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THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The Faculty

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So Many Committees, So Little Time

Professors' growing service obligations make advancement tougher for many of them, particularly women and minority-group members

By PIPER FOGG

Philadelphia

Wednesdays are supposed to be writing days for Camille Z. Charles. The assistant professor of sociology at the University of Pennsylvania needs to finish her book before she comes up for tenure next fall. With no classes scheduled, this should be the right time to hole up in her office, pop in a jazz CD, and crank out a chapter.

But a real Wednesday is nothing like that. The precious hours of one such day in November sped by as Ms. Charles performed a list of inescapable duties considered service to the university.

Helping a graduate student revise an article consumed her morning. A lecture given by a visiting job candidate ate up an hour at lunchtime. Committee meetings hijacked her afternoon, and she spent the evening entertaining the job candidate at a French restaurant. The only writing she did was finishing letters of recommendation for some of the 15 students she advises.

As the only black female professor in the social sciences at Penn, she is in high demand: Minority students need mentors, and committees want diverse memberships.

Ms. Charles, 38, an assistant professor at Penn since 1998, is like many faculty members whose multiple service commitments take time away from their research and teaching. And as more colleges seek to save money by relying on large numbers of adjuncts, activities like leading search committees, advising students, and participating in campuswide groups fall to a shrinking number of full-time professors. Without the service work that these faculty members perform, colleges would not be able to function.

But when it comes time for decisions on tenure or promotion, what matters at Penn and other research universities is not the number of students you advise, but the number of publications on your CV. Some education experts, noting that female and minority professors shoulder a larger service burden than their peers, warn that this tendency may be hampering their move up the career ladder.

Related materials

Colloquy: Join an [online discussion](#) about whether colleges should do more to reward the service activities of faculty members, considering that female and minority professors shoulder the heaviest burdens of those duties and say that the work hurts their chances of professional success.



Emily Toth, a professor of English at Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge who writes about women in academe (and writes the "Ms. Mentor" column for *The Chronicle*), says women are seen as more approachable than men and have a harder time saying no. What's more, she argues, they have to do more to prove themselves, and so they take on too many service commitments.

Extra service, she says, "will get you into heaven, but it won't get you tenure."

Advising 'Marginalized Students'

That's not to say that professors caught in the service bind are unaware of the consequences. In Ms. Charles's most recent evaluation, her department head said she needed to establish more independence in her field by publishing a book on her own. If she does, colleagues have told her, she's a shoo-in for tenure.

But halfway through the third week in November, Ms. Charles is behind. She was supposed to have completed the analysis for two chapters and will have to work all weekend to catch up. "All this stuff is interfering," she says, referring to a laundry list of service commitments.

A member of the Faculty Senate Executive Committee, Ms. Charles was one of just two black professors at a recent monthly meeting. She is a member of Penn's Committee on Pluralism, which advises top administrators on issues of tolerance and inclusion. Because Ms. Charles's research focuses on race and ethnicity in housing and education, administrators often ask her to give presentations to university groups, including the president's Affirmative Action Council. She also chairs the undergraduate-curriculum committee at the Center for Africana Studies, where she is a research associate, and teaches in a weeklong summer workshop. And she is on the advisory board of a resource group for black students.

With so few minority professors at Penn (there are 352 out of about 2,400 full-time professors), Ms. Charles says she finds it hard to turn down requests for help, especially from students.

Day after day, students pop in and out of Ms. Charles's cozy faculty office for advice on issues both academic and personal. One Wednesday afternoon she counsels a new undergraduate advisee about whether going abroad is a wise idea. That morning she tries to reassure a graduate student who is nervous about the job market. She also recommends a nasal spray for the student's sniffles and expresses concern about the student's repetitive-stress injuries.

Officially, Ms. Charles advises about 5 graduate and 10 undergraduate students. But in reality it is more like 22 to 25, counting the ones for whom she serves as an unofficial mentor. "I have way too many," she acknowledges during a break between committee meetings and conversations with students.

She knows that counseling minority students will not gain her tenure

points, but it is especially satisfying, she says. "You get a sense you are really needed. ... That makes the other stuff more bearable."

During lunch at a pan-Asian restaurant near her office, the hostess, a Penn undergraduate, stops Ms. Charles on the way to the bathroom and asks the professor to be her adviser. "Her name is Camille, so you know I'm not going to turn her down," jokes Ms. Charles. But she is serious about saying yes.

"Basically, any marginalized group of students gravitates toward me," she says, noting that the hostess appears to be biracial. "I've been those students," says Ms. Charles, whose father is white and mother black. "I didn't have anybody to talk to."

Hard to Say No

At the University of Wisconsin at Madison, Nellie Y. McKay is the most-senior African-American woman in the English department. The professor of African-American studies says she is on some 18 Ph.D. committees at a time. She plays a watchdog role in her department, she says, staying alert for assistant professors who find themselves overtaxed with service duties.

She also spends a lot of time with students. "I can spend hours talking to a group of students trying to explain and soothe at the same time," especially about racial issues, she says. "It's burdensome." But when those students stay in academe and become professors, she says, she feels a great sense of accomplishment.

"Women and minorities have a greater burden because [institutions] want diversity on committees," says Ernst Benjamin, an education consultant who has studied the issue. He is a former research director for the American Association of University Professors.

"They do a disproportionate amount of the service work," he says.

Personal satisfaction aside, many professors complain that performing a lot of service does not get enough credit in academe. That may be because service is harder to quantify than teaching and research are, says Mary Ann Mason, a professor of law and social welfare who is dean of the graduate division of the University of California at Berkeley.

Not all committees or causes are created equal. For example, in tenure-and-promotion decisions, departments care more about service to the department than to the university. "If you refuse to chair a really significant committee more than once ... it does count against you," she says. "These are small, personal departments. It's the good-citizen factor."

Another problem at research universities, report some professors, is that if you teach too well or do too much service, you can be seen as neglecting your research.

Evelyn Hu-DeHart, a professor of history at Brown University, calls service "the black hole." Ms. Hu-DeHart, who is Chinese, runs the

ethnic-studies program and heads a center on race and ethnicity at Brown, where she has been for a year. But during more than two decades in academe, she has come to believe that she and other members of minority groups are caught in a bind. She says: "The institutions are dishonest. When they hire minorities, they trumpet it. ... Then the department has a different agenda. They say you've got to make tenure ... so just say no" to service.

Uri M. Possen, chairman of the department of economics at Cornell University, says Ms. Hu-DeHart is right about departments. "As a rule, we try to protect our assistant professors, independent of who they are," he says. "They have to show they can do some service but teaching and research are really what they should be working on.... Their goal is to get tenure."

As for teaching, the university sends a message to students that minority professors are there for them, Ms. Hu-DeHart says. "Then we're told by our chairs, 'Be sure you don't win a teaching award.'"

Mr. Possen concurs. "We want people to be reasonable teachers," he says. "But if you are spending an inordinate amount of time on teaching and you're short-shrifting your research, then you are really hurting yourself."

Many scholars who study women and the workplace agree that women have a harder time than men in turning away colleagues who ask them to contribute time and energy to a cause. Barbara Keating, a sociology professor at Minnesota State University at Mankato, thinks that is because women have been socialized to be caretakers.

Many issues that are important to women or minorities won't get attention unless those same groups volunteer to work on them, she asserts. In addition to activities within her own department, Ms. Keating serves on the tenure committee for Mankato's women's-studies program because she cares about gender issues.

"Women do a lot of double duty and it doesn't get recognized," she says. "Yes, it's a choice, but if you don't do it, who will?"

Hanh Huy Phan, a professor who founded the ethnic-studies department at Mankato, says that as an Asian-American she feels a responsibility to work twice as hard as others to promote multiculturalism. "We have more at stake in bringing about change," says Ms. Phan, who is Vietnamese. "I will make sure, when given the opportunity, to select administrators who share the same goals and dreams I do."

Struggling for Balance

Some white male professors report that they, too, spend a lot of time doing service work and have trouble saying no.

Kenneth S. Sacks, a professor of history, runs the history honors program at Brown. He also serves on three personnel committees in his department, directs the department's undergraduate curriculum, and serves on two universitywide committees. "I said yes to whatever people asked me to do," he says.

One reason that professors are swamped with service responsibilities is that the number of committees at colleges is increasing, he says. Among other reasons: a growing number of federal guidelines. Universities, he says, are more conscious of potential lawsuits involving sexual and racial discrimination, for example.

"Personnel committees, universitywide committees, the graduate-level admissions process -- all of that stuff is constantly being monitored," he says.

University service is rarely talked about and goes largely unrewarded, in the opinion of many professors, but there is an upside to it, Mr. Sacks adds: "If you're engaged and committed, you learn things." As a member of a search committee, he just read a stack of books on American history that he never would have read otherwise, he says, and he just incorporated one of them into a lecture for his course on ancient Greek history.

Robert D. Simoni, a professor of biology at Stanford University, also says service is its own reward. "I like being a participant and member of my community," says Mr. Simoni, who is chairman of his department and a member of the University Senate, serves on the provost's budget committee, and runs a program that trains students to do doctoral research. "I meet faculty from other disciplines, and I find that enjoyable."

And while he feels that helping make decisions that affect the whole university is important, he, like many other scientists, believes that his only true responsibilities are research and teaching. "What people do beyond that doesn't count for much" in promotion-and-tenure decisions, he says. But that's the way it should be, he says, even if "that puts service down the line."

Karl Jacoby, an associate professor of history at Brown, says he finds it a struggle to balance service work with teaching and research. "The only way to move forward is to get some funding to get outside leave," says Mr. Jacoby, who took research leave two years ago to work on his book, about ethnic relations in the U.S.-Mexico borderland.

But, he says, "I think people who have been really very good at distancing themselves from service tend to get really well rewarded. There is a disincentive to be particularly involved with a lot of administrative stuff."

His own strategy has been to weight his service heavily toward his own department. "People who look out for themselves tend to be taken care of," he says.

Some professors complain that while service may not help you, it can hurt you. Those who are less thoughtful about allocating their time, especially before earning tenure, can hurt their research careers.

Jerry Garcia, an assistant professor of history at Iowa State University, learned the hard way that directing the Latino-studies program as a second-year faculty member was not his best career move. "I ran into a

lot of problems," he says.

Without tenure, he had no clout during the two years he led the program. The administrative job interrupted his research. And while most faculty members who direct programs at Iowa State have to teach only two courses per semester, Mr. Garcia continued to teach a normal load of three because he was a junior professor.

Even though he was doing the extra service, he says, his department head was against giving him extra time on the tenure clock. The chairman told him not to expect any special treatment if he didn't finish his book on time. Mr. Garcia will be up for tenure next fall. He thinks he will have to ask for an extension.

Ideas for Change

Some professors say the answer to the service dilemma is simply to do more to reward good service. One idea is to put more emphasis on service in faculty job descriptions to better reflect reality. Another is to extend the tenure clock for professors who take on exceptional service loads.

A project at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, financed by the National Science Foundation, is examining ways to improve the climate in academe for female scientists and engineers. According to a survey conducted for the study, women in the natural sciences say they do more service on committees but are less likely to be department heads, even though they express a greater interest than male scientists in leadership roles.

"One woman said that she feels like a cruise director, and that's not what she went to grad school for," says Abigail J. Stewart, director of the university's Research Institute on Women and Gender, who leads the project.

The project has asked participating departments from about 18 other colleges with similar grants to join in proposing improvements. One suggestion is that female scientists should get a semester off from teaching and service to have more time for research. Another is for universities to give awards, perhaps even money, for faculty service.

In the absence of such changes, professors will continue to struggle to figure out how much service is enough.

Meanwhile, three committees at Michigan are looking at potential policy changes to improve the climate for female scientists. After they deliver their reports next year, yet another committee will be formed to put the recommendations into practice. It will be seeking new members.

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