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**Making Service Count (a little)**  
Guiding principles for junior faculty.

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Service doesn't count in promotion. In case you had any doubts, here is an excerpt from the University of Virginia Faculty Handbook:

Service to the University is an obligation of every regular faculty member. ... Quality and effectiveness of service are difficult to assess. The effort must nevertheless be made. ... In no case, however, can it stand alone as a determinant of tenurability nor can devoted service compensate for inadequate student instruction or research.

Clear enough.

The problem is that you have to do it. Somehow, people notice when you never show up to committee meetings. The trick is to find some way to make service contribute positively to your teaching and research rather than being a complete drain. Here are three guiding principles.

*1. There's a time to schmoo, and a time to do.*

One of your objectives as a junior faculty member is to develop a reputation, so that you and your work are well known in your department, school, and university. Committee work can be a good opportunity to spread your reputation by schmoozing: i.e. making contacts and getting to know people. This is not just in the sense of social chatting, but also demonstrating your academic interests and abilities. Particularly on university committees, such contacts can lead to research collaboration and other substantive opportunities that arise from personal contacts.

But a little goes a long way. There's a time to schmoo (make contacts, get to know people, spread your reputation) and a time to do (work with your head down, producing original contributions of knowledge to your field). One good committee assignment every year or two is more than enough schmoo service, but you'll probably be expected to do a lot more service than that, which leads to the second principle:

*2. Find a niche and scratch it.*

One of the most effective service strategies is to create a new role that is valuable to your organization and symbiotic with your other interests. In 1995, I did this by initiating a web site for my School. I had started working with the web in my teaching, and decided the School should have a web site. I got resources to create the site and managing it became part of my service. No one else thought to do it, and the site has proven very valuable in terms of graduate admissions. This strategy made sense only because I was working with the web in my teaching and research, so that knowledge gained in one could be used in the others. The particular activity will vary by person and place, but the strategy is the same: take the initiative to create a niche for yourself, doing something that reinforces your other work and makes you valuable to your department.

Now, you may ask: Aren't you just creating work for yourself? Won't you have to do your niche activity in addition to all the other things that get piled on you?

That question leads to the next principle.

*3. The primary value of service is in getting out of other service.*

When your chair appoints you to committee X, he or she will probably not be responsive to your pointing out that you are extremely busy with teaching and research, and that time spent on committee X will not help get you promoted. That's true for everyone, and remember the Faculty Handbook: "Service is an obligation of every faculty member." Your only hope of finessing out of your service obligation on committee X is to show that you are already meeting your service obligations elsewhere. If you can say that you are managing your valuable new service initiative (your niche) and that you are also on committees Y, and Z, then you may be able to convince your chair to select some other faculty member whose interests are more closely aligned with committee X.

These three principles form the strategy: Gladly accept service roles that are good opportunities for making contacts, but not outrageously time consuming (schmoo service). Initiate service roles that are valuable to your department or school and reinforce your other interests (niche service). Finally, use those beneficial service roles as bargaining chips to get out of other service roles. The objective is not to weasel out of service altogether, but to steer and control your service assignments so that the work is mutually beneficial to you and the University.

In practice, you'll probably do well to have half of your service time spent on schmoo service and niche service, but that's a lot better than none. For the remaining half, you can only grin and bear it. Try to get service roles that are rewarding to you, keeping in mind that the time spent is a charitable donation. As the Faculty Handbook says, service doesn't count in promotion, but if you work carefully, much of it can reinforce the things that do.

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