

Leveraging Committee Assignments for Advancement

Serving on faculty committees can be enriching, exciting experiences that enable you to increase your knowledge of your institution and field, develop new partnerships and expand your network, and sharpen critical skills. Service also shines a spotlight on a professor's abilities, and can open the door to opportunities to pursue administrative jobs, apply for awards, and contribute to interdisciplinary research projects. But with a seemingly dizzying array of committees on which early career faculty can serve, how do you decide which to pursue, and when? Experts agree that the key is to seek opportunities that can add value to your institution and align with your interests and career aspirations.

By **Alaina G. Levine**



Stuart Sidle

Stuart Sidle says that committee experiences have enriched his academic career. From serving on faculty searches, the associate provost for strategic initiatives at the University of New Haven in Connecticut learned to improve both his own evaluation of potential employees and his ability to prepare for job interviews. When he sat on a curriculum committee, he learned about the course approval process which helped him lead

his department when he was chair. He recommends faculty incorporate committee assignments into their career advancement plans.

And he's not alone in this opinion. "Committee work is crucial to your growth as a faculty member," says **Jeanne Hossenlopp**, vice provost for research and dean of the graduate school at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Conversely, "committee work is crucial to the life of a university." **Thomas Near**, an associate professor of ecology and evolutionary biology at Yale University, agrees. "Faculty have to be savvy with our time but also generous of our time" as it relates to participating in committees, he says, because committee work "makes you a better member of the university community and improves the community itself as well."

Those serving on committees see excellent return on their investment. **Michael Palladino**, dean of the School of Science at Monmouth University in West Long Branch, New Jersey, says serving on a broad range of committees—including those that focused on curricula, governance, hiring, and fundraising—has helped him as a dean. As an untenured faculty member, he found himself "thrust" into a leadership position when serving as the vice chair of the Faculty Council when the chair went on medical leave. "It had a much bigger impact than I thought," he says. Colleagues and administrators began noticing that he was "not afraid to make decisions and was not only motivated by tenure," which ultimately helped him solidify tenure after all. "I realized that service work that advances

the university helps both me and the university," he explains.

But even if you are not in a leadership role, contributing to a committee is "an effective way of contextualizing what you're doing and broadening your viewpoint," says **David Pyle**, a professor of earth sciences at the University of Oxford. "It allows you to become more engaged with the institution as a whole."

Indeed, committee assignments give you "an appreciation of how complex the work of a university is," says Hossenlopp. An institution's behind-the-scenes elements, such as hiring, fundraising, funding, and even instrumentation and laboratory support, aren't always apparent from your time in grad school or as a postdoc, explains **Jennifer Swann**, a professor of biological sciences at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Yet they are essential aspects that keep the institution running smoothly that faculty should not only be aware of, but also contribute to in order to chart their own path to success.

Gaining Insight and Abilities

Depending on the committee, faculty can become familiar with different areas of their university as well as gain the opportunity to hone varied skill sets. Curriculum committees, for example, "help us to better train our students," says Hossenlopp. Institutional policy and promotion and tenure committees enable you to grasp university politics, says Swann. And graduate recruitment or faculty search committees are an effective way to develop talent in articulating your value to new audiences, she adds.

Not surprisingly, most committee assignments enhance mem- **continued**

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Kristin Douglas



Michael Blackburn



Jennifer Swann

bers’ communication skills. Your speaking, writing, and negotiating skills are challenged as you prepare reports and presentations, says Palladino. You learn strategies for conflict resolution. And as a committee chair, you also develop expertise in delivering “bad news” and constructive criticism, says **Kristin Douglas**, a biologist and associate dean at Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois. Your improved communication skills enable you to become a more effective advocate, for yourself, your department, and your university, adds Palladino: “You’re able to talk about your institution in a more informed way.”

With improved communication and amplified visibility comes the chance to expand one’s network. The prospect of collaborating across interdisciplinary fields can be realized, as Pyle himself experienced. And your service can put you in contact with people with whom you might not otherwise have connections, such as trustees of the university and other institutional constituents. By serving on and later chairing his institution’s diversity committee, **Prosanta Chakrabarty**, an assistant professor of biology at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, interacted more directly with his upper administration and contributed to a search for a new dean. His participation on this team directly led to an invitation to address a group of university donors, he says.

Choosing a Committee

So how do you decide which assignments to pursue, and at what point in your career? “Picking committees can be tough water to navigate when you’re new” to a university, admits **Eric Bubar**, an assistant professor of physics who joined Marymount University in Arlington, Virginia in 2011.

Early in your career “you are so focused on teaching and establishing your research that you might not see the value of serving on committees,” says Palladino, “but that’s where skilled faculty mentors and deans comes in handy to provide advice about appropriate committee service.” The department chair can also counsel you about which committees are strategically important for helping you gain tenure, which

might take up too much time, and how to say no to invitations, says Hossenlopp.

Many universities have formal mentorship programs for early career faculty to assist them in their service decisions. Douglas, for example, learned that at “different points in my career that ‘serving’ meant different things,” she explains. In her early career, she was encouraged to select committees that focus on education and curriculum development, which helped her become a better teacher. “As I got closer to tenure, my mentors advised me to join highly visible committees,” because it is important for people to see you on “big power” committees, such as governance boards.

Strive to serve on committees whose interests are united with your own. “It is essential that faculty chosen to serve on particular committees have the background, skills sets, and/or desire to make valuable contributions. Aligning faculty interests with the right committee is key,” says Palladino.

But don’t be afraid to serve on a committee that is outside your realm of expertise, as it can be invaluable, advises Pyle. When he volunteered for a finance and fundraising committee, he was “exposed to a completely new set of problems,” he says.

Highly Visible Committees

Since every university has its own culture, it is critical for a faculty member to know which committees to pursue during certain times in their career, especially in advance of receiving tenure. “Avoid Faculty Senate in your early career,” says **Michael Blackburn**, who serves as co-dean of the University of Texas Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences at Houston. “You become embroiled in untenable issues.”

However, “my gut instinct is that if you can have one of these highly visible positions and navigate it in a way that is sensitive to other people’s opinions and viewpoints while still being able to communicate your viewpoint, that ultimately builds respect for you,” says Douglas. She notes that her participation in her institution’s governance committee ultimately allowed others to see her leadership talents, which helped her land the position of associate dean.

No matter what committee you are on, people are watching you, and generally, “you do a disservice when you don’t speak up,” says Swann. Not only do you not help the committee itself, she adds, but “if you don’t say anything before tenure, no one’s going to listen to you after tenure....People put you on the committee because they want your voice.”

Know When to Say No

“My mentor told me you could say yes to every offer or just yes to the ones you care about,” says Douglas. “I am very careful only to serve on committees that I care deeply about or on which there is a skill I can learn.” Recognize you can (almost) always decline a committee offer. “If the president asks, you can’t say no,” she adds with a laugh.

Some professors are courted more than others to serve on committees, which necessitates saying no more often. Case in point: female and underrepresented minority professors, who frequently are asked to serve on more committees than their white, male counterparts. Pyle sees it firsthand at Oxford: “females may end up being pressed to be on far more committees than men,” he admits.

Although she herself has not experienced it, Douglas notes that “it does happen on campus, related to multicultural **continued**”

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Michael Palladino

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representation, because there aren't as many faculty who represent that viewpoint, so there are certain people who get asked to serve more often.”

The increase in diverse sources of inspiration can inject new life and creativity into a committee. But for many women and minorities on a campus, they can often feel like they are being exploited.

Swann advises to “beware the token position. To appear fair and balanced, many committees will recruit women and underrepresented minorities. But it may just be for show. Their opinions are not sought or heard, and they are often saddled with more than their share of the work. Talk to your chair or diversity officer if you are in this position.”

Committees Outside Your Institution

“One aspect of service that I always emphasize to new faculty is service to the profession,” says Palladino. “Serving as a panelist at a workshop or on a professional society committee (even if this starts at a regional chapter or organization) are all good opportunities.” Service to journals and granting agencies as a reviewer are also essential to advancement, he adds.

Participating in your professional association's newsletter committee is a good way to launch external engagement, as Hossenlopp discovered. Early in her career, she served as the newsletter editor for the Division of Laser Science of the American Physical Society. It automatically positioned her to interact with prominent members of her field and opened her to networking channels she might not have had access to for years. “Build your professional network early, especially outside your department,” she advises.

As you craft your professional advancement plan, get to know the service culture of your university and department and how (and if) committee work influences promotion decisions. This will aid you in deciding when to participate in committees that are associated with professional societies. In the Department of Biological Sciences at Louisiana State University, “they don't ask new assistant professors to serve on committees,” says Chakrabarty; internal committee invitations are offered only after a faculty member has been on staff for at least three years. But even then, internal service is not as important as your external service. “I was advised not to do much university committee work because it doesn't count much toward tenure,” he notes. But he did volunteer to edit a journal and run workshops at conferences, which increased his knowledge of his field, augmented his network, and magnified his reputation in the minds of other leaders in the discipline.

At Yale University, some committees have charters that necessitate untenured faculty to participate in them, says Near. But in general, the institution specifically does not consider internal service when making tenure decisions. “It's more about your reputation in the international field,” he says, which means that early career faculty are encouraged to pursue assignments with professional societies that bolster their investigations and elevate their research profile. His involvement in the Society for the Study of Evolution and American Society of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists, in which he organized symposia at national meetings, helped him immensely. “It has provided tangible benefits to my research program and has kept me knowledgeable about advances in the field,” he concludes. “It helps the discipline and it helps you serving as a professional in the discipline.”

If your university allows it and better yet, favors it, consider participating in external committees sooner rather than later. “You are seen as a leader,” says Swann. “Not enough pre-tenure faculty do this, and it can only help you.”

Advancing Your Profession, Institution, and Career

For early career professors eager to serve your institution and profession through committee participation, don't make the mistake of pursuing too much too soon. “It's good to step back and realize you don't have to achieve all of your goals in 2–3 years,” says Pyle. There are other people who can be tapped for assignments if you are overtaxed yourself, and there is always time after tenure to pursue stimulating committee projects that you don't have time for presently.

In fact, post-tenure committee contributions should be woven into your career strategy. “Once you get through tenure, you're supposed to broaden your horizons and be more invested in the way the university is conducting its business,” says Swann. Moreover, this is the time when you can become even more engaged in your professional society and seek vital leadership roles.

“Working on a committee can be very rewarding and you can do a lot of good things for the university, which can really help your reputation,” says **Malcolm McCallum**, a visiting assistant professor in the department of environmental studies at the University of Illinois at Springfield. “Just make your moves judiciously and carefully to minimize the negatives and maximize the positives.”

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