Faculty Complaints on Sabbatical Denials  
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The role of a university’s faculty is not merely to teach. Through research projects and networking with outside faculty or industry professionals, faculty gain connections for their home university and strengthen their abilities, which benefits the students they advise and instruct. A time-honored tradition of attaining these goals is a year’s sabbatical leave dedicated to professional development experiences that are impractical during the course of a regular academic year.

The sabbatical approval process at NJIT is as follows: Faculty members submit sabbatical proposals to a faculty-run sabbatical committee. This committee provides opinions to the Provost on the strength of each proposal. The Provost then decides which ones to forward to the Board of Trustees for final consideration.

For the 2012-2013 academic year, seventeen faculty members submitted proposals, of which the committee highly recommended fifteen and recommended two. Of the seventeen, only seven were put forward by Provost Dr. Ian Gatley to the Board of Trustees. All seven were approved, and an additional one after further discussion. However, the faculty was incensed that this number was low in comparison to the average of 12.4 approved sabbaticals per year over the past few years, and the twelve out of fifteen approved last year.

At a faculty meeting on February 29, a motion passed almost unanimously by secret ballot to appeal to the Board of Trustees on behalf of “the 9 faculty members who were denied sabbatical leaves” to “ask that it approve their leaves”.

Among the denied applicants was Dr. Gareth Russell, asking for time off to work with Microsoft, a giant in the technology field. Another was Dr. Horacio Rotstein, who planned to collaborate with world-renowned researchers at New York University.

Rotstein spoke at the April 5 Board meeting’s public session on the effects of sabbatical denials. “As it is the norm in research universities, I am expected to be not only an expert but also a leader in my field,” much in line with NJIT’s description of being “New Jersey's public technological research university”. Denial of a research sabbatical such as his meant a lost chance for collaborative work to build “productive long-term scientific collaborations” that “provide opportunities for external funding, and increase research opportunities for graduate and undergraduate students.”

In addition, Rotstein noted that “no serious and productive sabbatical plan can be made” unless commitments are made in advance, and an inability to keep these commitments would not only be a blow to a faculty member’s reputation, but to that of NJIT.

Both Rotstein and the faculty appeal motion mentioned that the necessity of advance planning made it reasonable to assume that a sabbatical proposal would be approved. In fact, a memo sent out last August with guidelines on writing sabbatical proposals requested proof that “arrangements [had] been made to secure the facilities necessary to conduct the research” and “letters of invitation” for projects.

In a letter to a faculty member whose application was rejected, Gatley said that although this year “there was a large number of strongly recommended applications,” he could not agree “that NJIT is able to have so many faculty members away at this time.”

Board of Trustees Chair Kathy Wielkopolski noted in a letter to Faculty Council Chair Dr. Mill Jonakait that although the Board recognized the importance of sabbaticals both for the university and “for the professional development of our faculty here at NJIT,” “the decision was made based on the university's educational needs at the present time.”

These needs required retention of more full-time faculty and hiring of fewer adjuncts, which NJIT’s new faculty hiring plan aimed to achieve, said Gatley in a private interview. Full-time professors are involved on campus over multiple years and have more understanding of the student body’s specific needs than a temporary hire would be. If more sabbaticals were granted, he said, NJIT would need more adjuncts to cover teaching positions, defeating the purpose of the hiring plan.

Dr. Amit Bose disagreed. “There should be no connection between the number of sabbaticals granted and the "lack of faculty",” he countered. Referring to the new hiring plan, he said next year “should be the year to increase, not decrease, sabbaticals since there will presumably be new faculty on campus to "replace" those on sabbatical leave.”

Dr. Andrew Sohn concurred. “Sabbaticals are built into the academic system… departments plan to cover their courses knowing that a certain number of faculty will be away on sabbatical.” He stressed the importance of keeping in mind that “that the job of a faculty member goes far beyond teaching courses.”

With 20 faculty scheduled to be hired for next year, a net of 3 new faculty members would be added to NJIT’s mentoring staff, even if all the recommended sabbaticals were approved for the coming year. While this seems like a small number, it does not account for faculty returning from sabbaticals granted last year.

Gatley felt that some of the denied applications were indeed very strong and were “distressing” to turn down. He empathized with the faculty, saying that had he been in the shoes of a faculty member who had spent extensive time and effort planning a sabbatical only to be denied, he would have shared the same sentiments and likely reacted in a similar fashion.

However, cautioned Gatley, sabbatical arrangements should not be made in a “vacuum”. Extraneous circumstances, such as the lack of faculty he cited this year, might render those plans unable to carry forward. President Joel Bloom confirmed this sentiment, stating that sabbaticals *cannot* be taken for granted every seven years, and that circumstances sometimes demand that even the strongest proposals be denied. Bloom further stated that the incoming faculty hires will normalize the number of sabbaticals granted in coming years.

As the semester is drawing to a close, the faculty members whose sabbatical proposals were denied this round will probably be left disappointed. Gatley acknowledges that there is need for a more coordinated sabbatical application and approval process that can better satisfy faculty, administration and other parties involved. Perhaps matters will resolve differently once such a plan has been implemented.