

## **More About Making Service Count (a little)**

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February 19, 2008

It's common knowledge: service doesn't count toward tenure, but lack of service counts against you. That situation motivated me to write the essay *Making Service Count (a little)*<sup>1</sup> in 1999, the year I got tenure. It emphasized that even though service doesn't count, you can still be strategic in making it support the work that does. My experience since then (including 7 years on promotion and tenure committees) has led me to write this follow-up essay, which extends the ideas of the first. I'll start with the strategy that the first essay called *niche service*.

### **Know when to fold 'em: letting go of your niche**

Niche service involves creating a specialized service role for yourself that is aligned with your interests and valuable to your organization. In the first essay, I cited an example of a role I invented for myself in 1995: creating and managing my school's web site. Years later, I can now talk about the full life cycle of niche service, particularly when to let it go.

When you create a niche, it's natural to be possessive since it's your creation, based on your talents and interests. Eventually, though, a time will come when that role has given you all the benefit it can. For my web site example, that time came in 2002. The expectations for the site had naturally raised since 1995, it was demanding more time, and other people wanted to control it. The beneficial returns this role brought in the late 90s were diminishing rapidly in the early 2000s. The choice was easy. I handed the project to someone else and never regretted it.

I think the optimal time to step out of any continuing service or administrative role is the point where your legacy will be most positive. It's sad to see someone impede their career and their organization by clinging to a role too long beyond that point. When you have a continuing service role, regularly assess the costs and benefits to you and to the organization, and recognize when your stepping away will benefit both. Know when to fold 'em.

### **Shoveling snow: the dynamics of service in a small department**

The concept of niche service is based on creativity in inventing service roles. This strategy works well in my large department, but the dynamics are quite different in a small one. Every department has basic work that has to be done: undergraduate advising, graduate admissions, faculty searches, etc. This work is like shoveling snow, if it doesn't get done, things shut down. In a department where there are more than enough people to shovel all the snow, there is typically room to invent specialized service roles. In a small department there is much less room. Every semester there's snow to be shoveled and you will have to do your share. If you don't, the burden will inevitably fall on a colleague who may neither like it nor forget about it. I'll paraphrase a comment I once heard about someone who had been especially lax in basic service: "If this person is so irresponsible *before* getting tenure, what will they be like *after*?"

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<sup>1</sup> <http://faculty.virginia.edu/martini/Papers/service-essay-99.html> It's good to read this one first.

When it comes to shoveling snow in a small department, try to find roles that you enjoy and will reinforce the themes of your work, which raises the next idea.

### **Reinforce your themes**

A common weakness in the presentation of a tenure case is a format that resembles a laundry list of accomplishments, with little supporting explanation. This approach is apparently based on reasoning that if the numbers are sufficient (i.e. X number of journal papers, Y number of conference presentations, an average value of Z on course evaluations, etc.), tenure is assured. It's rarely that simple. In such cases, questions like the following commonly pop up: "What's driving all this activity?" "What makes this person tick?" "Where's the symbiosis?" "What's holding all this together?" Sometimes the answers to those questions are self evident, but often they're not.

The lesson is that in addition to documentable accomplishments, a strong case typically has well-defined themes: clear ideas and a driving inquiry that motivate almost all aspects of the work. In a strong case (and a strong career, I think) those themes underlie virtually all major activity. As you consider a potential service role, think about how it can reinforce your themes. If it does (at least to some degree), then when you write the statement for your case, you can use that service as a small example among many others to explain those themes. Someone reading your case will not only recognize that you've done your requisite service, but will also better understand the fundamental ideas that motivate you.

### **Summary**

The first essay closed with the following advice:

*Gladly accept service roles that are good opportunities for making contacts... Initiate service roles that are valuable to your department or school and reinforce your other interests... use those beneficial service roles as bargaining chips to get out of other service roles.*

This essay extends that advice with the following:

- **Know when to fold 'em:** Happily let go of specialized service roles you have invented for yourself when their returns diminish.
- **Shovel your share of snow:** In a small department where everyone has to shovel snow (i.e. do basic service) you must do your share. There is less room for service creativity than in a big department.
- **Reinforce your themes:** Seek service roles that align with the motivating themes of your work. Use these roles in explaining those themes when you write your tenure statement.

When you take a strategic approach to service, the goal is not to manipulate the system for your benefit, but rather to serve the organization in a way that helps everyone, including you.