

Sabbatical Leave Proposal

Ray Zhang, Economics Department
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Length of Service as a Full-Time Faculty: 20 years
Application for Sabbatical Leave: One Semester (Fall 2026)
Previous Sabbatical Leave: 2016

Cover Statement

This sabbatical proposal represents a fully independent, off-campus research project focused on enhancing online students' sense of belonging and exploring ethical, equity-minded uses of AI in teaching. Clarification has been added regarding the "reasonable distribution of sabbatical leaves among departments and divisions." The Department Chair, Professor Hugo Hernandez, fully supports the proposal, and, in the absence of a permanent division dean, has overseen relevant day-to-day matters on behalf of the acting dean. The project builds on my record of teaching excellence and reflects the values highlighted in Dr. Julius Sokenu's recommendation, emphasizing thoughtful scholarship and student-centered outcomes. No other substantive changes have been made.

MC Mission Statement

MC's student-first philosophy embraces equity, social justice, anti-racism, and intersectionality. We empower learners from local, national, and global backgrounds to achieve their certificate, associate and baccalaureate degree, transfer, and career education goals. Through the integration of innovative instruction and holistic student support, our programs are designed to foster equitable student outcomes.

Project Overview

This sabbatical proposal seeks dedicated time for *independent professional research and applied development* on faculty practices that foster online students' sense of belonging (SoB), with a parallel exploration of ethical and equity-minded uses of artificial intelligence (AI) in teaching.

The project will identify effective strategies for strengthening instructor presence, communication, and inclusivity in digital learning environments while evaluating how AI-enhanced tools can responsibly support engagement and feedback. *All work will be carried out off-campus*, without direct involvement in teaching or institutional activities during the leave.

I. Academic Background in Brief

Teaching Experience

- Full-time at Moorpark College (2005–present; tenured in 2008)
- Long-term Substitute, LACCD (2002–03)

- Part-time teaching: Chaffey College, Cerritos College, Golden West College, Long Beach City College, LACCD, and California State Universities

Educational Qualifications

- Doctoral studies in International Political Economy (with fellowship)
- Graduate studies in Business Administration (with scholarship)

Recent Economics Conferences Attended

- FedEdu Series (Sept–Oct 2025, ongoing)
- Teaching and Learning with FRED (Sept 18, 2025)
- Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco, “Meet the Experts: Teaching Monetary Policy” (May 27, 2023)
- AEA Conference on Teaching and Research in Economic Education (May 28–June 1, 2023)
- Race and the Teaching of Economics Webinar, MacArthur Fellows Program (Mar 22, 2023)

Academic Awards and Memberships (Selected)

- American International Studies Association / American Economic Association / Western Economic Association
- Irvine Fellowship Minority Merit Institutional Award / Phi Beta Delta International Scholars Award / Chairman Circle’s Scholarship

Examples of Contributions to the College

1. Updated all Economics course curricula annually, especially since 2022.
2. Contributed to Program Plans and SLOs for Economics since 2005; led annual program reviews since 2021.
3. Attended 60+ institutional workshops and webinars since 2021.
4. Led Global and Domestic Economy Faculty Lecture Series.
5. Developed and secured approval for the Economics Transfer Model Curriculum (AA-T).
6. Revised and created Course Outlines of Record for multiple Economics offerings.
7. Served on numerous faculty hiring committees.
8. Represented Social Science on Fiscal, Ed-Cap, Multicultural Day, Safety & Wellness, Honors, Faculty Development, Study Abroad, and Distance Education Committees.
9. Authored “A Nonessential Rebate Card for a Short Run Fiscal Stimulus,” Ventura County Star.
10. Authored “A Wrong-Footed Tax Stimulus: A Critique of President Obama’s Tax Rebate Proposal,” Student Voice (Moorpark College).

II. Rationale for Sabbatical Leave

After two decades in community college teaching, I have found that cultivating students' sense of belonging is central to engagement and persistence, especially in asynchronous online learning environments. This sabbatical will provide dedicated time to *independently analyze, synthesize, and design faculty strategies* that enhance inclusion and human connection in digital classrooms, fully outside of campus activities.

As highlighted in a letter of support from Moorpark College's president, the project exemplifies thoughtful scholarship and reflective practice, addressing critical questions about how students, particularly online learners: feel seen, supported, and connected. This project will allow for rigorous, independent exploration of instructor presence, inclusive communication, and ethical AI use while ensuring that outcomes can be broadly shared *after the leave*.

1. Focus on Sense of Belonging (SoB)

Fostering students' sense of belonging has become increasingly vital for engagement and success. This sabbatical will explore proven faculty practices that build belonging, community, and academic persistence.

2. Exploration of Technology-Enhanced Support

The project will examine the evolving role of AI and automation tools in supporting student engagement. Rather than focusing on technology itself, the study will investigate how ethical, equity-minded applications of AI can augment instructor presence, timely communication, and inclusive practices that strengthen belonging.

These aims will lead to tangible frameworks that can be shared across departments *after the sabbatical*, advancing institutional understanding of effective online pedagogy without requiring on-campus work during the leave.

III. Sabbatical Proposal: Detailed Plan

Weeks	Focus Area	Key Activities	Deliverables
1–6	Research and Literature Review	Examine scholarly and CCC/OLC research on belonging, instructor presence, and inclusivity	Annotated bibliography (LR)
7–12	Applied Research & Course Analysis	Analyze faculty development materials; redesign one online Economics course module conceptually to enhance belonging; evaluate AI tools for communication and feedback	Draft Faculty Toolkit and course redesign outline
13–16	Synthesis & Dissemination Preparation	Integrate findings into report and prepare materials for faculty workshops post-leave	Final report, toolkit, and presentation resources

All goals are achievable and measurable within one semester *without on-campus engagement*.

IV. Logistics and Resources

Research and applied analysis will use *open-access and institutionally supported sources*, including:

- CCC Vision Resource Center
- Online Learning Consortium (OLC) publications
- Peer-reviewed journals via the MC Library and/or other academic sources.

AI-related exploration will be limited to non-proprietary, FERPA-compliant tools such as Canvas-integrated or CCC pilot applications. No student-identifiable data will be used.

All activities will adhere to institutional research ethics and FERPA standards. Analyses will focus solely on course design and pedagogical practice conducted independently.

V. Contribution to Professional Development and Relationship to Teaching Assignment

This project will directly enhance my teaching effectiveness as a full-time Economics instructor by improving course design, instructor presence, and communication in online and hybrid formats. The resulting faculty toolkit and research synthesis will support professional learning across departments *after the leave*, furthering Moorpark College's emphasis on inclusive excellence and student-centered learning.

VI. Benefits to the Institution, District, and Students

Students will benefit from more connected and equitable online experiences that foster motivation, engagement, and persistence.

For the college and district, the project will:

- Provide a replicable framework for inclusive online pedagogy.
- Support innovation and equity goals outlined in systemwide initiatives.
- Promote professional development that bridges instructional design and technology integration.

All benefits will occur *post-leave*, ensuring the sabbatical is fully independent.

VII. Dissemination of Outcomes

Upon completion, I will submit a comprehensive report including the annotated bibliography, research synthesis, toolkit, and course redesign example. Findings will be shared through:

1. Flex Week presentations at Moorpark College (post-leave)
2. Interdisciplinary faculty workshops on belonging and engagement
3. Presentations to the Division and Distance Education Committee

4. Optional submission to district-wide or regional/national PD & HE conferences

Evaluation will include qualitative feedback from faculty participants on toolkit clarity and applicability, informing future revisions and broader implementation.

VIII. Alignment with Moorpark College Mission

This proposal aligns directly with Moorpark College's mission by integrating innovation, holistic support, and equity into online teaching practices. It empowers students through enhanced connection, community, and belonging while being conducted *entirely independently* during the sabbatical.

IX. Departmental Support

In preparation for this proposal, I have discussed my sabbatical plans with my Department Chair, Professor Hugo Hernandez, who expressed full support for my project and its alignment with the department's goals. At the time of planning, the division does not have a dean, and Professor Hernandez has been carrying out most day-to-day business on behalf of the acting dean, ensuring that departmental and divisional considerations are appropriately represented.

X. Conclusion

This sabbatical represents an opportunity to advance Moorpark College's mission through applied research conducted independently, bridging pedagogy, technology, and equity. As noted in supportive feedback from senior leadership, the project's *focus on fostering belonging and responsible AI use addresses pressing institutional priorities*. By developing actionable, evidence-based tools during *a fully self-directed leave*, the project will strengthen student outcomes and enrich faculty practice, while remaining fully independent of campus activities or direct involvement during the leave.