

Welcome to Column 26 of Hey Jane! This is a project of the SWS Career Development Committee. Questions and answers are generated by the committee and SWS members. Answers are compiled from several anonymous sources. All columns are archived on our committee's page on the SWS website.

Hey Jane! How Should I Negotiate What Seem Like Ever-Increasing Service Burdens? How Can Administrators Develop Best Practices for Service for Faculty?

First, it is important to recognize that service is a central part of academic jobs, even though it is often one of the least-favored and least-rewarded parts of the job. The key issue to keep in mind here is that you need to (a) identify departmental/university expectations regarding service, and (b) develop strategies that allow you to protect your time for the activities that matter most for your own career and professional development as well as job satisfaction.

Approaching your department and university like an ethnographer is a good beginning. Take careful notes, ask questions, and try to identify what the expectations are for service obligations for faculty in your rank. It is easy to over-perform if you don't have good data on what others are doing. Research suggests that women faculty of all ranks do more service than men in the same ranks. At the same time, research also suggests that being engaged in major service positions (especially as undergrad advisor) can slow women's progress toward tenure and promotion; these positions are less likely to slow men's progress, even as men are less likely than women to do them. Failure to meet service expectations can be more burdensome for women than for men. Not unlike parenting, women are less rewarded for doing it than are men, and are punished more for failing to do well it than are men.

Carefully document all of the service you do, from serving on committees, to organizing talks, giving guest lectures – really anything that takes up your time, is a contribution to your department or university, and is not directly related to your teaching or research. While it may seem that “everyone does this stuff,” in fact, some faculty are much more likely to do the minutia that gives their departments life – and variation in service time is patterned in gendered ways. In addition, if you keep careful track of these obligations, it makes it easier to say “no” to additional burdens.

Choosing what sorts of service to focus on can be difficult. Use your fieldnotes to identify which service work is most valued, which takes the most time and effort, etc., and then try to negotiate your service work in ways that allow you to participate in the running of your department/university, without being completely overburdened. Boundaries between teaching, mentoring, and service can be murky. And at some institutions service, especially related to teaching and advising, is valued and included as a criterion in the tenure review. Always pay attention to how much service other faculty in your department are doing, and ask them questions about how they choose what to focus on.

If you are often asked to serve, and are uncomfortable saying no, just say “What a wonderful opportunity! Let me check my schedule and get back to you.” Then either talk to a trusted colleague about whether this service would be valuable for your career before responding, or – if you know you want to say no – simply get back to the person with a “So sorry I won’t have time for that this year, but please keep me in mind for the future.” If there are others who might be equally appropriate for this service, suggest these alternatives. By conveying enthusiasm when you first receive the request, you will leave your colleague with a much better feeling about you than if you brusquely say “no thanks.” Even if you know you want to accept a service commitment, you might still say you want to think about it before you respond – that communicates that you are a thoughtful person who monitors her time carefully. Your chair or another trusted or influential colleague may be a useful ally; you may be able to say “XX has advised me to limit my service commitments until I am further along here.”

It is important to distinguish between service for your department, and service for the College and/or University. All faculty are expected to do service for their departments. Not all faculty are invited to do service for the larger institution. Being invited to do so is often itself a mark of your positive reputation. Accordingly, you may want to treat these invitations quite seriously. If they come at a bad time, it is fine to decline. But you may want to consult with your chair first, to assess the meaning and importance of these requests. Furthermore, some institution-level service requests may also be caught up in politics you’d rather avoid (or politics of which you’d like to be a part!). Again, consultation with your chair and trusted senior faculty is a good idea. And for those of you who are administrators, when the service is completed, a note of appreciation to the faculty member with a copy to her chair, is always a good idea.

If service is a central part of promotion and tenure, you should certainly be engaging in it. If you are mostly judged on teaching and research, try to protect your time for those activities, without entirely “checking out,” as being a good colleague is important. If it is impossible to avoid a major service obligation, you should ask for course releases, RA/TA or work-study assistance, or other support that will allow you to protect your research/teaching time. Even if you don’t receive these incentives, you will have made it clear that you are focused on these activities.

If you are an assistant or associate, ask the chair or dean what the service expectations are for faculty in your rank, and then discuss whether all faculty are meeting those expectations. If you are an active participant in any interdisciplinary programs, clarify with your home department or dean how that service weighs in your overall contribution. If you face many demands for service, which you think will impede your progress toward Associate or Full, have a frank conversation about your career goals with your chair/dean. Let them know what you hope to do, and get their advice on how you can achieve those goals. Let these administrators develop a “stake” in you, by asking them for their help.

Those who hold administrative positions should take responsibility for establishing expectations and norms for service, and communicating those expectations to

department chairs. Department chairs should develop transparent spreadsheets of service work over 5 year cycles, so that it is clear that there is equity in how service is being apportioned. Deans should similarly guide chairs to track the details of service contributions of their faculty over set time frames, and to expect that analyses of these allocations of service responsibilities be a component of annual departmental reports to the dean. At the College level, deans should analyze service patterns by rank and by unit, attending to the equity of allocations. Such analyses might lead to compensation for unusually high levels of service, and appropriate responses to unusually low levels of service.

One particularly thorny category for administrators is assessing the quality and time commitment that goes into various forms of service. For example, it is a truism that women, minorities, and especially minority women are sought out for mentoring and advising to a disproportionate level by minority and women and minority women students (and as senior faculty, by junior faculty). At some institutions there are systems for “counting” these forms of service/teaching, both in the formal sense of independent studies and in more informal senses. In attempting to quantify these extra workloads, administrators may attempt to assess how much time actually goes into these. Some faculty devote hours – useful hours – to each student. Others don’t. Assessing these investments can be extremely difficult. To the extent that you keep records of your own work in these areas (for example, readings lists for independent studies), you can help your own chair (and dean) assess your contributions.

Another sad fact about service is that those who are most efficient, and detail-oriented regarding service work are rewarded with... more service. Rather than allowing yourself to overperform, try to recognize that YOU do not need to take on every piece of service that needs doing. It is important to realize that much service can be done at a “C+” rather than “A” level with little impact. In other words, even if you are pretty sure you will do a better job than a colleague, it is okay for that colleague to do it. Likewise, even if you are capable of doing an amazing job, perhaps an adequate one will be functionally equivalent.

It is crucial to recognize that you do not need to do everything yourself. Remember the idea that on airplanes in the case of an emergency, parents are told to put the oxygen mask on themselves before their children. If you are unable to get your research/teaching done well, because you are trying to manage all of the service that gets thrown your way, your career may be hampered, which in the long run will hurt many more people. In addition, if you do great deal of service work that you don’t enjoy, you may become resentful and burned out. It’s simply not worth the risk; find ways to maintain your balance and your enjoyment in your job.

Conversely, if you really enjoy service work – and this is not as unusual as our column may make it seem – be sure you communicate that to your chair and possibly also your dean, and develop understandings with them about how your service contributions will be recognized. As one example, you might talk with a dean about the importance of

being awarded a sabbatical in recognition of completing some particularly weighty college-level service.

Try to be thoughtful about what service is most important (e.g., recruitment), and make choices accordingly. Also, recognize that it is possible to choose to let some service work go. If regularly cleaning out the department refrigerator is a thankless task that no one wants to take on, consider getting rid of the refrigerator! It is sensible for departments/colleges to rethink their committee structures and sizes, in order to ensure that faculty are not needlessly doing more service than necessary. This is something both chairs and deans should also do, periodically assessing the service tasks in their units, and feeling free to drop tasks that do not ultimately matter.

CAVEAT to all professional advice: Always check with your departmental colleagues, chair, dean, etc. to find out what the norms and expectations are in your institution. I hope this helps!