

# The Classified Staff Development Leave: The Opportunity of a Lifetime

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Congratulations! By investigating the classified Staff Development Leave (SDL), you are taking the first step towards utilizing a phenomenal benefit that is similar to a faculty sabbatical. The classified SDL allows you to take a quarter or two or three to enhance your professional skills or get a substantial start on a new field of expertise, all while being paid most of your regular salary and benefits. Read on for my best answers to the most common questions about the SDL, tips for submitting a successful application, samples of successful applications, and contacts to get more information. Please note that the SDL is governed by contract language negotiated by each bargaining unit, and that language is subject to change, interpretation, and negotiation. The information below is accurate to the best of my knowledge, and the advice represents my personal opinion.

## THE QUESTIONS

### The Basics

- 1) What is a Staff Development Leave (SDL)?
- 2) Who is eligible and how often?
- 3) Why would I want to take one?
- 4) What have others done on SDL?
- 5) What is required to complete an SDL?
- 6) What's the catch?
- 7) How do I apply?
- 8) What's the selection process?
- 9) Do you have any tips or suggestions?
- 10) Where can I get more information?

### Frequently Asked Questions

- 11) When are applications for the SDL due?
- 12) What if I turn my application in on December 16?
- 13) How many units do I have to take while I'm on leave?
- 14) Do I have to take classes on my SDL?
- 15) What is successful completion of a course?
- 16) Do I have to wait 7 years before submitting an SDL application, or can I submit my leave request earlier so long as the leave wouldn't actually begin before I'd reached 7 years of employment (or since the last SDL)?
- 17) Can I take a two-month or seven-month leave?
- 18) Can I take three successive fall (or winter or spring) quarters off, like some faculty do?
- 19) What if my manager is reluctant to support my leave application for fear of disruption to my department?
- 20) What if my manager still won't support my application?
- 21) Do I have to return to work in the district after my leave?
- 22) What if I don't complete everything I said I would?
- 23) What if I return from leave and soon thereafter accept a great job in another

- district or in private industry?
- 24) Can a regular, half-time/60%/75% employee apply for an SDL?
  - 25) Will my job be here when I return?
  - 26) So is it a bad idea to go on leave when layoffs seem likely?
  - 27) Am I eligible for educational expense reimbursement on SDL?
  - 28) Can I use travel and conference funds on SDL?
  - 29) Can I apply the coursework and other professional activities I complete on SDL towards a Professional Growth Award (PGA)?
  - 30) Can I work for pay during my leave?
  - 31) So is it a good idea to take another job while on leave?
  - 32) One of the classes I included on my approved SDL application isn't available/was cancelled/is no longer appropriate. Can I substitute an equivalent class?
  - 33) My SDL application has been approved, but I've changed my mind. What should I do?
  - 34) I've worked here 25 years and have never taken an SDL. Am I crazy?

## THE ANSWERS

### 1) What is a Staff Development Leave (SDL)?

The SDL is “a leave from one to ten months at 85% of full pay. Such leaves may be taken in one-quarter or one semester increments to a maximum of ten months.” The SDL exists “to encourage and enable classified workers to enhance their value to the District through further job-related education, the upgrading of their skills, or retraining for a different career path.... The leave may be used to complete interrupted studies, learn by observing methods used in industry or other educational institutions, or get a substantial start on a goal of better education.” (SEIU 2001-05 agreement, p. 36)

In other words, the SDL can allow you to...

- a) keep current in your career, or
- b) improve your skills, or
- c) advance in your career, or
- d) prepare for a new job or career...

by providing a significant amount of time away from your current job with most of your pay and benefits.

### 2) Who is eligible and how often?

All regular contract classified staff are eligible regardless of which bargaining unit they are in: CSEA, SEIU, or Teamsters. Confidential staff are also eligible, as are staff with assignments of at least 50%. Staff considered “casual” and the new (as of 2005) classified hourly employees in the SEIU bargaining unit are not eligible.

### 3) Why would I want to take one?

There are many reasons to take an SDL. It can...

- a) refresh you after working many years straight without a break
- b) help you adjust to new demands and challenges on the job
- c) prepare you to advance in your field
- d) allow you to train for a new field
- e) allow you to spend extra time at home with a child or sick relative, see the seasons change in Vermont, supervise a home remodeling, etc. (Of course, these sorts of wonderful reasons won't be the

reasons you offer in your application, but the flexibility leaves often afford can provide opportunities that a regular 9 to 5 job can't.)

#### **4) What have others done on SDL?**

Here's a sample of applications from the last couple years:

- a) Library Technician: Take library courses; tour other college libraries; create department Web page
- b) Administrative Assistant: Take photography and software classes; complete union project for community college legislative advocacy
- c) Postal Services Specialist: Pursue Master's of Fine Arts
- d) Division Administrative Assistant: Begin nursing AA degree
- e) Office Coordinator: Take software and accounting courses
- f) Police Officer: Pursue MA in Homeland Defense & Security
- g) Senior Accountant: Continue coursework in MBA program
- h) HR Technician: Finish Master's in Public Administration

Obviously, some applications relate to the employee's current duties, some are completely different, and some are a mix of the two.

#### **5) What is required to complete an SDL?**

Basically, you must honor the terms of your accepted application, doing everything you said you would do and submitting a final report and evidence of completion when you return. An SDL is a sort of contract between the employee and district specifying what the employee will do on leave to justify receiving 85% of pay plus benefits. You must pass the classes you said you would take (although equivalent substitutions are acceptable with permission from the committee). You must complete any projects or other activities you described.

#### **6) What's the catch?**

There are a few drawbacks to taking an SDL:

- a) You'll earn 85% of your salary, sick leave, seniority credit, and PERS credit (but that may still be enough to earn a full year of service credit); you'll earn no vacation while on SDL
- b) You must complete two months of service in the district (in any job or combination of jobs) for each month you were on SDL or you'll have to reimburse the district for your salary during the leave (prorated for time you do complete in the district)
- c) You'll have to get used to going to school again, doing homework, pulling all-nighters (OK, maybe that's just me)...
- d) You'll miss whatever happens at FHDA while you're gone (layoffs...)
- e) You may not want to come back
- f) You may train for a position that isn't open when you return
- g) You'll have to wait another seven years to take your next SDL (so time your leave carefully)

But honestly, those are minor drawbacks. The SDL is an AWESOME benefit!!!

#### **7) How do I apply?**

Applying takes a bit of work, but it's worth it:

- a) Download and print the application & instructions from the HR Web site: <http://hr.fhda.edu/personnel/classified/>
- b) Read the section of your bargaining unit's current agreement related to the Staff Development Leave (see HR Web site address above)
- c) Complete the application in detail (listing all planned coursework and describing all other activities)
- d) Attach supporting documents (like copies of college catalog pages describing the courses you plan to take)
- e) Obtain administrator and college president (or chancellor) signatures
- f) Submit the application by 4:30 pm on **December 15** at the latest for the following year (Do it earlier to be safe!)

### 8) What's the selection process?

Usually, because fewer than 10 employees have applied each year in recent years, every application that meets the requirements is accepted. If a larger number of applications were to be received, the SDL committee would "establish procedures for deciding which leaves shall be recommended to the Chancellor for submission to the Board." (SEIU 2001-05 agreement, p. 37)

So what meets the requirements? With coursework, the usual rule is that you must successfully complete a minimum of **9 undergraduate units or 6 graduate units per term** that you are on leave. So if you are taking a full 10 months off, you must complete 9 X 3 quarters = 27 undergraduate quarter units or 9 X 2 semesters = 18 semester units. Graduate students must complete 6 X 3 = 18 graduate quarter units or 6 X 2 = 12 semester units.

If you are completing other activities instead of or in addition to classes, you may reduce the numbers above. For example, you might complete 24 undergraduate units and a project equivalent to 3 units during your 10-month leave. The SDL committee will judge whether the quantity of work is sufficient; if it does not think so, you will be contacted by the Director of HR and advised on how you might amend your application to pass muster.

### 9) Do you have any tips or suggestions?

Yes! Here are some suggestions to help you apply successfully for an SDL:

- a) Make the leave part of a larger life plan
- b) Follow all directions carefully, including attaching supporting documents
- c) Meet the application deadline without fail (early is fine!)
- d) Keep busy: 9 undergraduate units/term or 6 graduate units/term, but...
- e) Don't promise more than you can deliver; describe 9 units and do 15 if you want to (You won't get in trouble for doing extra, but you might for falling short of your application promises)
- f) Stay away from FHDA: REFRESH YOURSELF!

### 10) Where can I get more information?

FHDA Web site: <http://hr.fhda.edu/personnel/classified/>

Talk to one of your union representatives (or someone else) on the SDL Committee (note: representatives change periodically):

- a) Steve Schmidt (CSEA): (650) 949-6168, schmidtsteven@fhda.edu
- b) James Williams (CSEA): (408) 864-8964, williamsjames@fhda.edu

- c) David Garrido (SEIU): (650) 949-7923, garridodavid@fhda.edu
- d) Blanche Monary (SEIU): (408) 864-5705, monaryblanche@fhda.edu
- e) Pat Fifield (Teamsters): (408) 864-8720, fifieldpat@fhda.edu
- f) Greg Parman (Director of Human Resources, chair)—retired Sept. 30, 2005
- g) Cindy Castillo (Mgt): (408) 864-8403, castillocindy@fhda.edu

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### **11) When are applications for the SDL due?**

Applications are due at 4:30 pm on December 15 of the school year PRIOR to the school year in which you wish to take the leave. For example, if you want to take a ten-month leave beginning September 2006 or a one-quarter SDL beginning April 2007, your completed leave application is due December 15, 2005 in Human Resources. If December 15 falls on a weekend, applications will be accepted until 4:30 pm on the following work day. Be sure to get your application time and date stamped and keep a copy for yourself.

### **12) What if I turn my application in on December 16?**

You may have to wait another year to have it considered. Don't be late!

### **13) How many units do I have to take while I'm on leave?**

You must successfully complete at least nine undergraduate units or six graduate units per quarter (or semester) that you are on leave.

### **14) Do I have to take classes on my SDL?**

No, but most applicants complete all or most of their work obligation during an SDL by taking classes from an accredited college or university. You may complete some or all of your work obligation in other ways such as completing a special project or observing industry practice. What's important is that the quantity and nature of the activities be appropriate for the leave. The Staff Development Leave committee will evaluate this during the application process. You may contact a member of the committee and/or the director of human resources for guidance.

### **15) What is successful completion of a course?**

Successful completion is a "C-" grade or better in a graded class, or a "pass" in a pass/no-pass class.

### **16) Do I have to wait 7 years before submitting an SDL application, or can I submit my leave request earlier so long as the leave wouldn't actually begin before I'd reached 7 years of employment (or since the last SDL)?**

You can submit the application after six years, for example, since it must be submitted close to a year in advance of the actual leave. The wait is 7 years before and between taking leaves, not 7 years before an application can be submitted.

### **17) Can I take a two-month or seven-month leave?**

Leaves are often requested in quarter or semester increments to correspond to the academic terms of the college or university the applicant will be attending, but you may request a leave ranging between one and 10 months.

**18) Can I take three successive fall (or winter or spring) quarters off, like some faculty do?**

Typically, no. But if your leave plan requires this or your department has special needs for you certain times of the year, discuss it with your manager. If you can agree with your manager on a schedule that works for both of you, the committee would probably consider it.

**19) What if my manager is reluctant to support my leave application for fear of disruption to my department?**

SDL applications are due far in advance of the leave, giving everyone time to plan for the absence. Furthermore, departments receive extra funding to fill your position with temporary help. No staff member should be denied support for an SDL application because it will be inconvenient for his or her department. That said, many staff perform essential functions and the needs of the department are important. Talk to your manager about the best timing for your leave and how you can help prepare the department for your absence.

**20) What if my manager still won't support my application?**

Contact your union representative(s) on the SDL Committee as far in advance of the December 15 deadline as possible for help.

**21) Do I have to return to work in the district after my leave?**

Yes, if you want to avoid having to pay back some or all of your salary received during the leave. Upon your return from SDL, you are required to work in the FHDA district two months for each month you were on leave. So if you take the full 10-month leave, you must work in our district for at least twenty months upon your return to be free of any further obligation. You don't have to work in your original position, however. Work in any other staff, faculty, or management position in the district counts, too.

**22) What if I don't complete everything I said I would?**

You've broken the agreement. If you originally promised more than the minimum acceptable level of activities, you might be OK. But if you only promised to take the minimum acceptable units or perform a minimum acceptable level of activities and you failed to complete even that, you may be liable for repayment of some salary received during the leave.

**23) What if I return from leave and soon thereafter accept a great job in another district or in private industry?**

You'll be required to repay a pro-rated portion of the compensation you received during the leave. For example, if you take a 10-month leave, then return to district work for just eight months (instead of the minimum of twenty), then resign or retire from district employment, you would owe the district 12/20 or 60% of the salary you received during the 10-month leave.

**24) Can a regular, half-time/60%/75% employee apply for an SDL?**

Yes. You continue with your current medical benefits, and your salary and expected work would be pro-rated for your assignment. So a 50% employee would earn 85% of his or her regular salary and be expected to perform 50% of the work a full-time employee would be expected to perform on a leave of identical length. Staff considered “casual” and the new (as of 2005) classified hourly employees in the SEIU bargaining unit are not eligible for the SDL.

**25) Will my job be here when I return?**

Probably. The district can have someone else do your work temporarily while you're on leave, but it can't replace you with another regular employee permanently. That said, if district reorganization and layoffs eliminate your position while you are on leave, you would be treated like any other employee who had been laid off. That is, if you have bumping rights, you might return to a different position than you left.

**26) So is it a bad idea to go on leave when layoffs seem likely?**

Tough call. If you stay, you're in a better position to lobby for the continuation of your position. On the other hand, if you use your SDL to acquire new or enhanced job skills, you're in a better position to apply for other and/or higher positions.

**27) Am I eligible for educational expense reimbursement on SDL?**

Yes, up to the contractual limit (recently \$1,000 per year per employee). If your leave straddles two years, you may be able to use your limit for both years.

**28) Can I use travel and conference funds on SDL?**

Yes. If your leave application includes attending or presenting at professional conferences, you may apply for any travel and conference funds for which you would ordinarily be eligible.

**29) Can I apply the coursework and other professional activities I complete on SDL towards a Professional Growth Award (PGA)?**

Yes. Submit all of your SDL activities on your next PGA application. If you took a leave of at least two quarters, you should have enough hours to earn a PGA from your SDL activities alone. Whatever hours you accrue in excess of 200 will roll over towards future awards. (You will still have to complete at least 100 hours of new activities for each future award.)

**30) Can I work for pay during my leave?**

Yes, but typically not for FHDA unless it's part of an internship for a program of study elsewhere. When you are not on leave, the district doesn't care what work you do for other employers so long as it doesn't compromise your district work. That is, you're free to teach part-time for another college district in the evenings or work weekends at Home Depot if you want to. While on SDL, you are free to accept other work as your time and energy allow. The district will simply hold you accountable for successfully completing the requirements of your leave.

**31) So is it a good idea to take another job while on leave?**

That depends. Of course, if relevant work is a part of your leave proposal, it might be a great idea. Or if the only thing holding you back from advancing your education is the 15% reduction in pay during an SDL, and you would be able to complete the leave requirements and hold down a part-time job that made up the difference in pay, it might be a great idea. On the other hand, if money is the issue, you might be able to save a little bit each month during the year or two before the leave and focus yourself completely on the leave activities, which may turn out to be more time- and energy-consuming than you had figured. Don't forget that you can use the leave activities to obtain a PGA award when you return, and that will help make up for the reduction in salary and unreimbursed educational expenses.

**32) One of the classes I included on my approved SDL application isn't available/was cancelled/is no longer appropriate. Can I substitute an equivalent class?**

Yes. Be sure that the classes are truly equivalent (no substituting a one-unit non-credit class for a three-unit graduate class), and let Human Resources know right away in writing about the change. Don't wait until you return from the leave to notify HR--keep them informed about anything unexpected that causes a deviation from your approved plan, and keep a copy of your correspondence.

**33) My SDL application has been approved, but I've changed my mind. What should I do?**

If you are sure you don't want to take your leave as approved, contact Human Resources immediately. You may be able to modify or postpone your SDL.

**34) I've worked here 25 years and have never taken an SDL. Am I crazy?**

Certifiable. The SDL is a fantastic way to get education and training to stay at the top of your game in your current job, adapt to workplace circumstances that may require you to change positions, seize opportunities for different or higher-level work, or simply to do something different, refreshing yourself to bring new enthusiasm to your current job. Life's too short to do the same thing for 35 years without interruption.

**GOOD LUCK, AND HAVE A GREAT STAFF DEVELOPMENT LEAVE!**

*November 18, 2005*

# REFERENCES

- 1) SEIU Agreement 2001-2004 with 2004 changes, Staff Development Leave (pages 36-37).
- 2) SEIU Agreement 2001-2004 with 2004 changes, Staff Development Leave Appendix D (pages 112-113).
- 3) CSEA Agreement 2001-2003, Staff Development Leave (pages 22-23).