

**Date:** April 15, 2026

**To:** WPI Faculty

**From:** The Committee on Governance (COG) (Gillian Smith, Chair)

**Re:** Motion to update the Policy on Sabbatical Leaves to clarify timing and process

## Motion

The Committee on Governance and I move that the Faculty Handbook *Chapter Two, Section 8a. Policies on Sabbatical Leaves* be modified as below. New text is highlighted in yellow, removed text is in ~~red strikethrough~~. In addition, the Sabbatical Checklist is to be added as Chapter Two, Appendix C.

## Ch. Two – Academic Appointments

### 8. Policies on Leaves

#### a. Policy on Sabbatical Leaves

##### i. Basic Objectives

Leaves of absence, and particularly sabbatical leaves, are among the most important means by which a teacher's effectiveness may be enhanced, a scholar's usefulness enlarged, and an institution's academic program strengthened and developed. A sound program of leaves is therefore of vital importance to WPI, and faculty members are strongly encouraged to take advantage of this mechanism to help promote their professional competence. Sabbatical leaves are an investment by the university in a faculty member's capacity to devote focused time, attention, and energy to pursue a professional growth opportunity or an intellectual achievement that would not be possible to do while fulfilling their normal job responsibilities. Thus, the major purpose of leaves is to provide opportunity for continued professional growth and new, or renewed, intellectual achievement through study, research, creative activity, and/or writing.

The term "sabbatical" normally applies to a leave of absence in which a faculty member receives partial or full salary from WPI. Faculty member exchanges between two institutions, leaves without salary, and the performance of full-time duties assigned by WPI at off-campus locations are not part of the sabbatical program.

Because both the institute and the individual benefit as a result of a sabbatical leave, both share in the cost of such a leave. At WPI such sharing is both through financial support by the institute and through the assumption by colleagues of the academic responsibilities of absent faculty members. A faculty member should apply for a leave far enough in advance that temporary replacements of high quality can be obtained. Each application for sabbatical leave should include a well-designed and serious program with clearly stated objectives that will maximize the professional development of the faculty member involved.

##### ii. Sabbatical Eligibility and Timing

Sabbatical leaves may be taken for a full academic year or a half academic year. Half academic year sabbaticals should be taken in consecutive terms (i.e. A/B, B/C, or C/D terms), with the beginning and ending dates of a sabbatical coinciding with term start and end dates.

All full-time tenured and tenure-track faculty members are eligible **to apply** for sabbatical leave after six years of full-time service since their most recent **transfer or hiring into a sabbatical-eligible position at WPI or since their previous sabbatical**. Sabbatical leaves are subject to application and approval. Up to 16 weeks of accrued medical and/or parental leave may be counted as full-time service. Any other time spent on unpaid leave or at less than half-time activity does not count as full-time service toward sabbatical leave. **Time spent on unpaid leave or less than half-time activity, although considered continuous service, does not count as full-time service toward sabbatical leave.**

For half academic year sabbaticals, faculty will be released from half of their standard teaching load of the full academic year, rounded up. For example, a faculty member who typically teaches five courses in a year would be released from three courses. Faculty are expected to work with their department head and/or program director and their colleagues to equitably contribute to project advising during the half of the year they are present on campus, at a level that constitutes roughly half of their typical project advising for a year. **If it is not possible to contribute to project advising during the academic year (e.g. due to no half-year advising options being available), faculty should coordinate with their department head/program director so that their total teaching responsibilities are the equivalent of a half-year of teaching.** There is no expectation of project advising during the sabbatical leave period.

Faculty are required to return to WPI full time for at least a full academic year following the completion of their sabbatical. Upon returning to WPI after a sabbatical, faculty must produce a short report and/or presentation describing how the sabbatical contributed to professional growth and new, or renewed, intellectual achievement. This report or presentation should be delivered to the faculty member's department or program. A copy of this will be made available to their Dean and to the Provost.

Eligibility records are maintained in the Provost's office, and faculty can inquire about their sabbatical eligibility status at any time.

### **iii. Financial Arrangements**

- a. A full year sabbatical leave is taken at one-half of the faculty member's academic year salary. Half-year leaves are taken at full salary. If the faculty member obtains salary support from outside sources, WPI's contribution will not exceed that required to maintain the faculty member's normal salary. Exceptions to this policy must be negotiated before the leave starts.
- b. Faculty members on sabbatical leave will receive WPI benefits based only on actual WPI compensation.
- c. WPI, on occasion, may provide some displacement expense to faculty members who leave the campus on sabbatical leave for an entire academic year, depending on the particular circumstances.
- d. Funds will be provided to departments with faculty members on sabbatical leaves to cover necessary teaching obligations.
- e. **The use of university-managed funds during sabbatical remains subject to WPI's travel and expense policies.**
- f. **If a faculty member does not return to WPI following their sabbatical, they may be liable to repay salary they received during their sabbatical to WPI at the discretion of the university.**

#### iv. Procedures for Application, Review, and Award

Review of sabbatical applications takes place during the academic year prior to the proposed leave. The faculty member will receive copies of recommendation letters from all stages of the review process. At all stages of the process described below, the review of each application will be based primarily on the merits of the proposed sabbatical.

- a. Faculty members are encouraged to share a draft of their application with their Department Head or Program Director regarding the merit and appropriateness of the sabbatical as they formulate their plans prior to submitting their request.
- b. Faculty members should submit requests for sabbatical leaves to ~~the Dean~~ their Department Head/Program Director ~~on or before December 15~~ by the first day of B term for proposed leaves in the following academic year. An application for a sabbatical leave must contain all the supporting information including the objectives of the sabbatical leave and the benefits to the faculty member, the department, and to WPI (see Appendix C). The application should also include information on previous leave(s) of absence taken by the faculty member, past contributions to WPI, a plan for how any graduate students will be supported and advised during the leave, a letter of invitation from any institution at which the faculty member plans to work, and the sources and amounts of external funding.
- c. ~~The application should be accompanied by supporting documentation from the faculty member's department head. This documentation should include a review of the~~ The Department Head/Program Director should provide a recommendation letter by two weeks after the first day of B term that reviews the faculty member's proposed sabbatical program with regard to ~~its~~ merit and appropriateness of the activities as a sabbatical; the impact of the sabbatical on department operations including, but not limited to, ~~detailed~~ impact on course offerings including number of courses being released; and ~~detailed~~ plans for coverage of those responsibilities. This letter should include sufficient detail as to adequately communicate the ability (or lack thereof) to find coverage for typical faculty responsibilities (e.g. plans for adjunct hiring). The Department Head/Program Director provides this letter along with their ~~department recommendation on~~ recommended decision regarding the proposed sabbatical. In the case of an application for a sabbatical leave by a department head, this step will be taken will be supplied by the appropriate Dean.
- d. The appropriate Dean reviews all application materials and supporting documentation, and forwards their recommendation to the Provost by four weeks after the first day of B term ~~with copies of the sabbatical checklist and the recommendation to the Committee on Appointments and Promotion.~~
- e. The Provost reviews all leave applications, together with accompanying recommendations ~~from the Deans~~, makes final determination of the requests, and notifies the applicant of their decision and the reasoning for this decision. Copies of this notification go to the Department Head/Program Director and the appropriate Dean. The Provost's decision should be based primarily upon the merits of the application for the faculty member, as explicated by the faculty applicant, Department Head/Program Director, and/or Dean. However, overall costs to the institution are also considered. If a meritorious proposal is denied, the applicant will be given priority upon reapplication.

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The Dean's recommendation will be based primarily on the merits of the proposed sabbatical.

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- f. Notification of the award will be **no later than April 15** made by the beginning of C term if possible and no later than the end of January. Any applicants who are under review for tenure at the time of application will instead be notified when they receive their tenure decision.

## v. Monitoring and Record-Keeping

The Committee on Appointment and Promotions (COAP) **will maintain** maintains a record-keeping and monitoring role for sabbaticals. COAP will maintain the same level of confidentiality for these documents as for promotion dossiers and decisions. COAP will, in its annual report to the faculty, provide a summary of sabbaticals granted for the coming year. Further, COAP will pay attention to decisions made in recent years and monitor for any equity concerns in sabbatical approval and denials..

- a. The Provost's office is responsible for organizing and providing an annual report that will be given to COAP, after all decisions are made. This report shall indicate the general reason for each negative decision, including whether the application was considered meritorious.
  - b. The Provost shall provide **sends** copies of the decision letters to COAP along with copies of the recommendations from the DH/PD and Dean.
  - c. In their review of trends in sabbatical applications, COAP can pay attention to all matters related to decision-making, including but not limited to the extent to which financial decisions are driving sabbatical decision-making; bias in decisions on the basis of timing, academic rank and title, discipline, department/program, and/or school; trends within a single year of decision data; trends across multiple years of decision data;
  - d. If COAP finds matters of concern or irregularity in sabbatical decisions, either for a given year or after their review of decisions in recent years, they will notify the Provost and COG. A meeting will be called with COAP, the Provost, the Chair of COG, and the Secretary of the Faculty to discuss next steps for how to address this issue.
  - e. COAP will provide a summary analysis of sabbaticals granted in their annual report.
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## Appendix C: Sabbatical Application Guidelines

*Information to be supplied by the applicant:*

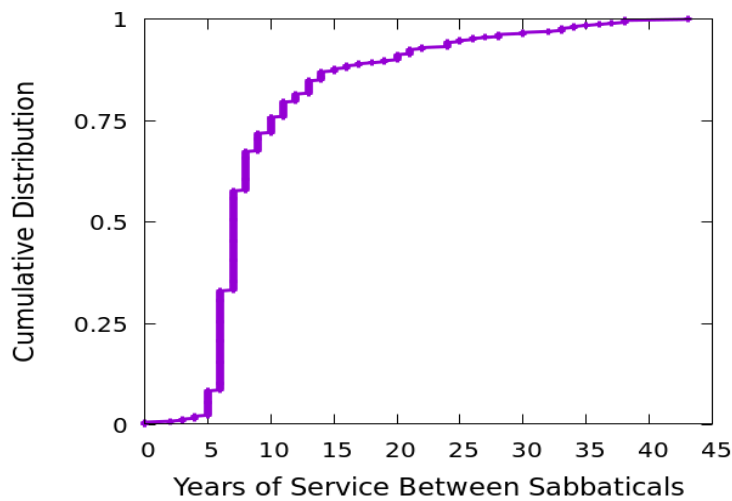
- a. WHERE? Be specific as to where you want to go.
- b. WHEN? Tell when you want to be away.
- c. WHY? Discuss your specific objectives for the sabbatical.
- d. INCOME? Who will be paying your salary? Include details of all financial arrangements with non-WPI organizations.
- e. COMMITMENTS? Include firm commitments, in writing (i.e., an official letter).
- f. BENEFITS? Explain how this sabbatical leave will benefit WPI, your department and your professional career.
- g. ELIGIBILITY? Clarify your eligibility and list all prior leaves.
- h. CONTRIBUTIONS? Summarize your most significant relevant contributions to WPI.
- i. CV? Submit an updated Curriculum Vitae.

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## Rationale

WPI maintains a commitment to the time-honored structures of both tenure and sabbatical leave. Sabbaticals offer an opportunity for faculty to step away from their regular teaching and to focus on areas of scholarship and professional growth. This dedicated time can lead to significant breakthroughs, beneficial both for the faculty member and the university. Furthermore, sabbaticals offer a chance for professional renewal, preventing burnout and fostering new perspectives that can enrich teaching and engagement upon return.

However, a review of historical data shows WPI has not upheld a consistent expectation around eligibility for sabbatical leave.



*Figure 1. Distribution of Sabbaticals Taken*

Figure 1 above shows the distribution of 402 faculty sabbatical leaves taken at WPI over 34 years. The x-axis is the number of years of full-time employment between sabbaticals taken by each faculty member (or since original hire) and the y-axis is the cumulative distribution. The median is 7 years, and the mean (not depicted) is 9.8 years. There is heavy tail, with about a quarter of all sabbatical leaves taken after 10 years. From the graph, about a third of the sabbatical leaves were taken with 6 or fewer years between sabbaticals. Eligible faculty can take either a 6-month sabbatical or a full-year sabbatical – historically, about 41% of faculty take full-year sabbaticals and 59% take half-year sabbaticals (this is not shown in the graph).

The wording in the current handbook – “all full-time tenured and tenure-track faculty members are eligible to apply for a full-year or half-year sabbatical leave after six years of full-time service since their most recent hiring at WPI or since their previous sabbatical” – would typically be interpreted as meaning a faculty can submit a sabbatical application after they have completed six years of full-time employment. However, faculty have often submitted applications *during* the sixth year instead of *after* completing six years, and these have generally been granted.

While any overuse of sabbatical leave adds strain to teaching loads and department budgets, the strict cost for allowing sabbaticals to be taken after 6 years of service is fairly modest – costing WPI only about \$4k more per year. Details of this financial model are available upon request.

The sabbatical checklist has existed for at least 10 years and is referenced in the current version of the faculty handbook, but it was only maintained as a document external to the handbook. This motion rectifies that by including it in the handbook.

Additionally, we are rectifying some shortcomings in the current sabbatical leave process description, and adding some clarity to existing processes:

- The requirement that sabbaticals be taken in consecutive terms is being added both to reflect the predominant current practice and to ensure that faculty have sustained and focused time away from their duties.
- The sabbatical reporting requirement reflects common practices in many departments that was an assumed norm of the sabbatical. Since COVID, these practices have been less consistently applied; adding the expectation to the faculty handbook is an effort to bring back the norms of faculty sharing what they learned through sabbatical with colleagues, and may have the benefit of reminding faculty who are eligible for sabbatical to consider applying.
- The sabbatical application process description now aims to create a standardized process across departments and programs with as much transparency as possible for the faculty, with the goals of reinforcing trust and accountability in decision-making. There is now a clearly stated timeline for all stages of the application process, to aid in timely decision-making and help faculty and departments plan for anticipated absences.
- COAP's role in monitoring outcomes of sabbatical leave applications, which was first introduced when approval authority for sabbatical leave applications moved from COAP to the Provost's Office, has been made more explicit and more transparent.
- The financial reality of sabbatical leaves at WPI is that half-year sabbaticals cost the institution money, while full-year sabbaticals save the institution money. This is entirely due to the recouped partial salary of anyone who takes a full year sabbatical. Full year sabbatical salary savings are a critical source of support for half-year sabbaticals. If half-year sabbatical leave applications increase, and if budgets tighten in our current fiscal environment, and depending upon the salary of the faculty member and cost of course coverage for each application, it becomes likely that otherwise meritorious sabbatical applications may need to be denied solely for financial reasons – especially in a year that happens to have a glut of half-year applications and few full-year applications. Revisions to the policy aim to protect faculty applying for sabbatical through the following mechanisms:
  - Requiring that sabbatical applications be reviewed primarily on their merits

- o The reason for denial must be included in the decision letter from the Provost
- o Giving priority to previously-denied meritorious applications.
- o Providing concrete guidelines for COAP's holistic review of trends in sabbatical review, including reasons for denying applications.
- o Improving transparency in both the application review process and, where possible, in the outcome of COAP's review of trends.
- The policy adds a "return requirement", making clear that faculty should not use sabbatical leave as the beginning of planned departure from WPI. Included in this return requirement is that, at the discretion of the university, WPI may require the repayment of salary if faculty do not return from sabbatical. This is common practice at many universities. If WPI were to exercise this option, the faculty member and WPI would come to agreement upon a repayment plan.

## Implementation

The policy will take effect immediately, applying to sabbatical leaves applied for in academic year 2026-2027. In addition to COAP's ongoing monitoring role, COAP further intends to conduct a review of three years of sabbatical data in 2029-30 to understand the impact of university finances on sabbatical decisions.