

The “Service Problem”

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What is the problem?

If we insist that committee/panel membership – tasks that are generally classified as “service,” either to an individual’s institution or within the broader community – must have a reasonable diversity of members, but we are pulling from a candidate pool that does not also have equal representation, then statistically individuals from under-represented populations will serve on more committees.

This is also true more generally for broadly-defined “service” jobs, such as mentoring, outreach activities, etc, and is regardless of all of the other potential issues with implicit biases or whether your service activities change how you are perceived in the community.

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Why does this matter?

Service jobs take time and effort away from our research, which is the standard by which we are judged for things like promotion, tenure, funding, and award nomination.

Why is this a systemic problem and not just a matter of an individual choice?

Anyone who says 'yes' too often will have too much time taken away from research, leading to potential delays or losses in terms of career progression (fewer papers published or not as much grant money brought in = lower likelihood of promotion or tenure, less support for awards, etc). However, anyone who says 'no' too often will be seen as not participating, not contributing, not a team player, etc, and this also has the potential to lower the likelihood of promotion, support, etc. “Too often,” unfortunately, is the assessment of the person asking and not the person deciding. So the more someone is asked, the more effort they must expend in assessing whether saying yes or no is the better option for their career.

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How do we address this issue?

Here are some actionable proposals for addressing the “service problem.”

1. Treat committees for what they are: a burden.
2. Expand committee membership to new candidate pools, to reduce the load. For example, allow industry membership (pulled from a database of successful SBIR/STTR proposal participants); allow K-12 education membership (pulled from database of eg ORAU teacher training/summer program participants); allow grad student membership (eg locals in the case of local committees, or pulled from SCGSR participants, etc); as appropriate given context.
3. Make a national database (like the referee databases for Phys Rev) so that people can search for potential candidates to invite for committee/panel membership. This helps overcome the “name recognition” problem, and could also track committee membership so that people do not get asked when they are otherwise unavailable or overcommitted.

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4. Task promotion/tenure/award selection committees with addressing how someone’s service burden might have detracted from their scientific output.

We have similar suggestions in place to account for things like career gaps for family leave, etc. Considering questions like “is this person having to perform more service work than others in their group, department, or a similar cohort?” can help level the playing field.

5. Compensate people for their service.

Internal/institutional service (hiring committees, seminar organizers, etc) are given internal funds to offset their time spent. This exists to some extent at national laboratories, but too often the funding is not commensurate with the time spent. Some level of standardization may help.

For external/community-wide service (PACs, advisory panels, review committees, etc), funds could come from DOE/NSF-level programs. For example, an honorarium for participation in a review (though national lab employees generally cannot accept these), or a boost in research funding to help pay a student or postdoc.