

MANAGING THE SERVICE COMPONENT IN ACADEMICS: PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR SCHOLARS

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ABSTRACT

If you have never felt overburdened or underappreciated for your service, do not bother to read this. If you are still reading, then I will assume, at some point, you have felt stretched too thin or felt out of control of your service obligations. Managing teaching, research and service is tricky and even painful if you find you keep dropping one or more of your obligations. The goal of this paper is to share experiences and observations from experienced scholars, to help you manage the process better and to give you the opportunity to learn from others' mistakes.

INTRODUCTION

An unknown author once said, "Make service your first priority, not success and success will follow." There is little doubt that the author never worked in a modern academic institution. An academician in the college and university system in the United States is faced daily with the task of balancing obligations of research, teaching and service. Few would argue the opportunities to engage in service activities are virtually endless and the service component is typically undervalued in the reward and recognition system.

Truth be told, my colleagues would probably tell you that I still take on too much service. I probably do, but as a full professor, I think that I have an obligation pick up slack and to protect junior faculty as much as possible. My service experiences have taught me a great deal and helped me improve my scholarship and my teaching. Unfortunately, when service obligations get out of hand, a scholar can be diverted from other things that also matter (teaching, research, and family – not necessarily in that order).

Very early in my career, I found myself placed in the middle of controversial assessment issues at a time in my career when I should not have been embroiled in controversy. I found that newly minted scholars are often uncertain how to balance the many demands placed upon them – teaching, research and service (Spooner, Spooner, and Karvonen 2002; Zurer 2001). I hope that sharing my experiences would be beneficial to young (and not so young) scholars.

When I talk about service, I am not talking about paid administrative jobs – although I have great sympathy for the number of meetings and amount of paper shuffled by administrators. Faculty service load is often an unexpected surprise for new scholars. Many of us emerged from our doctoral programs naively unaware of the service component of our careers.

It has been my observation (only an observation, collected casually), that service obligations at many institutions are not equally or equitably distributed (some carrying a stronger burden than others). Sometimes, that lion's share of the burden falls to the senior faculty. This is not a bad thing, but it can still get excessive. More unfortunate is when the newest and most junior faculty members end up carrying an excessive burden because they are unprotected and/or afraid to appear uncooperative. Researchers have empirically examined the tendency of inequitable assignment and unequal reward (Baez 2000; Bellas 1999; Daufin 2001; Whitman, Hendrickson, and Townsend 1999). This discussion, however, is less about pointing fingers and more about understanding how it happens. The goal of this paper is to help you to understand what to do when the service radar has locked on you.

I want to strongly state, up front, that this paper is not about avoiding service. In many cases, there are members of the team who will avoid service obligations. Research should not be an excuse to avoid service opportunities completely. Many believe that quality service supports quality research (Kiewra and Creswell 2000). This paper is not intended to be a "how to" manual for avoiding service obligations altogether. The target audience for this paper those who have difficulty understanding how to manage service obligations and those who find that more often than not, they have more service obligations than they can adequately fulfill.

Service is a double-edged weapon of war. Avoiding all service is as damaging as having too much. Junior scholars sometimes discover too late that the "protection" they received from all service obligations was detrimental to their careers. Service opportunities can be rewarding, educational, uplifting and can give you a voice in critical decisions being made that directly affect your welfare and livelihood. On the other hand, service obligations include a wide range of activities that can slowly drain the life from even the most vibrant of individuals.

OBLIGATIONS TEND TO CREEP UP ON YOU

There is more service to be done than there are willing workers. Quality-of-output depends on not being stretched too thin and not being forced (coerced) in taking the wrong assignments (too many, too controversial, too time-consuming or too difficult and outside of your skill set). Quality-of-life depends on understanding how much is too much, servicing where it matters most, and avoiding landmines.

The best way to deal with an excessive service burden is to contain it before it overflows. We end up with service obligations a number of ways:

- ◆ we get elected to them,
- ◆ we get appointed to them,
- ◆ we inherit them, and
- ◆ we volunteer for them.

Service obligations should be approached from the strategic perspective of “getting the most bang for the bucks.”

Sometimes, we end up with too much service, which could have been avoided with better management of the process. (This will not always work. There are plenty of examples of faculty who carry heavy service burdens who have tried, but, failed – though no fault of their own – to manage the process.) Early in your career it may be difficult to know how many and which assignments you should take. A close senior faculty mentor may help you be more successful (Angelique, Kyle, and Taylor 2002). Choose wisely and form bonds early – just because someone is more senior does not mean that he or she is wiser. Select a mentor who has achieved the kind of success that you plan for yourself. While the best mentor advice will probably come from within your organization, do not overlook the bonds you have forged at other schools.

Elections

Many service obligations come our way through elections. If possible take your name off the ballot if the position is not right for you (you do not have the time, the expertise or the training for a particular task). If you are not allowed to remove your name, engage in anti-campaigning (offer support for others on the ballot; explain to voters why feel you are not best suited AND request being considered for an assignment for which you are better suited). You will seem to be more sincere if do not appear to be avoiding all service.

Appointments

When an individual has specific characteristics or skills that would enhance many different service assignments, that individual often ends up with too many

appointments. Those same skills and characteristics often make that person look appealing on a ballot as well and this may compound the issue. If you have the right kind of relationship with the person/people who are making the appointments, discuss your service desires before appointments are made. Giving decision makers the right kind of information earlier, rather than later, may help to reduce assignments with a poor fit. When there is a good fit between skills, availability and desires, the service obligation is a lesser burden. Again, this is not about avoiding, but managing service. Tell decision makers which service assignments you are eager to embrace and why you are best suit for a particular assignment. It may be helpful to ask your mentor for assistance.

Inheriting

Inherited service obligations may be assigned to you because of policies and practices (which sometimes single out the most junior faculty – e.g., assignments delegated to the most recent hire). This case may not be an issue when new hires are joining regularly, but in uncertain time, this practice might place a service burden on an individual indefinitely. When an assignment policy is no longer reasonable, request a change of policy.

Furthermore, policies or traditions may favor a senior member for leadership positions (e.g., committee chair). While not uncommon, nor unreasonable, they may change the shape of an individual’s service portfolio. Leadership roles typically demand more time and effort than other obligations. If leadership obligations change the nature of your service portfolio, it may be reasonable to request a replacement on other obligations.

Finally, we inherit service obligations out of inertia. This occurs when you are assigned the service obligations fulfilled by the person who held the position before you, even if the assignments are not directly part of the job position. These can be problematic if they do not correlate with your skill sets.

Volunteering

Volunteering is a “wonderful, awful idea” (apologies to Dr. Suess). I have a weakness for service obligations that seem particularly worthy or important. I often want to be involved in critical decision making which will affect my livelihood or students’ success.

Sometimes our decision to volunteer is intentional and rational; in other cases we unintentionally volunteer. One case that stands out in my mind occurred when I volunteered to do a small piece of a university-wide project. Quickly, a vast majority of the project was redirected to me. By the time I resigned, I was responsible for the entire project. Another way a person may unintentionally volunteer occurs when he/she is the only one who

does not specifically refuse to do the task. The people who are responsible for getting the job accomplished may view that lack of refusal as acceptance and direct the responsibilities accordingly. It is important to watch this tendency carefully, because this approach often leaves the individual with the *work*, but without the authority, the title or the ability to claim the service assignment during evaluation.

External Service

Service can be broadly divided into two categories – internal service and external service. Scholars really have a critical need to stay connected to the outside. It is particularly important for untenured faculty to maintain external contacts and relationships. If you are tenured, you may believe that you will never leave your current employment. Keep in mind, that unforeseen circumstances may drive you to make a change.

Too much internal service may slowly cut you off from the outside world. This is a dangerous position to wake up in – it may make it difficult or impossible to move. Huge quantities of internal service do not really add much to the vitae bottom line on the job market. Isolation may be the actual intention – how can you leave if you have no where to go?

Service to the discipline is extremely valuable and it keeps you connected and involved. Balance your service portfolio, and if you are contemplating a change or if you are not tenured, you are better to err on the side of too much external than on too much internal service. External service may come in a variety of forms (e.g., reviewing, editing, track chair at a conference, serving as a session chair or discussant, and officer positions in academic organizations).

TEN IMPORTANT LESSONS

Looking back, I found that I have learned ten lessons. Some of these lessons seem pretty obvious, but they are easy to forget when we are in the middle of the process.

Lesson 1: If No One Else Wants the Job – There is Probably a Good Reason

The easy assumption is that no one wants a service assignment because it is a particularly nasty, unappreciated, controversial, and/or time-consuming assignment. Sometimes that is true, but then again, not always. That is a dilemma.

Most would not have to think too long or too hard to imagine a faculty member who does not fulfill an equal share of service responsibilities. Even your students can tell you that if one member of the team does not do his or her fair share then other members must pick up the slack or everyone suffers.

Lesson 2: Service Assignments Vary in Their Worth

There is no question that “worthy” jobs must get done. Part of the problem, especially for younger scholars, is having the information and skills to determine which are really worthy. The problem is compounded because the person in the position to assign or requesting that you volunteer for the task has a need to fill the job. Intentionally, or unintentionally, that person may misrepresent the importance of the assignment. Mentors are useful to help you decide the true value of a task, including the reward value compared to time commitment.

Consider all the advice and input from your mentors and the people asking for your commitment, then subject the assignment to a couple of acid tests. Will this assignment grow my career (e.g., how much does it count toward my promotion and/or tenure, is this a high profile assignment that will show important people my skills)? Will this assignment give me networking opportunities (e.g., will I get to meet important decision makers that otherwise might overlook my efforts)? Will this assignment give me access to potential new co-authors and research topics? Will this assignment teach me new skills (e.g., cutting edge research techniques)? The more acid tests the assignment passes, the better the task should appear, assuming a reasonable time commitment. If the assignment does not pass any acid tests, try to let that assignment pass.

Lesson 3: Service Assignments Vary in the Amount of Time Required

Before taking on a new service commitment, diligently try to determine the amount of time you are being asked to commit. In a perfect world, you would be given a written commitment, especially if the task seems to be very large and time consuming. Since administrators may be reluctant to give a formal commitment in all but the most specific cases (e.g., you are the new Director of a center and that constitutes 50 percent of your obligation), you may be able to establish some control by stating upfront how much time you are willing to assign to a particular task (e.g., That assignment sounds like a wonderful opportunity and I am very excited about starting, but I want to make sure that we are in agreement. Based on my current research productivity and teaching loading, as well as my other service obligations, I believe that I can dedicate two hours per week to this assignment. Do you believe that two hours per week will be sufficient to fulfill my obligations?).

It is critically important, especially if you are not tenured, to keep in mind your institution’s evaluative weights given to teaching, research and service. It is not uncommon, particularly for tenure-track faculty, to have a very small portion of their promotion and tenure decision based on service. An institution that assigns a weight

of as much 25 percent is rare. Frequently, service weights range from 10 to 20 percent, sometimes even lower for untenured faculty. If service accounts for only a small portion, or none, of your overall evaluation, you need to avoid assignments that will require more time than the proportional weight. In other words, do not spend 50 percent of your time on service if it only counts for 10 percent of your performance.

Lesson 4: Service Assignments Vary in Their Reward Value

Just as service assignment vary in their true importance and in their time obligations, service assignments vary in their reward value. Some service assignments earn more points than others. Before you take on a new service assignment, try to ask about the relative value of that particular assignment, compared to other assignments, in your merit and/or promotion and tenure evaluation. For example, some committee assignments may be considered to be “major” committees where others might be considered “minor.” Major assignments are typically evaluated more highly than minor assignments. My observation has been that there may be no correlation, or even a negative correlation, between the amount of time a person must expend and the reward value obtained. Prestigious assignments might be considered major, even when the time obligations are minimal. On the other hand, unglamorous assignments, even when the work load is extreme, may be considered to be minor. The required input may not be equal to the reward value (Agrell and Steuer 2000). Institution history and personal opinions may impact what is considered to be valuable. If your institution has a written policy or a “point” system, ask what value will be awarded for this service activity. Obtaining a copy of the written policy is even better than asking. Here again, it is important to keep in mind your institution’s weight given to teaching, research and service. It serves little purpose to exceed the maximum value of a category. If a service project will add very few points to your evaluation bottom line, but effectively stops you from improving your teaching and/or research evaluations (which are typically of greater value), think carefully before accepting it.

Lesson 5: If the Job is REALLY Important, Administration Should be Willing to Support it

Recruiters always try to make the job seem appealing. When a task needs to be assigned, the person responsible for finding a warm body to fill it is going to say that the job is important. Importance is a relative thing. Every task is important if it is not getting done. Keep in mind, the job may not be all that important in the eyes of administrators, regardless of what they SAY, if they will not commit to its importance in writing and/or with resources. This is particularly burdensome to a faculty member placed in the

position where central administration has a different perception of the value of an assignment compared to “local” administration.

It is not unreasonable to ask administration to support a project they are asking you to accomplish. Less tactfully stated, administration needs to “put their money where their mouth is.” A true commitment of resources speaks with greater volume than a verbal statement that the assignment is really important. Large assignment need more support than small ones. New assignments may require additional training. Will administration support your training? If you are asked to take on a large, time consuming project, ask if additional staff or student assistant support will be made available. You may want to ask for teaching release time. Verify that it will be “real” release, not merely combining the two sections of a course that you are scheduled to teach into one section, thereby giving you twice as many students as normal for the section but credit for half as much work. Depending on the characteristics of the assignment, you may be reasonable to request additional resources, such as computers, software, formal training and/or travel.

If this assignment represents a major change in the characteristics of your job description, make sure that everyone is in agreement on how this will be treated in your evaluation. For example, if you have taken an administrative task that constitutes 50 percent of your time, will the committee evaluating your tenure packet consider half as much research productivity to be acceptable?

Lesson 6: If the Job is REALLY Important, No Single, Solitary Faculty Member Should be Required to Carry the Burden of Seeing it Accomplished

Critical, time-consuming tasks should be assigned to a team of individuals instead of just one. Amazingly, this is not always the case. Really important tasks tend to carry inherent risks. Risky jobs are often difficult to fill, especially when the rewards for completing the task are not equitable. Early in the process of working on large, risky and or high profile assignments, attempt to verify or put in place a procedure for succession. A committee, not a person, should be responsible. The committee chair should be rotated on a scheduled basis. A current member should be rotated into the chair position. The chair-elect should be trained by the current chair, so that there is an overlap and a smooth transition of leadership. Institution history, risk sharing and continued success can be improved with strategic planning.

Lesson 7: Someone Has to Do It, But it Does Not Have to Be You

“No” may be the responsible answer.

Lesson 8: If it Has to Be You, Then You Should Be Afforded a Reduction in Service or Other Obligations Elsewhere

Sometimes you may find that decision makers will not take no as an answer. If the answer cannot be no, then it may need to be “how?” If you attempted to reject an assignment and you are not given that option, consider some of the tactics discussed in Lesson 5. Carefully prepare your response and clearly state why you are concerned about your ability to accomplish the task (e.g., your teaching load is heavy, tenure expectations demand a high level of research productivity, you do not have access to appropriate technology). Prepare a written proposal of what you need to be successful, which clearly states your desires and concerns. Some examples might include: (1) You would like a written reduction in the research expectation needed for tenure. (2) You would like a change of weights associated with your merit review. (3) Since 50 percent of your time is going to be spent on this service activity, you would like your service weight to be increased from only 10 percent of your evaluation.

Lesson 9: If it Has to Be You, but You Are Not Skilled, Administration Should Provide You with Proper Training

Just as in Lesson 8, you may not get what you need unless you ask for it. When it comes to skill development, you may have to be brave enough to ask for (and/or demand) help! Every day faculty are asked to take on jobs for which they were never properly trained, such as assessment, accreditation, distance education initiatives, teaching courses outside of their educational base.

It is reasonable to ask decision makers to support your training needs. You may wish to ask for paid travel to conferences and workshops. You may need to ask for support in covering other obligations during your absence. You may need to ask for time and direct interaction between you and the administrator responsible for the completion of the task. When you are working on a new task of a significant magnitude always keep open lines of communication.

Lesson 10: Resigning IS an Option, Especially if Commitments have Not Been Kept

Resigning from an assignment may not be as easy as it seems. Under the best of circumstances, you ask for a replacement before you resign and you are quickly replaced. You and your successor work out the terms of transfer of authority and you go on with your life. It is helpful if there is an overlap between your leaving and your replacement going solo. If you are replaced, do not punish your replacement for your treatment. Remember

this replacement is freeing you to return to your other commitments. Within reason, do whatever you can to help your replacement to succeed. Tell your replacement what you wish you had known and how to avoid landmines. Do not take this opportunity to burden your replacement with all the woes of the past.

Sometimes decision makers will refuse, directly or indirectly, to accept your resignation. A decision maker may directly state that no suitable replacement could be found. More commonly, the decision maker acknowledges your desire to be replaced and simply never does it. Keep in mind, you may not be allowed to resign from duties that were part of your employment contract without negotiating a new contract. Assuming that you are not legally obligated to continue in the duties, if your informal request to be replaced is unsuccessful, submit a formal, written letter of resignation from the assignment, set a specific date as your last and request a replacement be located as soon as possible. Reality necessitates the consideration of what to do if you are not replaced after you have resigned. When the date arrives, stop performing the duties.

Regardless of how smoothly you are replaced, once you are no longer receiving credit for doing the assignment, establish a fixed and reasonable amount of time to help your successor. So, you should offer reasonable help, but not indefinite help. After that time has past, consider assisting your replacement as your lowest, rather than highest priority. Remember, once you no longer have the job, you are not best served by continuing to perform it.

Finally, do not be surprised if they hire one or more additional staff members and/or administrators to do the job that you were expected to do as part of your faculty assignment. Furthermore, do not be surprised if this critical, time-consuming task simply stops being performed once you resign. Remember, simply because someone says it is important, does not really make it important.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The purpose of this paper is to provide tools and insight for a process of managing faculty service obligations. Keep in mind, I am one of those who tends toward too much, rather than too little service. The thoughts provided here are not intended to frighten or to discourage service. The goal is to manage service so that you can perform at your best in the obligations that you do perform.

I strongly encourage involvement and even some risk taking with regard to service. You will learn a lot when you do something new. The skills you learn and the knowledge you gain have other applications. You will meet new people when you do something new. The new contacts are typically helpful throughout your entire career. Evidence suggests that service opportunities often make you a better teacher and or researcher.

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