During my sabbatical, I was able to spend a significant amount of time working on a new research project. Given the nature of my research, this was very helpful. I use economic experiments in order to study social preferences, such as fairness and altruism, etc. This project was about charitable giving and the intersection between altruistic preferences and attitudes. In a previous experiment, Eckel, Grossman, and Johnston (2005) found that forced contributions – essentially a tax and transfer – to charity will crowd-out private giving. This has implications for how charities choose to deploy their fundraising resources, and for public policy with respect to tax treatment of charitable contributions. In this previous experiment they have subjects choose a charity from a menu of ten charities and then decide how much to give. We modify their experiment slightly. We selected four charities, three of which have missions that are closely associated with social issues: gay rights, African American rights, and environmental protection. The fourth charity was the Red Cross, which has a fairly broad and socially benign mission. Each subject had to decide how much to give to each of the four charities, and also faced a fifth menu choice similar to that of Eckel, Grossman, and Johnston. We followed up the experiment with a survey that included items measuring attitudes toward gay rights, African American rights, and environmental protection. Our primary research question was whether people with strong positive attitudes for a particular charity’s mission would be crowded out by forced contributions to the same degree as others.

I did this experiment with a colleague and coauthor, Prof. Matthew R. Roelofs, at Western Washington University. This was important for two reasons. First, I have had extreme difficulty getting subjects to show up for experiments at SSU; response rates have been quite low. WWU has a larger population to sample from, and they have a history of getting higher response rates. So, it was very helpful in terms of subject participation to complete the experiment at WWU. Second, WWU is my alma mater, and it provided an opportunity to return and interact with many faculty whose classes I sat in as an undergraduate student. Furthermore, they invited me to present some research on preferences for fairness while I was there. My time there was very rewarding, professionally and personally.

We planned to do our experiment over two days, with a goal of 150 subjects. The response rate was so good, that we were able to admit 159 subjects in just one day, a feat that I have never accomplished before. This gave us a little bit of extra time together to figure out how best to manage the data entry and plan the analysis. This, again, was valuable time since such activities tend to be done most efficiently in person, and also because I had some out of country travel planned shortly thereafter. Prof. Roelofs completed the data entry while I was gone, and when I returned to the US three weeks later I was able to do some preliminary analysis quite quickly. I presented these early results at a brown bag seminar within my department, and received some good feedback in terms of the direction of the analysis and arguments we were trying to make.

The data collection took place in early October 2013, and the brown bag presentation occurred in November 2013. For the remainder of the semester, I was able to complete a more measured and systematic analysis of the data. Our main result is that people with strong positive attitudes toward a charity’s mission are not crowded out to the same degree as others. The results are statistically weak, however, and we continue to fine-tune the analysis in order to bolster our story. Once the Spring 2014 semester began, work on this project has been faltering, but we are nearing a point where we can write up a paper and then soon submit it for publication. I recently presented the full results at the Bay Area Behavioral and Experimental Economics Workshop at Stanford University on May 4, 2014. The results, though modest, were well-received by other behavioral economists. It is noteworthy that some of the field’s most prominent scholars were present at this very small and intimate conference, including 2012 Nobel Prize winner Alvin Roth.
In addition to my research on social preferences, during this sabbatical I was able to make some progress on other research and course development projects, but none of those advanced to any new stages or milestones. The primary focus of my sabbatical was the experiment on charitable giving. Prof. Roelofs and I did, in fact, submit a letter of intent for a grant program on charitable giving, but in November 2013 we found out that we were not invited to submit a full proposal.

Doing economic experiments requires resources, and it is a time-consuming process. Given the heavy teaching load at SSU, and the very limited resources available for research, it typically takes a very long time in order to design, receive Human Subjects approval, test, and conduct an experiment. It is not uncommon for me to take as long as two years from concept to data collection. However, this sabbatical allowed me to accelerate that timeline considerably. Prof. Roelofs and I first conceived of this idea in late Spring 2013. The idea actually evolved from the research originally proposed in my sabbatical application after we realized that the original project would be too complex for our limited resources. It would not have been possible to make such rapid progress without this sabbatical leave, and I am very grateful.