I was awarded a Sabbatical Research Leave for spring semester 2013 in order to conduct primary source research for a new project on the topic of the intersections between consumer culture and gender ideology in France and Germany in the first two decades of the twentieth century. I examined gendered imagery in advertising and publicity materials of French and German retailers and manufacturers (most notably, those advertising materials found in contemporary newspapers and periodicals) in order to examine how images drawn from consumer culture helped to create and reflect wider social perceptions of masculinity and femininity from 1900-1918.

During the spring and into the summer of this year, I spent considerable time at various libraries across the United States, including: the Hoover Institution Library at Stanford University in Palo Alto, California; the libraries of the University of California-Los Angeles in Los Angeles, California; the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.; the libraries of Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana; and the libraries of the University of Wisconsin-Madison in Madison, Wisconsin. Each of these sites held significant French and/or German publications from the early twentieth century that proved of value to my research project.

On the basis of the research I conducted at these libraries, I have begun to build an interpretation of gender ideology and consumer culture in the early twentieth century in France and Germany centering on issues such as class, domestic and public roles, and war and nationalism. Source materials that I explored revealed a preoccupation with women in their “traditional” domestic roles as housewives and mothers, yet also portrayed women as participating in the world of the public sphere, but only in narrowly defined and culturally acceptable contexts. For instance, women were depicted as being employed in some advertising materials, but virtually always in a line of work that was deemed “acceptably” feminine (such as handicraft workers, or as nurses tending to wounded soldiers during World War I) or in positions clearly subordinate to men (such as secretarial work in an office setting). Despite the realities of women’s increased employment in both France and Germany during the First World War, outside of depictions of women as nurses, their contributions to the war in locales such as munitions factories were essentially ignored in advertising discourse. Publicity and advertising materials also showed
women as unable to understand the nature and workings of consumer-related technological goods—presenting such technical knowledge and expertise as an exclusively and quintessentially masculine characteristic—and as inherently weak and frail in contrast to naturally healthy and virile men, thus justifying the disqualification of women from roles of power, authority, or equality with men in society.

Since my return full-time to campus in late August of this year, I have been preparing my material for dissemination to both colleagues here at the university as well as beyond UW-Platteville. In terms of sharing the results of my work with colleagues here in Platteville, on Thursday, October 3, 2013, I presented the key elements of my research findings as the main presenter at the year’s first installment of the LAE Faculty Forum series, at a session entitled: “Gender as Advertised: Men, Women, and Consumerism in Early Twentieth-Century Europe.” Meanwhile, I continue to refine my work for future presentation and—hopefully—publication, applying to present my work at various regional and/or national historical conferences around the country in 2014 and 2015, with an eye toward publication of segments of my work in those years as well.

In sum, my Sabbatical Leave was successful and rewarding, and I look forward to presenting and publishing further elements of it in the near future. I would like to thank Social Sciences Department Chair Nancy Turner, LAE Dean Elizabeth Throop, Provost Mittie Nimocks Den Herder, and the members of the Improvement of Learning Committee for this opportunity and for their support.