are significant tasks to do at home, time to do these should be factored into the application process and discussed. Often organizing things that annoy can provide a more peaceful atmosphere for study and reflection.

11. Memorable family trip/outing/adventure:

Families live with InterVarsity in a variety of ways. Occasionally the school year schedule precludes vacation options that a family would like to pursue. Perhaps your family has always wanted a spring break trip to the Gulf of Mexico but InterVarsity commitments entailed a spring break trip. Planning a spring sabbatical allows for this. If you are an empty nester during the school year with children in college, this could be the opportunity to travel with your spouse in the fall. Sabbaticals can bless the family in this way. While a vacation cannot be part of expenses reimbursed by InterVarsity, planning ahead can make it happen.

12. Setting family expectations: what does Dad/Mom at home mean? Impact on children and their schedules:

Your spouse and children need to know that a sabbatical is not a vacation. It is focused work in categories that may not be covered in usual work responsibilities. However, your family will note the change in rhythm and your presence at home more, perhaps in the evenings or the absence of trips for meetings. If you have young children at home, it is advisable to work at a coffee shop, library or church office so that it is possible to read, write and pray. A well planned sabbatical can allow time to be home in the afternoon to meet a school bus or to do a day trip with your children. Conveying that you are both at home and working means that you can’t be interrupted (often) is essential. A sabbatical can offer opportunities for your spouse’s growth as well and this may be considered as part of your sabbatical plan although not the primary part.

13. Setting donor/church/friend’s expectations:

Since sabbaticals are often unfamiliar to churches and friends, they may see your sabbatical as an opportunity for you to do more for them. If not part of your sabbatical plan, invitations from churches, especially supporting churches, to teach or have other ongoing responsibilities should first be reviewed with your supervisor. On the other hand, occasional, one time opportunities can meet needs of churches or friends without overwhelming the sabbatical’s plan.

14. Common emotions on leaving daily ministry tasks:

Anger may be the primary feeling that you have as you enter sabbatical. The possibly crushing workload of getting everything done and turned over to the appropriate people is hard. You are basically making a decision, in advance, about all the situations you know about and are responsible for, before you leave. This creates an undue amount of stress. It is for this reason that it is recommended that approximately the first one to two weeks of a sabbatical simply be a transition time that allows you to work through the anger and possibly other emotions. You may also
feel some angst about leaving colleagues, lack of regular conversations, and questions of personal value that may stem from some identity issues with work.

15. Must I get an “A” in my courses, read all the books and over-achieve or can I change my life’s rhythms?

Sabbatical is the opportunity to learn. For some it is academic, for others reflective and yet for others learning while doing. While sabbaticals can be significant work, it is anticipated that there are options for slower and different rhythms. Sometimes there are clear choices: could I get a B+ in this course so that I could engage the materials more prayerfully? Or, yes, I do have many books to read but instead of reading for information, I will choose to read slowly and pay attention to where the Holy Spirit touches my heart. With your supervisor, you determine the sabbatical’s rhythm. One hope for those taking sabbaticals is that you will return refreshed and rested.

16. The one-year commitment:

Staff who choose to take a sabbatical are committing to return to InterVarsity for at least one year. This permits both InterVarsity and the staff to benefit from the sabbatical time.

17. Funding the sabbatical:

Your donors may be open to helping defray some of your sabbatical costs, especially if you are pursuing a degree. Letting them know of your plans and giving opportunities to contribute additional amounts to your InterVarsity account towards sabbatical expenses can be an enormous help.

18. Donors and sabbaticals:

Your donors should be fully apprised in advance of your sabbatical and its value to InterVarsity and to you. Gaining their support early-on helps keep funding consistent. If there is a significant drop in support during your sabbatical, you may be asked to return to campus. Contact with donors during a sabbatical is assumed; they need to know what you are doing and how it is going.

19. Expensing your sabbatical:

A budget for your sabbatical must be submitted along with your sabbatical application to your supervisor for approval. If you are taking seminary courses or a certification, you must expense these using the Educational Assistance Plan.

Doing the sabbatical: entry->depth->re-entry

1. First days of sabbatical: anger and recovery and restlessness:

Many enter their sabbatical with some level of exhaustion. Resting and doing things that are restorative, perhaps the gym, walking, or other exercise, help with the transition. So much of our day is prescribed by work responsibilities that one can feel restless when suddenly, there are no emails, no phone call, no meetings and no appointments. A level of depression may also accompany entry into a sabbatical due to meaning derived from ministry work. This quiet space is unusual and we can react negatively to its unfamiliarity. However, knowing restlessness is one of the emotions and naming it can help us to embrace it.

2. Getting the rhythm going:

After allowing for a transition time of one to three weeks, the main part of the sabbatical should begin. If doing a study program or a project, it is important to allow this transition time rather than moving directly from the intense time of ministry to another intense work responsibility. At
the end of the sabbatical, you will want to allow for transition time out of the sabbatical and a ramp-up into your former ministry responsibilities as well.

3. Dealing with surprises:

You can expect some surprises on your sabbatical. This may be something that God will bring to your attention, study courses that change, family illnesses, or changing sabbatical needs. When these happen, they are a good reason to call your supervisor and/or spiritual director to talk about what is happening, what it means, and how to best proceed with the change. Monitoring your internal world at this time is important.

4. Attentive to God’s work in new ways, discovering meaning with spiritual director or friends:

In the busyness and haste of life, we don’t have or allow time to reflect. Something may happen which we don’t fully notice or understand and which, as a result, isn’t processed. Sabbaticals are about noticing and discovering meaning. This openness to discovery may give new understanding to your sabbatical. It is important to stay open to God and his teaching in this place. You may need a spiritual director or discerning friend who can listen to what is happening and help you see patterns or gain understanding about yourself. Allowing each Friday to focus on reflection gives this opportunity.

5. Mid-course changes/adjustments:

Sabbaticals generally go in the direction planned. But sometimes there are adjustments needed as the unexpected occurs. Changes in the sabbatical plan should always be discussed with your supervisor.

6. Monthly reporting as a means of reflecting on changes:

Monthly reports are a requirement of sabbaticals because of their value. It can be easy to lose track of life in the sabbatical setting. The simplest report format would be to use the sabbatical application and comment on each section. If necessary, the report can be lengthened to suit the supervisor’s needs for additional information.

7. Personal retreats:

Many, many sabbaticals happen at home. If there are young children at home, arranging in advance to use a room at church or visiting a library are good choices. Personal retreats allow for uninterrupted reflection and the opportunity to be in a different setting. Small changes like this can bring insight. Personal retreats are especially valuable when seminary work or projects are the thrust of a sabbatical.

8. Preparation for re-entry:

Sabbaticals come to an end, often too soon. The joy of discovery, learning options, doing things one simply doesn’t have time to do are all a part of sabbatical. There can be a sense of loss in returning to work. For others, returning to work is a joyful experience.

9. What to retain from sabbatical in ongoing ministry life:

You will be tempted to think that you will retain all of the gifts of the sabbatical and that these will continue to translate into daily life. This isn’t true. What is best is to consider one, or possibly two, habits or characteristics of a sabbatical that you would like to continue doing post-sabbatical. You are looking for a realistic way to incorporate this—whether prayer, a friendship, an activity—into your daily life.
Post-sabbatical re-entry

1. Overwhelmed:

Up to six months of work (or more) awaits your return from sabbatical. Colleagues, who have been covering for you, expect you to return feeling rested and ready to immediately take responsibilities that they have been carrying for you. Coming from a discipleship or study sabbatical, the world that you are returning to may seem very noisy.

2. Pace:

Think of the first week of re-entry as an on-ramp to the next months. When you return to regular work responsibilities, first connect with colleagues and friends, with students, and others. Then begin the process of catching up on changes and decisions, and finally beginning email. When you take a sabbatical, decisions will be made in your absence. Choosing a sabbatical means that some decisions were made without your input and you will have to implement these.

3. No need to defend or explain what did or did not get done on sabbatical:

When asked about your sabbatical, unless you have certain specifics in mind, a helpful answer is: “I am still reflecting on the experience and what I learned.” It does take a certain distance from the conclusion of the sabbatical to see its value more clearly.

4. Colleagues’ expectations:

Your colleagues expect you to be refreshed and ready to work hard when you return. They may be surprised at your disorientation with all the decisions, facts and circumstances that are coming at you. They have missed you as well and will want to reconnect.

5. The helpful, final sabbatical report:

A required, final sabbatical report is due to your supervisor. Don’t miss the opportunity to give at least a full day’s reflection, before you return to work, on how you did. Review your sabbatical application and comment on each goal that you had set. What went as expected? What changed or was not accomplished? Also check your monthly reports for discernable patterns that may have emerged unexpectedly and merit reflection. Remember what you have been learning, and report it as a possible basis of change for the future. You may also use this and subsequent time to think about how you might structure your next sabbatical, based on how this one went. Review with your supervisor the one or two things that you want to continue from sabbatical and ask for his/her input and help.

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