



# The privileges and opportunities of a research sabbatical

## AUTHOR:

Brenda Wingfield<sup>1</sup>

## AFFILIATION:

<sup>1</sup>NRF-DST SARCH Chair in Fungal Genomics, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

## CORRESPONDENCE TO:

Brenda Wingfield

## EMAIL:

brenda.wingfield@fabi.up.ac.za

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As the title may suggest, I am currently undertaking a sabbatical – this time at Pennsylvania State University in the town of State College (Pennsylvania, USA). This sabbatical is the fifth that I have had the privilege to take during my 30-year academic career. The first was in 1994 at Iowa State University in Ames (Iowa, USA), the second at CSIRO in Canberra (Australia), the third at Murdoch University in Perth (Australia) and the fourth at the University of California, Davis in Davis (California, USA). They have all been very different and have without question added to my science, often in ways that I had not anticipated. I am reminded how important sabbaticals can be and take this opportunity to share some thoughts, particularly with my younger colleagues who might have doubts in this regard.

During my 7-year term in the dean's office at the University of Pretoria, I spent many hours encouraging academics, young and older, of the incredible benefits of taking a sabbatical 'offshore'. Some chose to take up this challenge with outstanding results; others have chosen to 'stay at home' and undertake research or writing locally. There are many reasons for the latter choice; some in my opinion are more valid than others. While the benefits of a sabbatical can be huge, leaving the comforts of one's home base is not for the faint hearted.

At the outset, allow me to explain some of what I achieved professionally during my various sabbaticals. One of the publications from my first sabbatical remains one of my most highly cited papers; I commonly use it as an example of how cutting-edge science can become routine in disease diagnostics – *but* the time lag for this outcome can be 10 if not 20 years, as it was in this particular case. My second sabbatical in Australia allowed me to produce one of the first papers on the phylogenetics of treating the plant pathogens known as 'rusts'.<sup>1</sup> That paper has not been one of my 'best sellers' but has maintained an average of two citations a year since its publication. It was an example of an idea that was far ahead of its time. It took 4 years before it was first cited but it probably will continue to be cited for many years to come.

Another short sabbatical in Australia allowed me the 'space' to think deeply about generic concepts for plant pathogenic fungi in *Ceratocystis*<sup>2</sup> and to begin the process towards developing a natural classification for this group. The genus has now been split into many different genera and we have robust DNA sequence data to support this new taxonomy. There are many other examples that I could share but the point is that research sabbaticals can have a very significant impact on one's scientific output and academic development. I have no doubt that I would not hold a SARCH Chair in Fungal Genomics without the knowledge that I gained from my various sabbaticals. And I am certain that my sabbaticals have also had a substantial impact on other things, such as my NRF rating.<sup>3</sup>

Many years ago, one of my close colleagues suggested that one should consider a sabbatical in the same light as one would when undertaking an extended camping trip. Most often one does not have to sleep in a tent but many 'creature comforts' are lost, albeit temporarily. Certainly my current sabbatical has highlighted this fact. I have a small furnished apartment on the bus route to the University. This means that I do not have access to a vehicle and it implies that shopping for groceries is more of a challenge than normal. I have learned rapidly to purchase only as much as one can carry comfortably. And, as during other sabbaticals, I have learned to make do with minimal home facilities. Minimalism is not only part of the challenge, but also brings freedom to focus on research and writing.

My sabbaticals have all been in countries with a stronger currency than South Africa – the country in which I choose to live – which has had some stressful consequences. I can remember that my children thought something terrible had happened to them when they were not able to enjoy their favourite foods. The value of the rand against the currency of the country you are in becomes frighteningly real. In the case of my present sabbatical, the rand value dropped by almost 20% to the dollar during my first 2 weeks in the USA. One can shop more frugally for food, but my accommodation became that much more expensive. This situation clearly puts many off taking sabbatical leave offshore, but these issues have been true for many years and there are usually ways to find the needed support to live, even if frugally.

My first sabbatical coincided with the first democratic elections in South Africa. At first, we heard a lot about the elections in the media, but then past president Richard Nixon died. From that point on, we had little news from South Africa – all news was about Nixon. My current sabbatical feels similar – many changes have occurred in South Africa since I left the continent. But these are different times. We have Internet connection and easy access to world news. I can also talk more easily with family, colleagues and students thanks to Skype, FaceTime and WhatsApp. Clearly, some of the challenges of sabbaticals of 10 and 20 years ago are no longer relevant. But one certainly still needs to accept a change of mindset; to me this mindset is also one of the driving forces of what I now term the 'academic sabbatical advantage'. One of the reasons that I have been such a strong proponent of research sabbaticals is that I believe in the value of being pushed out of one's comfort zone. One of the motivational quotes which resonates in this regard is: 'Outside of the comfort zone is where the magic happens.' Another saying is: 'The only difference between a rut and a grave is the depth of the hole.' Being outside one's comfort zone is important if one is to easily embrace new ideas and new ways of doing things (and potentially even magic).

The immediate value of being on sabbatical is that one immediately becomes almost 'anonymous' and has very few obvious responsibilities. Although this anonymity can feel strange, it – combined with a sudden lack of 'importance' – brings many advantages: time to think, to read, to write and to make new contacts. And perhaps one of the most important points of a sabbatical is to be in a position to take a step back and think about one's career, one's research and one's life – what one seeks to achieve in the short term and in the more distant future.

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