



Hidden Workloads: A Literature Review

This review of the scholarship on invisible academic labor offers a multifaceted picture of the various areas where such labor is occurring and reveals that the impact of hidden workloads depends on rank, administrative roles, and faculty identities.

Assistant Professor Rank

Both a literature review and examination of ACS practices reveals that faculty at the rank of assistant professor often enjoy some protection from service work. At ACS campuses, this shielding is most often confined to the first year of employment; as the broader literature review presented by [O'Meara et al](#) reveals, at research universities assistant professors are more frequently shielded from service responsibilities until they are tenured in order to promote the development of their research agendas.

The extensive research presented by O'Meara et al for the [American Council on Education's "Equity-Minded Faculty Workloads"](#) demonstrates there is a lack of clarity throughout academia about how much service work is required, how much is enough, and how much is too much. In addition, the consequences for meeting, exceeding, or failing to meet those unclear expectations are also muddy. Campuses rarely establish reward systems for meeting or exceeding expectations for service work. And, in some instances, social loafing (failing to complete service tasks) is rewarded because faculty who shirk are infrequently asked to contribute to such work. Although the ["Analysis of ACS Faculty Evaluation Documents"](#) reveals that service is the least rewarded form of faculty work at ACS institutions (teaching and research are more highly valued) and that faculty guidelines sometimes caution against prioritizing service over teaching and research, [O'Meara et al](#) note that "some faculty may feel vulnerable in saying no because they are of a lesser rank than the colleague asking them." Notably, the ACS Hidden Workloads Survey found that the mean time assistant professors spend per week on service tasks is 16 hours, illustrating that the amount of service work performed by ACS faculty is hidden from/by faculty evaluation systems.

The [American Council on Education's "Equity-Minded Faculty Workloads"](#) recommends that institutions and departments give assistant professors clear guidance on how much service work is appropriate, the consequences of exceeding or failing to reach that benchmark, and professional development on how and when to strategically say "yes" and "no" to asks when they are received. Institutions, departments, and assistant professors should be taught how to collectively balance the needs of the institution with the needs of individual faculty. Although the ["Analysis of ACS Faculty Evaluation Documents"](#) indicates that most ACS institutions do not explicitly weight expected percentages of effort in teaching, research, and service, the [American Council on Education's "Equity-Minded Faculty Workloads"](#) suggests that campuses should consider doing so by rank and/or inviting faculty to negotiate differentiated weighting according to their career place, time, and needs.

Associate Professor Rank

Research indicates that associate professors tend to be the most overloaded rank when it comes to service, and hidden work exacerbates this inequity. This is a significant finding because as [O'Meara et al](#) demonstrate, "research has shown that heavy service loads for associate professors are linked to longer time to advancement to full professor" and impact faculty retention.

Shielding some assistant professors from service assignments is one factor that increases pressure on associate professors to shoulder inequitable amounts of service work. At research institutions, full professors also experience some relief from service work, and at all types of institutions recent increases in step-down retirement packages that include service-releases compound the pressure on associate professors. [Rabinowitz](#) labels such positioning “the associate-professor trap.” In addition, the rise of contingent hires and administrative initiatives leaves fewer faculty in general to do ever more work.

[Rabinowitz](#) identifies lack of training and guidance for the service and administrative work associate professors face as drivers of associate professors’ dissatisfaction with workload, increased burnout, and decreased retention. Associate professors are often tasked with directing programs and chairing departments. Without adequate professional development for efficiently tackling such administrative work, associate professors’ time for research and teaching innovation is curtailed. This finding is significant as teaching and research are the most highly rewarded areas of academic work in ACS institutions. Stalled teaching and research agendas and slow career advancement contribute to loss of compensation and rewards for associate professors. Burnout and mid-career shifts into other academic roles or out of academia entirely drain campuses of bright, energetic minds.

Intersectionality also plays a significant role in trapping associate professors. [Truong](#) notes that, “The invisible labor faculty of color engage in is not limited to supporting students, but also supporting and mentoring colleagues... They also share insights with newer and more junior BIPOC faculty to help demystify the hidden curriculum of navigating racialized spaces and situations.” Simultaneously, faculty of color also mentor white colleagues as they learn about justice, equity, diversity, inclusion, and microaggressions.

In addition to ballooning workloads, scant relevant professional development, and informal mentoring of students and colleagues, associate professors also experience pressure from a lack of clarity and transparency. The hidden work dilemma encountered by assistant professors is not resolved by tenure and promotion in rank but rather compounded by it.

Full Professor Rank

Because rank can determine which committees faculty are eligible to serve on, full professors sometimes enjoy more prestigious service assignments than faculty at other ranks. As [O’Meara et al](#) point out, assigning, electing, or asking full professors to serve on the most visible and powerful standing committees means that faculty at lower ranks are more often tasked with less desirable and less respected service work. In addition, full professors are more likely to have clarity about how much service work is appropriate, and they are also more likely to have experience saying “yes” and “no” strategically.

Full professors are also more likely to be male and white. [O’Meara et al](#) note that intersectionality produces a “leaky pipeline” to the rank of full professor. Women and faculty of color are less represented at higher ranks because more women and faculty of color than white male faculty leave institutions before achieving higher ranks. In this way, intersectionality compounds inequities surrounding the types of service work faculty do: white men are rewarded with more distinguished and visible service assignments while women and faculty of color are more likely to labor on obscure, hidden tasks.

Department Chair

The academic department chair role represents a special work category. It comprises a host of logistical tasks as well as the political and social burden of supervising and evaluating one’s colleagues and peers. Typically, the role of department chair rotates between members of the department such that faculty

members who take up the administrative work of chairing departments later return to “regular” faculty status. This temporary movement into a supervisory position is fraught with invisible complications that produce unrecognized emotional and psychological labor.

[Flaherty](#) notes that inadequate training for department chairs often produces hidden, unaccounted for work. According to a [University Council for Education Administration](#)’s 2016 study, 67% of newly appointed chairs received no training at all. Most chair training when available, focuses on operational procedures (how to use campus budgeting tools, how to submit annual review forms, how to submit course schedules, how to credential adjunct hires, etc.) and not on the thorny problems (how to cut a budget, how to manage an under-performing colleague, how to maintain good morale and a conducive work climate). Despite meager training that focuses on procedural tasks, [Jenkins](#) suggests that department chairs’ core responsibilities involve complex competencies including advocating for faculty while also representing the administration and facilitating an environment that builds consensus while simultaneously providing vision.

[Flaherty](#) also suggests that assistant and associate professors are increasingly being tapped to chair departments. They accept out of necessity and a sense of duty despite the lack of adequate (or sometimes no) compensation. ACS deans and provosts reported that only a few campuses shield department chairs from additional standing committee service. Women, too, are increasingly asked to chair departments. This intersectionality contributes to [O’Meara et al’s](#) “leaky pipeline” increasing the likelihood that women and faculty of color associate professors will take longer to achieve full professor rank since chairing a department demands so much time but is not rewarded or factored into promotion criteria.

Faculty Identities

In general, women faculty spend more time on teaching, service, and mentoring, while men spend more time on research. Data from a 2014 Faculty Survey of Student Engagement of nearly 19,000 faculty show that, controlling for other demographic factors, women faculty spend 0.6 hours more per week than men on service. The flip side of this is true as well. [Misra et al](#) draw on research that shows that “on average, men spend more time on research; men may ‘protect’ their research time more than women do, but leaders may further shield men from ‘less productive’ forms of work.” In quantitative terms, [Carrigan et al](#) find that women spend 3 percent less time on research and 5 percent more time on teaching than men. [Winslow](#) argues that women also experience a greater mismatch than men between their actual and preferred time allocations in relation to teaching, research, and service.

There is also a qualitative difference in the types of service performed by women and men. As [Hanasono et al](#) demonstrate, women are expected to do more emotional labor with students, whether it is helping them navigate hostile institutional cultures, deal with mental or physical health issues, or cope with racism, sexism, homophobia, assault, etc. Women faculty are expected to take on this burden of care because they are assumed to undertake caregiving or nurturing roles in relation to students. This work is vital to the institution and to student success, but it remains invisible and unrewarded.

[Guarino and Borden](#) point out that there are several reasons for these gendered differences. It may be that “women are unable to refuse service requests due to the structure of gender inequity in academia.” Saying no may simply shift the burden of service to other women. Moreover, “male faculty feel less structural pressure to serve and are instead likely to face criticism for too much rather than too little service from their male peers.” [Babcock et al](#) find that “relative to men, women are more likely to volunteer, more likely to be asked to volunteer, and more likely to accept direct requests to volunteer.” Similarly, as [O’Meara et al](#) show, “women faculty are asked to engage in campus service more often to add diversity to committees because they are more likely to say yes when asked, are perceived to be good at

service work, and have orientations toward and commitments to the activities being pursued.” It may also be the case, Guarino and Borden note, that women fear retaliation for refusing to serve, especially from those who may supervise or evaluate their work. On the other hand, as [Bird et al](#) show, why women volunteer depends on the nature of the task. Some women faculty willingly volunteer to take on ‘institutional housekeeping’ because it represents the invisible and supportive labor of women to improve women’s situation within the institution.” That is to say, women may feel the need to take on additional service work in order to improve campus culture. This leads to differences in how men and women move through career ranks, thus contributing to systemic inequities.

The research on hidden workloads for faculty of color is similar to what has been discussed so far. As [Wood et al](#) show, faculty of color carry heavier service loads than white faculty, because “they are called upon as de facto spokespersons for their respective communities.” They may have to spend time and energy on educating their white colleagues about structural inequities. Or they may be asked to serve as advertisements for their institution’s purported efforts at diversifying the faculty. In other instances, faculty of color are sought out by students of color for advice and mentoring. Minoritized professors get a disproportionate number of requests to serve as mentors. [Audrey Williams June](#) calls their work “an unheralded linchpin in institutional efforts to create an inclusive learning environment and to keep students enrolled.” All of this additional labor is akin to what Amado M. Padilla has called “cultural taxation,” because faculty of color end up serving as unofficial consultants and counselors on issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. As [Saadia Azher](#) points out, “educators of color across the country are burdened with uncompensated and undervalued invisible labor.”

The impact of such cultural taxation is not only that faculty of color have to perform additional, uncompensated service but also that this invisible labor takes time away from working toward what is actually valued by an institution for tenure and promotion reviews. As [Wood et al](#) demonstrate, these additional service contributions are “often discounted” or “not equally respected in the RTP process.” [Kimberly A. Truong](#) argues that the work of DEI can result in institutional penalization, because “it impacts their productivity in research.” Along those lines, [Flaherty](#) cites a recent study in *Nature* to argue that faculty who are carrying the burden of creating more inclusive cultures are “significantly more likely to self-identify as nonwhite, nonmale or first-generation college attendee.” Though this study includes faculty in the fields of ecology and evolutionary biology, it has wider implications. While marginalized faculty take on most of the DEI work, “the majority (72 percent) also felt that diversity and inclusion work didn’t really matter in tenure decisions.”

These disparities persist even after faculty of color make it through the tenure review process. Based on a study on time spent on service at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, [Joya Misra and Jennifer Lindquist](#) report service inequities at the rank of associate professor. Their findings also indicate that “there are clear service imbalances by both race and gender, with associate women of color spending the most time on these activities, and associate white men the least.” It is not coincidental that faculty of color remain underrepresented at the rank of full professor. Moreover, as [Patricia A. Mathew](#) points out, “chances are a faculty member of color is not going to get a sabbatical or a grant from her institution because she contributes to [the diversity mission](#) her university probably has posted somewhere on its website.” Overall, then, the full range of work performed by faculty of color remains unacknowledged and underappreciated, even though it directly benefits the institution. As [Jeremy House](#) concludes, “professors of color may be imperiling their tenure and promotion prospects by performing service work to help their institutions become more racially inclusive.”

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Additional Resources

[Equity-Minded Faculty Workloads: Worksheet Booklet](https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Equity-Minded-Faculty-Workloads-Worksheet-Booklet.pdf) American Council on Education
[Equity-Minded Reform of Faculty Evaluation: A Call To Action](https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Equity-Minded-Faculty-Evaluation-Principles.pdf) American Council on Education
[Equity-Minded Workloads: What We Can and Should Do Now](https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Equity-Minded-Faculty-Workloads.pdf) American Council on Education
[Faculty Work Activity Dashboards: A Strategy to Increase Transparency](https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Equity-Minded-Faculty-Workloads.pdf)

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