

Academe Online

The Ivory Ceiling of Service Work

Service work continues to pull women associate professors away from research. What can be done?

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How does a successful associate professor with a distinguished publication record, a visible leadership role among women scientists on campus, and prestigious grant funding for interdisciplinary initiatives in graduate and undergraduate training as well as research feel about seeking promotion to full professor? In the course of our research, we commonly heard, "It feels like the first time in my life that I'm hitting up against the glass ceiling." Compared with earlier cohorts, women are earning more doctorates, taking more academic jobs, and earning tenure more frequently. But when it comes to promotions to full professorship, our research confirms growing scholarship that women may hit a glass ceiling near the top of the ivory tower.

Men still hold more than three-quarters of full professorships in the United States, and women's share of full professorships has increased only marginally over the last several decades. Women are less likely ever to be promoted to full professor than men, and their promotions take longer. A 2006 report of the Modern Language Association's Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession, *Standing Still: The Associate Professor Survey*, showed that women professors in the association were less likely to be promoted than their male counterparts, and it took women from one to three and a half years longer than men to advance to full professorships, with women at doctoral universities lagging farthest behind.

National data across all disciplines confirm these findings. Indeed, University of Pennsylvania education researcher Laura Perna's analysis of *National Study of Postsecondary Faculty* data reveals that, nationwide, women at four-year colleges and universities are 10 percent less likely than men to attain promotion to full professor, even after controlling for productivity (career-refereed publications), educational background, institution type, race, ethnicity, and nationality. Perna's findings suggest that gender differences cannot simply be attributed to men being more productive researchers or having more experience than women. Instead, they point to entrenched institutional practices that may disadvantage women.

What explains the stubborn ivory ceiling of academia? A study of tenured and tenure-track women faculty members in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields by Georgia Institute of Technology sociologist Mary Frank Fox and cultural studies and literature professor Carol Colatrella identified ambiguity in institutions' criteria for promotion to full professor. While most faculty members interviewed could identify the expectations for tenure, fewer could identify the expectations for promotion to full professor. This lack of clarity opens the door for promotion based on vague criteria rather than straightforward expectations.

A related explanation may be found in the way men and women professors divide their time at work—and how colleagues value the division of labor. A variety of studies show that men focus more on research than do women. While men are not necessarily more productive than women, they are more protective of their research time. Tenured women, on the other hand, devote more time to teaching, mentoring, and service; and particularly to activities that may be seen as building bridges around the university. Yet, these pursuits hold less value in promotion cases in many institutions, especially at research-intensive universities.

Faculty Work-Life Study

Our own research—surveys and focus groups with 350 faculty members at the University of Massachusetts Amherst in 2008–09—explores evidence of a glass ceiling among faculty at a research-intensive university. What we found mirrors other studies: by cohort, women are less likely to be promoted than men, and when they are promoted, the process takes longer. Why might this be? Could women's service to the university, an issue often raised in our focus groups, limit chances for promotion? Our survey asked whether associate professors had served in major administrative positions in their departments—for example, directing undergraduate or graduate programs or working as associate chair or chair. We also examined compensation in the form of course releases and extra pay for assuming administrative roles. We saw few differences in how men and women were compensated. We did, however, find substantial differences by gender in *when* professors and associate professors took on major service roles. Three-quarters of women associate professors, compared with half of their male counterparts, had played such roles. And a third of the women had served as undergraduate directors, compared with 17 percent of the men. Because undergraduate directors spent more time teaching and working with undergraduates—tasks that research universities tend to undervalue—gendered norms may contribute to women associate professors spending more time in devalued roles.

Such norms, however, do not hold for service as chair. Chairing a department is generally viewed as *more* prestigious, reflecting a high level of respect. Yet, not one of the male associate professors who responded to the survey had served as chair, compared with 15 percent of the women. The reverse is true among full professors—35 percent of men have chaired, while only

14 percent of women have done so. Thus, women may be asked, and may agree, to chair their departments earlier in their careers than men.

Does serving in these administrative positions slow progress to full professorship? There were no differences in time to promotion for men and women who served as chairs, associate chairs, or graduate directors. But women who served as undergraduate directors were promoted significantly more slowly; women associate professors who served as undergraduate directors took twelve years (rather than the usual seven) after receiving tenure to be promoted to full professor. By contrast, male undergraduate directors saw no slowing in time to promotion. While, of course, other factors may contribute to being selected as undergraduate director *and* being slow to promotion, there is a clear association. As one female associate professor noted, associate professorship is “the midcareer service gully that we find ourselves taking an extended stay in.”

The Gendered Gully of Service

Our survey asked faculty members at all ranks to summarize their time spent on research, teaching, mentoring or advising, and service. We saw some small gendered differences between lecturers, assistant professors, and full professors—for the most part, men and women in these ranks spent their time similarly, although women spent a little more time on mentoring and service.

However, when we focused on associate professors, we saw remarkable differences. Although associate professors of both sexes worked similar amounts of time overall—about sixty-four hours a week—the distribution of work time varied considerably. Men spent seven and a half hours more a week on their research than did women. Even if these differences in research time occurred only during semesters, not during summer or holiday breaks, this would mean that men spent in excess of two hundred more hours on their research each year than women. On the other hand, women associate professors taught an hour more each week than men, mentored an additional two hours a week, and spent nearly five hours more a week on service. This translates to women spending roughly 220 more hours on teaching, mentoring, and service over two semesters than men at that rank.

Another way to consider this would be to look at the percentage of time spent on research, teaching, mentoring, and service. On average, male associate professors spent 37 percent of their time on research, while women associate professors spent 25 percent of their time on research. While women associate professors spent 27 percent of their time on service, men spent 20 percent of their time on service. This dramatic difference suggests that men focus more on their research, which earns greater prestige and potential for promotion. One associate professor survey respondent reported difficulty balancing research, teaching, and service, commenting, “In reality, only research matters when it comes to tenure and promotion, but service and teaching require lots of time.” Our survey also asked faculty members to differentiate between service to the university and service to the profession. Men and women associate professors spent about the same amount of time on service to the profession (5.4 hours a week), but women spent much more time on service to the university (11.6 hours versus 7 hours). While service to the profession often means more prestigious external visibility, service to the university includes a range of activities necessary to keep the university going but less likely to increase one’s faculty stature.

We found similar patterns when zeroing in on STEM fields, despite the fact that faculty members in these fields, overall, have lower teaching loads and therefore more time to spend on research. On average, STEM men and women associate professors spent less time teaching than associate professors in other disciplines. But STEM men spent significantly more time on research (42 percent) than STEM women (27 percent), while STEM women put in more time mentoring (21 percent compared with 15 percent for STEM men) and performing service (25 percent for women compared with 20 percent for men). Thus, gendered patterns of work distribution are more pronounced when we focus on STEM faculty.

Not Just for the Love of Service

Perhaps women associate professors *enjoy* service more, while men *prefer* research? None of our data fits this interpretation. Overwhelmingly, both men and women faculty members express a preference for research. Most associate professors viewed service as impinging on their time, while they expressed frustration at how service is distributed. As one associate professor noted, “Having good judgment, being thorough, means more work. . . . The reward for good work is more work.” Another argued, “There are faculty [who] earn twice as much as I do, but they are making more work for everyone, since they don’t share in the work that needs to be done.” Sylvia Hurtado and Linda DeAngelo, both research directors with the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles, conducted a study further suggesting that a gendered time allocation leads to lower levels of job satisfaction and higher turnover risk among senior women as compared with senior men.

Why do associate professors, both men and women, spend so much time on service activities? In one focus group exchange for our study, an associate professor noted, “Because departments try to shield junior faculty from service, and full professors are usually in a better position to say ‘no’ when asked, associate professors often carry disproportionately heavy service loads compared to their junior and senior colleagues.” Another said, “Some departments have lost a lot of faculty. So their full professor ranks are thin. Even if these departments are hiring assistant professors, the associates are doing most of the service to

protect the junior faculty.”

Men and women faculty members consistently noted that when faced with multiple demands, they sacrificed research first. As one associate professor said in response to an open-ended survey question, many faculty members believe they “have to fit research into ‘spare time’ that isn’t consumed by committee meetings, teaching undergrads, and mentoring grad students.” Another associate professor said in a focus group, to wide agreement among the participants, “You do your vocational work on the weekend because the administrative work takes up the week.” In one focus group, a participant said that emphasizing service is “actually very counterproductive for the university. Tenured faculty are seasoned researchers. If they are putting all their time into admin[istration] rather than research it is really terrible for the university.” Another added, “Academia is a whole series of bait and switch. You go to grad school because you are good in college classes and then have to switch and write a dissertation. . . . When you get good, you are asked to do service—something else I have never been trained to do.”

Nevertheless, the work trends differed by gender, suggesting that women felt particularly pressured by the demands of service, mentoring, and teaching. Focus-group participants directly related the pressure on associate professors to do service and the imbalance of service to difficulties in attaining promotion. At the same time, they voiced concern about how service might limit their ability to be promoted. In one focus group, we heard the following exchange among three participants. “There’s a contradiction between the pressure for service at the associate level and the devaluing of service for promotion to full,” one said. “People who do a lot service for their departments and schools have difficulty going up for full because they just don’t get enough time to do their research,” said another. A third responded: “The criteri[on] for promotion is research. Associate professors have time for everything but research.” As a participant noted in another focus group, “Something has to give at some point. [I wish] there was a recognition of these different aspects, different balance for different people . . . and valuing them for that.”

All in all, associate professors, especially the women, seemed to view service primarily as an imposition taking time away from the valued work—research, which earns promotion. One associate professor argued, “As associate faculty . . . we become penalized for doing this service monster.” Another said, “There is a price to pay . . . for the administrative load.” A third chimed in, “Yes, \$13,000,” which was the university’s salary bump related to promotion, and laughter broke out around the room.

If faculty members recognize that service is undervalued and likely to lead away from promotion, why do they do it? Many devote time to service because they see it as vital to the running of the university and believe students will suffer if it is not done. At the same time, faculty members voice bitterness at colleagues who do not share the burden. “I have colleagues who have not seen service in ten years,” one said. A sense of being part of a larger enterprise also led some to do more service than they would have liked. One associate professor noted, “If I set limits, I know it means [other faculty and graduate students] will do that extra work. I feel guilty if I say no.”

Changing the Service Culture

What policies might help alleviate the stress associate professors, and particularly women associate professors, experience? We recommend two policy changes that would require university investment and three that would require shifting the culture of work.

First, at many universities, economic hard times have led to fewer full-time faculty appointments and greater reliance on non-tenure-track instructors, who may also be less involved in faculty governance and leadership. For universities to thrive, they must replace lost tenure-line faculty members, increase tenure-line faculties along with student enrollment, and ensure that all faculty members are involved in and compensated for governance activities. Secondly, we urge that greater resources be focused on mentoring to support promotions to full professorships, particularly for women faculty. We believe that workshops that emphasize the “pathways” to full professorship may be particularly instructive.

Cultural changes also matter. Deans and department chairs or heads need to examine teaching, advising, mentoring, and service responsibilities to ensure that all faculty members pull their weight and are rewarded accordingly. Department chairs should review service, teaching, and mentoring expectations with their department members and ensure that women do not disproportionately carry their departments’ service burdens.

We also believe that cultural changes are needed to stress the value of the work of the professoriate more broadly. Too many faculty members and administrators devalue the importance of “institutional housekeeping,” even though it is crucial for the institution’s ongoing health. Universities need to recognize, reward, and publicize their faculty’s service, mentoring, and teaching accomplishments, in addition to their research accomplishments, and ensure that promotions recognize the wide range of contributions faculty make.

To return to the successful woman colleague with whom we started, what explains the glass ceiling she seems to be hitting? For her, and for countless other women, the ceiling exists not simply because of her gender, but because she is engaged in a broader

range of activities, focusing not only on her own research but also on interdisciplinary training and mentoring grants and on building a community of scholars. Clearly, a promotion system that recognizes these contributions—in addition to the value of her research—will support truly healthy, sustainable universities.

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Comments

Many faculty members can identify with the choices presented in this highly informative article. Another pattern is for those who want to duck service is to demonstrate a clear lack of competence and/or the responsibility needed to accomplish a task, which, as the article states, is needed “to keep the university going.” This means not showing up for a meeting, oversleeping and missing an exam for students one is supposed to proctor, or never contributing to faculty governance or faculty presentation forums. The excuses can be as lame as car trouble, needy kids, or forgetting the day of the week (all valid excuses at times!) to being so deeply involved in research that one lost all track of time. The pay-off for the (often male) faculty member is that they escape service tasks because they have clearly demonstrated that the university would be better run by others. It works--but it's too risky for most women faculty members to pull off.

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An unintended consequence of well-intentioned policies of ensuring participation of women on all committees within a university or department is that -- when women are in the minority -- there are constant requests to all of them, but especially those known to be diligent in committee work, to be on more committees. In my own experience, it is indeed the Associate Professors -- knowledgeable enough to be good committee members, close enough to tenure to be disinclined to say no, and not yet able to say no with impunity -- who get the most of these requests, consistent with the findings in this article. It's a tradeoff -- ensuring presence of women in "important" committee roles = more burden on female faculty.

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