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Academic Service and Flourishing

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Introduction

No work environment functions, let alone flourishes, without some members engaging in services to others and the institution. *Academic service* is normally considered part of the responsibilities of a full-time tenure line faculty (often considered as factoring 10-20% of the evaluation towards tenure and/or promotion) and it is sometimes expected (and required) of non-tenure line and adjunct faculty. Departments often encourage graduate students to ‘get involved’ but also warn against taking on commitments that get in the way of their academic commitments (there are always cases of people who became very involved and never finished a degree). This advice is based on conventional wisdom that it is primarily publications and then teaching which land academic jobs for doctoral students.

Increasingly fewer students in doctoral programs in political science take tenure track positions upon defending their dissertations and most institutions of higher education need inspired and inspiring teachers (more than top-tier published authors). As more students move into less traditional professional academic employment and the field gives greater weight to job satisfaction and social emotional well-being, greater attention should be given to academic service (APSA 2021). This is because academic service can be a space for personal and professional development and happiness, and it can also open unexpected professional opportunities. Anyone who has served on an academic committee is unlikely to think ‘this is the path to happiness,’ but this essay will try to explain why graduate students and faculty should think carefully about and participate wisely in academic service. Of course, not all service opportunities are of equal value and people need to be careful not to overcommit or allow themselves to be pulled into too many service obligations.

An Apology for Service

Academic service is an ambiguous term, which can include multiple activities across a range of domains and on various levels. These activities may be research-oriented (organizing a seminar series), advising, organizing, mentoring, and governance. The domains might include the field (political science), sub-fields (comparative politics, American politics), professional associations (APSA, regional political science associations, Association for Asian Studies, Latin American Studies Association), local governance (Graduate Student Union representatives, Graduate Students of Color), or other spaces (associate editor on a journal, translator for legal clinic, advisor for a student association). The levels at which service can take place include the department, college or university, local (town or city), state, national, and inter-

national. The possibilities are rather limitless as service responds to the changing professional, social, and personal interests, responsibilities, and needs of diverse people operating over lengthy periods of time (whether several years for a typical doctoral student or several decades for some faculty members).

Academic service constitutes a quantitatively small part of faculty evaluations and, cynically, it can be said that good service does little to help an application; but bad service can be an excuse to deny tenure or promotion. The very engaged faculty member receives the same tenure as the one who just shows up and this can be discouraging. But the former is more likely to have better teaching evaluations and, more importantly, to enjoy teaching. Being more satisfied with teaching, which is disproportionately the primary responsibility for almost all professors in higher education, plays an important role in maintaining motivation as multiple articles pass through (or not) the slow process of peer-review. Greater motivation also contributes to continuing to engage in scholarship post-tenure, and it also encourages faculty to create new classes, work on new minor programs, and participate in departmental, college/university-wide, and professional programs (a program of Human Rights Studies, faculty development center, or division chair for a professional association). The happier faculty member may be on committees where one doodles and watches paint dry, but he or she can also choose committees where he or she cares about the subject and can make an impact.

Being a faculty advisor to a particular group of students, attending student recruiting events, serving as a mentor, being a leader in professional associations, serving on an editorial board for a journal, being a representative for the veterans' association, among other activities, can be very rewarding activities. They are not without their frustration. Mentoring involves prolonged discussions with students who struggle with very difficult, often irresolvable, challenges. But the reward of seeing students not give up and, sometimes, overcome challenges is considerable. Developing fellowship with other faculty and administrators who seek to help is critical for maintaining a sense of purpose and belonging. As a former chair once confided, being chair allowed him to help students more effectively than as a professor. Indeed, anyone in the field has opportunities to improve writing skills and analytical focus, but some advising scenarios allow faculty to contribute to improvement in more existential situations (e.g., retaining financial aid or responding to homelessness).

When faculty look through applications for a faculty position, full-time or adjunct, they look through a package that contains tremendous information (in what other field would it not be an offense to send a 25-page CV?). Although priorities vary in terms of how much and what sort of teaching and research is valued, academic service on CVs often stands out and gives occasion for a personal question in an interview, which can reveal more about a candidate than would a question about a dissertation. Search committees are not seeking soulmates, but they do not want to hire people who are not going to make their and their students' lives worse. And so, while many have written a dissertation that a dissertation advisor describes as 'brilliant' and possibly 'field-changing,' being the chair of the Graduate Women's Caucus for the last three years of a doctoral experience can truly stand out.

APSA reports roughly 26-27% of doctoral students get to all-but-dissertation status and roughly 32% report receiving a tenure-track position upon completion (APSA 2021). They may find tenure track positions later on but are most likely to work in other positions in higher education, think tanks, publishing, or other areas (See chapter 41 on non-traditional options). Academic service can, again, make a candidate stand out as being particularly qualified for a particular job. The person who as a graduate student was a Resident Advisor of the international dormitory can make an excellent case to be hired in a Global Affairs/Student Exchange unit. The coordinator of a speaker series can pursue positions in conference administration in a think tank or editorial work at a publisher. The graduate student who has been on the bargaining committee for the Union can look to other work in organized labor, government, or political advocacy. Importantly, all those positions may value the skills connected with service highly enough that being ABD or not (yet) completing the doctoral program may not be an obstacle to employment.

Of course, not all academic service will immediately open employment possibilities; but they certainly open the perspective to see the many and diverse possibilities for professional and personal engagement in an environment in which higher education training is a necessary but insufficient condition for long-term success and happiness. Understanding those possibilities and pursuing some through

engagement in service can contribute to flourishing and to building resilience against the myriad forms of frustration that can occur during a career.

A Caveat

Not every service opportunity will be fulfilling, and one might need to experiment a bit to find what sort of service is more meaningful and enjoyable. You should be judicious in expectations with any service opportunity until you get a sense of what it truly entails, what is possible, and with whom you must work. People with different personalities may take on service differently, and there may be different expectations of participation for people of different backgrounds. You also need to be careful about how much of yourself you will devote to the role. Scholars who identify with one or more underrepresented groups often report outsized *mentoring responsibilities*. This can be especially exhausting, while also consuming time that could be spent on research. They also report a lack of support, which contributes to lower completion rates and higher levels of frustration (Tormos-Aponte and Velez-Serrano 2020).

Introverted students are less likely to engage in most types of academic service and may struggle with a sense of belonging, while extroverts are more likely to overextend themselves and risk having a reputation as a good departmental ‘citizen’ while not devoting sufficient attention to research. First generation students may be more likely to have a sense of ‘imposter syndrome’ and service, often more than research or being a teaching assistant, can give insight into the university while also contributing to a sense of membership (See chapter 50 on imposter syndrome). Indeed, the ‘invisible curriculum’ that is so vital to success and flourishing in graduate school and beyond is most easily visible to the participants in academic service, via their interaction with other members of the community (Gable 2021).

Particular advice is difficult as doctoral students are quite different and will pursue different paths. As such, you will need to figure out how to balance your various commitments, and overdoing service (or teaching or research) may mean different things to different people at different times. It may be impossible to quantify how much is over-doing it. But the conversations that emerge from academic service provide opportunities to dialogue with others to attain a better sense of what good balance looks like.

Service Opportunities in Graduate School

Most students enter into doctoral programs in Political Science already having been involved in a range of service activities (extracurricular activities). In orientations in their new programs, they are often told about great opportunities for involvement. Informally, however, mentors often express concern about becoming ‘distracted’ or too involved in activities that are far afield from a dissertation. The latter may be especially the case in doctoral programs that aggressively treat qualifying examinations or papers as ways of channeling out of the program people from whom the department sees minimal potential contributions. Focus on a dissertation and preparing for qualifying exams encourages students to strategically seek out people with similar interests, methods, subfields, and so on. And academic service can provide opportunities to go outside of a ‘silo’ and to have a better sense of the diversity within the field.

Perhaps the most obvious space in which graduate students can engage in service that overlaps with academic interests is through academic workshops. These are spaces where students and faculty present their work and receive constructive feedback, usually organized by sub-field or interdisciplinary workshops such as Peace and Conflict Studies and Race and Ethnic Politics. Students may contribute in many ways, the lowest stake way is to attend frequently, listen carefully, and offer constructive feedback. Thus, students are in a conference-like scenario in which they learn about the field and develop professional skills. Since graduate students (especially in their first year) do not have classes with most faculty, workshops are spaces where students and faculty can learn more about each other.

A more active form of participation in workshops is to present work or to be a discussant for a presentation. Workshops cannot be sustained if scholars do not present their work. By presenting, you are not only improving your skills and receiving valuable feedback for your work, but you are contributing to your academic community by keeping these workshops active. Similarly, workshops need discussants.

Students often feel they do not have something ready for presentation and lack expertise to be a discussant. But the very same students, after participating, are often surprised by how well they tackle these assignments. Overcoming such fears is essential for many reasons. First, students need to learn that there is no moment where one has complete knowledge of a subject. Second, students must understand that participation in a scholarly community involves a dialogue of people who on any given day and any particular matter have different abilities and levels of interest. In the case of serving as a discussant, it is often easier to discern the value of and means of improvement of another's research.

Students may also organize workshops, which is more labor intensive and is often done by teams (say two to three students and one faculty member). This is a great opportunity to meet more faculty inside and outside the department. Organizing these workshops makes you part of the decision-making process. Furthermore, since workshops are such a key part of departmental culture, it could signal to future employers that you were an active participant. Creating workshops is more time consuming but it can be incredibly rewarding as you can create a forum for something not given sufficient attention. Such fora can provide opportunities to work one-on-one with a faculty member. You can even learn to apply for funding (a key skill!). Race and Ethnic Politics workshops are examples of recently created series and have usually been born out of this type of effort.

Another area in which students can be involved is in admission panels. Some departments reserve some seats on admissions committees for current graduate students. This is a great opportunity to shape the department in various ways, such as increasing diversity, or raising the profile of one theme or methodology. Depending on the subfield and the department, you will probably have to read from 40 to 200 graduate applications and take the hard decisions of choosing a few students from a big pool of excellent future scholars. This is usually done in the course of a few weeks to a month, which can be an intense demand on your time. Yet it is a great way to understand the admissions process and to signal to future employers that you know how it works. Being part of an admissions committee can prove invaluable, as it mirrors some of the same considerations that emerge in grant, dissertation award, and hiring committees. The experience of application review and relationship building with faculty has immediate benefits in terms of professionally relevant skills, while also contributing to a sense of membership and decision-making in a community.

Another area where graduate students often engage in service is through affinity groups such as a Political Science Graduate Student Association, Queer Political Scientists, Political Scientists of Color, and Women's Caucus. Departments tend to have a political science graduate student association, which carries a range of possible responsibilities such as governance issues, admissions, hiring, and union and/or collective bargaining over research/teaching assistant contracts. Leaders in these groups learn quite a bit about their departments and the field while often take on mentoring roles as well. They do this through outreach in local initiatives, organizing, engaging in professional associations (MPSA, SPSA, etc.), and building networks of alumni among faculty and other professionals across the United States and beyond.

Extant groups could benefit from proactive members and there is space to form groups that do not yet exist. This might be a good opportunity to develop an affinity group with a few students. It might start out small and this could be a very difficult process. But if all goes well you can very likely get your department to fund your activities. Like workshops, students can contribute to departmental life by being an active part of these communities, including through taking on leadership roles. Such groups can play an important role in helping potential students to select a doctoral program, and they might be involved in recruiting and orientation events. Thus, building strong groups is important for creating the type of community you want.

Conclusion

There are many other areas in which graduate students can engage in academic service. Leadership while a graduate student is great preparation for professional and personal scenarios that follow a graduate experience, whether in the form of a tenure track faculty position, as adjunct faculty, a post-doc fellow, or some other role in higher education or another industry. Academic service often offers sur-

prisingly important opportunities to contribute to flourishing via building social networks, maintaining motivation, developing a sense of membership, resilience, and responsibility, and giving insight into and agency in decision-making processes. Rather than being a distraction to be avoided or box to tick, it should be taken seriously. However, young scholars should prioritize the work they find most meaningful and enriching and should carefully consider the workload before accepting any service position.

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