Sabbatical Report for Karen Thompson
Submitted August 16, 2021

I am writing to report on the outcomes of my sabbatical leave taken during the Spring 2021 semester. I am happy to report that the time of my sabbatical was one of productivity and renewal. I worked on two research projects during my leave, in addition to several professional development projects.

For my first research project, I took the lead on writing a paper on a new program that I and two SSU colleagues (and coauthors) have recently developed. The Gateway to Professional Success (GPS) program is a co-curricular program aimed at helping students develop the professional skills they need to be successful in careers after they graduate. Over the past decade, employers and colleges have recognized a skills gap in college graduates, which has been heavily investigated in the literature and across the business community. Research suggests that employers have not been wholly pleased with their new employees. A survey by the American Association of Colleges and Universities found that nine out of ten employers believed new graduates to be poorly prepared (Belkin, 2015), and others have found that only 11% of employers thought graduating seniors had the necessary competencies (Craig, 2016). Students are also feeling underprepared for employment. A study by Cengage (2016) found that only 34% of students strongly agreed that they will graduate with the skills and knowledge needed to be successful in the job market, and only 36% believed that college provided them with the necessary skills and knowledge for workplace success. The major areas of weakness appear to be in the soft skills that are so needed for interpersonal cooperation. Thus, in response to employer and student feedback, we developed the GPS program, which is offered as a semester-based, 6 workshop series for students in the School of Business and Economics. The workshops cover the following skill areas that are in alignment with the soft skills deficiencies described in the literature:

- Communication Skills
- Teamwork and Collaboration Skills
- Problem-Solving Skills
- Working Successfully with Others
- Professionalism
- Self-empowerment

The GPS program launched in Fall 2019, and we have run it every semester since. From a programmatic perspective, it's important to verify that any skills training has a positive impact, and the aim was to write a paper about the program's effectiveness. For the GPS program, we have administered survey instruments to measure the extent to which students are (a) increasing their knowledge related to the professional skills material and (b) increasing their skills-based confidence. The idea has been to investigate if the program is improving students' knowledge and confidence, so that we can (hopefully) validate the merits of our program's model so other universities can benefit from our experience.

The paper will be ready to submit to a journal by the end of September. The literature review and method sections are now complete. After gathering, compiling, and statistically analyzing data from two semesters' worth of GPS workshops, I am in the final stages of writing up these results, along with a discussion of the findings and our recommendations for other colleges or universities that might want to implement a similar program. Once my coauthors have done a final review of our paper, we plan to submit it for publication in the Journal of Education for Business or the Journal of Management Education.

My second research project focuses on the development, use, and impact of HRIS by small and medium-sized businesses. All employers have to make decisions about how they will manage the myriad personnel-related functions (such as recruitment, selection, training, compensation, incentives, benefits, legal compliance, job design, performance appraisal, and safety and health management) that are needed to support their workforces. As organizations grow, they progressively recognize the need to develop human resource information systems (HRIS). HRIS are databases of employee data that help organizations manage and support the key HR functions. For this study, I am interested in several questions. First, what drives small and medium-sized businesses to implement HRIS? Second, what are the factors that influence their decisions? And, is there a tipping point that is reached -- perhaps based on the number of employees in the firm, the firm's profitability, competitor behavior, or other factors -- that pushes the firm to develop an HRIS? Third, what is the impact of HRIS once they are implemented? I was able to begin my literature review for this interesting topic and begin laying out my plan for this exploratory study, which includes surveying employers about their use of HRIS. I am aiming to launch the data collection in Spring 2022 when, hopefully, COVID will be under control so it will be easier to interact face-to-face with employers.

Thus, on the research side of things, my time on sabbatical enabled me to work extensively on one research project and lay the groundwork for a second project.

I also dedicated a significant amount of my sabbatical to my own professional development. I am very interested in learning about new teaching approaches, different ways to engage students, new perspectives on ensuring diversity, equity, and inclusion in the learning environment, and helping students become career-ready. During my sabbatical, I read a lot about these topics to educate myself on things I can change and improve in my own courses as well as my outside-of-class interactions with students. In addition, I have reimagined the way I teach certain topics in my Leadership, Organizational Behavior, and Internship courses, modifications which I think will improve student comprehension and retention of the material as well as make strategic use of enhanced teaching technologies. My exploration of career readiness for students provided me with many ideas and resources that will be invaluable as I begin a new role as the director of the Center for Professional Engagement. This new center is designed to cultivate the professional development of School of Business and Economics students and engage employers in partnerships for student success. Through my web research, I learned about the approaches that other universities are using in both of these areas. I also engaged with a group of other career services people at other universities, as well as local

employers, in an effort to learn more about what programs are needed and how we can partner with others to deliver the programming that will best support our students' career readiness.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to focus completely on research and professional development for a few months and to refresh my knowledge base for my students!