

Chapter 7: Service

One part of the professor job that doesn't get a lot of attention is service. However, understanding and managing this component is important, both for your own tenure case and for the wider community. Let us start by talking about what service is, and why it is important.

7.1 Defining and managing service

So what do I mean when I say service? I would loosely define service as *optional* tasks that your community requests from you. You are free to decline these tasks without a direct impact on your career (there might be indirect impacts). These tasks are important to keep the community running.

For example, your peer researchers may ask you to serve on the program committee for a conference, or review a paper for a journal. You will get a lot of these requests, and you are *not expected* to say yes to all of them. Your department will expect you to do *some* service each year, and there is an expectation that you get invited to serve on the PCs of the top conferences in your research area. But beyond that, you don't get any benefits by doing a lot of service.

Why should you do service? To put it in a nutshell, doing service is part of being a *good citizen*, both inside your department, and inside your wider academic community. This is because of the way academia operates, fully dependent on freely volunteered labor.

For example, imagine that you want to run a conference. You need someone to organize the conference, and someone to review submissions and select papers for the program. One way to do this is to recruit reviewers, pay them for their time, and pay other folks to handle the logistics of running the conference. Speakers would get paid. All the money would come from a combination of sponsors and the fees that attendees provide. This is how industrial conferences operate.

Academia uses a different model. People volunteer their time to act as reviewers or conference organizers. This allows the conference organizers to reduce the cost that needs to be paid by attendees (even so, the cost is usually several hundreds of US dollars). USENIX uses a slightly different model where the conference organizers are paid professionals, but the technical reviewing is still done by volunteers. This results in a slightly higher registration fee for attendees (compared to when everything is done by volunteers).

Thus, almost everything in academia runs on volunteer labor. All the events you attend, the conferences and journals you publish in, the panels you enjoy, the awards that are given out, all depend on people volunteering their time. Since you get a net benefit from the time volunteered by others, it is only fair that you do your share of volunteering as well.

There are some other fringe benefits to volunteering. One is that you get your name out. When you are an assistant professor and you are struggling to establish yourself, it can be useful to have folks know you and recognize your name. The second benefit is that you get to meet folks in the course of doing service and form your network; this is particularly useful when you are just starting out.

Why should you *not* do service? While it is important to do service, I've seen folks go overboard on this (and did too much myself in my first year). Doing service feels good: you are doing something for your community, and it feels like you are getting your name out. And it is hard to say no when folks you respect request you to join a committee.

But you should always, always remember: you *will not* get tenure for service. No matter how good the service is. The first consideration at R1 universities is always research. If your research is not good, having done amazing service will not get you tenure.

Apart from not helping you with tenure, taking on too many service commitments will make you *bad at service*. If you say yes to too many concurrent PCs, you will have a tough time doing a good job at reviewing papers for all of them. Nobody wins in this situation: the conferences and authors get crappy reviews, and you get a reputation for writing bad reviews.

Managing service commitments. As an assistant professor, you should do *enough* service to be a good citizen, but not so much that it affects your other job responsibilities. You should conserve your limited energy for research and teaching. Be thoughtful and intentional about the service requests you accept – always think about how much time you are committing down the line (even if it is several months or a year away). The way to think about it is that you can do two to four big service requests each year. A big service request is something like an organizational role at a conference, or a program committee assignment where you will be reviewing 10+ papers. You should really be doing only a few of these each year. Smaller service requests, such as being an external reviewer for a conference, you can do more of; but be careful that they don't pile up.

Saying no. How do you say no politely, especially when it is someone you respect and look up to? You should remember that folks who run conferences *expect* a lot of people to say no. It happens all the time, and if you decline, they will not take it personally. You don't need to worry, "If I say no this year, maybe they will not invite me ever again". I can relate because I had this exact worry at the beginning. I'm happy to report that I have declined to review at conferences, and still been invited the following year. As long as you do good research and write good reviews, you will be invited back. So do not let this consideration make you say yes when you don't have the time to do a good job.

I usually say something like: "Thank you for inviting me. Unfortunately, I am overloaded on service commitments this year, and I don't think I will have enough time to do a good job. Therefore I will have to decline". As you get a bit more senior, you could recommend a junior faculty member they could invite in your place.

7.2 Serving on program committees and editorial boards

When you get started as an assistant professor, serving on program committees will form the bulk of your service. At first, it can be super flattering to be invited to a program committee: I definitely remember my first such invitation. You now have a voice at the table in determining the program! You can review papers alongside researchers you looked up to. As a result, you pretty much say yes to all the invitations you initially get.

This is not a great strategy, though: you end up over-committing yourself in your initial years. I would recommend saying yes only in the following cases:

- 1) The conference is your home venue, where you have been publishing in grad school, and where you hope to publish in the future.
- 2) It is the top (or one of the top) conferences in your area.
- 3) It is a community that you want to join, or an area that you want to publish in.
- 4) It is a workshop specializing in your area.

For example, I publish regularly at systems conferences such as ATC/FAST, so I tend to review papers for them. SOSP and OSDI are the top conferences in my area, so I almost always accept PC invitations for them. HotOS and HotStorage are the relevant workshops for my area, so I review papers for them as well.

Don't accept invitations to be on the PC for conferences that you have never published in, and are unlikely to do so in the future. Don't accept invitations just because you know the PC chair if you are already committed to other PCs.

Overall, a good number to aim for is about 1-2 big PCs each year (10+ papers per PC) and 1-2 smaller ones (5+ papers per PC). Between research and teaching, it will be hard to do a good job with more PCs.

University expectations regarding PCs. Generally, your department or university likes to see that you are being invited to serve on the PCs of the top conferences in your area. If you become an assistant professor and receive no PC invitations, that can be a bit of a red flag. However, beyond expecting to see *some* service (a few PCs each year), the department/university doesn't really care how much service you do – they assume you will manage your service workload efficiently.

How much time does reviewing a paper take? This really varies by area. I would say anywhere between one to four hours per paper is common. Do not spend more than half a day on a single paper. You should read actively, trying to get the main ideas and insights, which will enable you to write a good review. You should aim to read the paper only once (this gets easier with practice), taking notes as you go. Having questions you want to answer as you read will help make reviewing easier.

If you find yourself spending more than 1 day a week on average (or 8 hours per week) for reviewing papers, you have accepted too many PC invitations. It can be hard to properly track this though, since you have a lot of activity near the reviewing deadlines, and not much on other weeks.

I've mostly talked about program committees since conferences are considered the primary publication venue in computer science, but much of the advice applies to journals as well. Only review for journals where you publish regularly, and track and manage how many submissions you accept to review.

7.3 Serving on dissertation committees

Another form of service is participating on dissertation committees, where you read the dissertation and attend the thesis proposal/defense. This can take up a lot more time, since you have to read an entire dissertation. It helps if you already know the students work, since that will form a significant portion of the dissertation. Still, serving on a dissertation committee can be an entire day's worth of work.

Requests for serving on dissertation committees can come from within the department or externally. The internal ones are harder to say no, since these are the colleagues you work with on a daily basis. Nevertheless, track how much time you are spending on this. Don't say yes to more than one or two dissertation committees per semester/quarter.

From the university viewpoint, I don't think there are concrete expectations regarding serving on dissertation committees. Not being on dissertation committees early on in your career will not be seen as a red flag (to the same extent that not being on PCs would be).

7.4 Serving as a session chair

Another form of service is serving as the *Session Chair* at a conference. The session chair will introduce the session (typically 1 to 1.5 hours) at the front, introduce the speakers, and moderate the questions. The session chair also kicks off the QnA if there are no questions from the audience at first.

Being a session chair is a fantastic service opportunity, and you should definitely sign up whenever you get the chance. It gets you face-time in front of the community, you get your name out, and the work required for being a good session chair is modest. Grab session chair opportunities with both hands when you are starting out!

7.5 Organizational service roles

As you become a bit more experienced, you will be offered organizational roles such as being the Publicity Chair, the Web Chair, the Poster Chair, or the Program Committee chair. Of these, being the chair of the program committee is most prestigious, since you are responsible for

delivering a high quality program in coordination with your chosen program committee. So if you are invited to be the PC chair of a conference or workshop you normally publish in, you should accept the invitation. Your university or department will care about whether you have been invited to be the PC chair (once you become a bit more senior).

However, the other roles involve a lot of work and little recognition. Ideally, these would be done by professionals (as in the case of USENIX). However, for non-USENIX conferences, someone has to step up and do them. Be aware of the work-reward ratio if you choose to accept an assignment like this though.

During my time as an assistant professor, I co-chaired HotStorage 2020 and SyStor 2021. I was also one of the General Chairs for SOSP 21. I enjoyed doing all three roles, but it was definitely a lot of work! I would not recommend doing any of these roles (especially being General Chair) early on as an assistant professor; it is a better fit when you are close to going up for tenure.

7.6 Departmental and university service

Apart from serving on program committees, editorial boards, and organizing conferences and workshops, you are also expected to do “local” service for your department and university. This can take multiple forms.

At the department level, this means you will serve on one or more committees. Assistant professors are usually assigned to either the PhD admissions committee or the faculty recruiting committee. Both committees are extremely important and directly influence the future of the department. Other committees include Faculty Evaluation Committees, Budget Committees, and Promotion Committees that you can participate on once you become more senior. Expect to spend at least a couple of weeks (put together, it will be spread over the semester) on departmental committee work each year.

At the university level, there will be committees deciding overall university policy. Typically, your department or college will need to be represented on these committees. As an assistant professor, it will be rare for you to be nominated by your department for these committees; typically, more senior professors participate in these committees.

Summary

The most important thing to remember about service is that it is like chores around the house; you need to regularly clean your house, water your plants, etc. You do this because you want a nice place to live in; similarly, service provides you a nice community to do research in. However, carefully manage the amount of service you do. You will be bombarded with requests, and it is all too easy to say yes to too many requests. Don’t accept so many service requests that it impacts your other responsibilities as a professor.