How Engineering Faculty Define and Value the Impact of University Service

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Abstract

This research paper presents the results from a survey meant to help define and understand what service at the university level is and how it is valued among engineering faculty across multiple institutions. Service at the university level is often poorly defined and undervalued, contributing to inequities in workload distribution and limiting faculty career progression and satisfaction. Additionally, this study seeks to identify suggestions for reward systems that offset service commitments such as extending the tenure clock, salary enhancements, and awards for meaningful service.

A Qualtrics survey conducted in the summer of 2024 received 68 responses from engineering faculty members representing multiple teaching focused, research focused, or split teaching and research focused institutions. Inductive coding and thematic analysis identified similarities and differences among the responses that led to the development of five themes that describe the definition of service, how service is and should be rewarded at their institution, and the metrics used to quantify an acceptable amount of service with respect to other responsibilities such as teaching and research.

Results show that service is defined as voluntary, unpaid work that occurs outside of teaching and research which supports the functioning and advancement of the departments, universities, professions, and communities. What constitutes this work is not clearly defined and includes participating on committees, advising and mentoring students, organizing outreach programs, and leadership positions within the institutions. One participant defined service as, "Doing things that aren't teaching or research or leadership related. But also, could be in those realms, so it's messy". This quote highlights one of the most common themes with service being defined as anything outside of teaching and research. What activities count for service varies with some participants believing any community service is service and some stating it must directly contribute to the welfare of the institution. Additionally, 59% of participants receive no compensation (time, money, resources) for their service with 79% stating they believe service should be compensated. Results from this study aim to summarize and more clearly define what service is and identify metrics used to quantify and reward service that match the expectation or desires of engineering faculty.

In summary, university service is vaguely defined and inadequately compensated. These results provide insight on the ambiguity of service which is often a considerable commitment and heavily valued criteria for most tenure track positions. If service is meant to support academic institutions and is used to define personal career success, understanding and defining what service is and providing proper value for this service can help support research output, career growth, job satisfaction, and the balance between work and personal life. The preferred presentation style for this publication is a poster session.

Introduction and Background

University service is one of the three main responsibilities of a tenure track position at most academic institutions and traditionally is used, alongside teaching and research, as means to evaluate faculty for promotion and tenure (P&T)[1], [2], [3]. Institutions typically view faculty service as some contribution to the institution, the broader community and/or the professional field. The types of activities considered to be service often align with the mission of the institution. According to Seldin (1999), some of the main elements of service include student advising, participation in campus committees, public service, involvement in professional organizations, supervision of graduate studies, oversight of honors programs, and providing consultation for governmental or business entities [4], [5]. However, considering the importance of service in the P&T process, it is often vaguely defined and the evaluation criteria for an acceptable amount of service is not clearly stated [1], [2].

One of the primary issues with university service is the absence of a clear definition. Luchs (2004) relates the ambiguity of service to a lack of importance when compared to teaching and research which potentially disadvantages faculty who are engaged in service. Faculty typically define service as the "third leg" of faculty responsibilities alongside teaching and research that supports the institution and its mission. This can lead to uneven distribution of workload and a need for clarity when evaluating service. Schweitzer and Hudson (1990) suggest that clearer expectations and criterion for service are an essential part of the equitable evaluation and recognition of service contributions [3].

Prior studies show that service commitments are typically unevenly distributed between faculty, with underrepresented groups and women faculty carrying disproportionate service loads [6]. Referred to as "cultural taxation", this phenomenon presented by Padilla (1994), highlights systemic inequities in the assignment and value of service commitments to underrepresented minority faculty which often impacts career progression, work-life balance, and job satisfaction [7]. This is also emphasized with female faculty who often become inundated with "excess service" leading to similar disparities in the allocation of time and career progression [8].

Evaluating service commitments has been shown to be inconsistent with some commitments (e.g., chairing a university-wide committee) carrying more prestige or impact when compared to other commitments [9]. This typically leads to a lack of transparency in evaluation criteria that frustrates faculty struggling to align service commitments with institutional needs. Additionally, compensating service has mixed opinions and this often leads to institutions offering some form of compensation and others providing no compensation, recognition, or incentives. This lack of compensation can lead to additional devaluing of the essential aspects of service [10].

When service commitments become excessive or undervalued, they can disrupt work-life balance, job satisfaction, and research productivity [11]. Faculty members report that service commitments will compete with research and teaching, which potentially could prevent or complicate career progression. Efforts to redefine and support service commitments in the evaluation process address challenges and foster a more equitable academic experience. Institutions must also work to create more clear and equitable metrics for evaluating service commitments. Metrics such as hours worked, number of committees served upon, and other roles

provide quantifiable evaluation criteria. These metrics must have enough flexibility to accommodate the evolving needs of the university, faculty, and service commitments [12]. Transparent evaluation criteria ensure that service is properly valued and recognized which can lead to greater involvement in service commitments.

Previous studies, such as Schweitzer & Hudson (1990) and Luchs (2004), recognize the important role of service in faculty evaluation and highlight the inconsistent metrics and definitions used to assess service commitments. The literature reveals a gap in understanding of how service is both perceived and valued by engineering faculty. Addressing this gap can help to develop more transparent evaluation criteria and an equitable reward system that reflects the diversity of faculty service.

Methods

This research initially began with a survey piloted in the summer of 2023 through flyers posted at the 2023 Annual ASEE conference. Upon review of the initial results, the survey was revised to improve the quality of data collection and responses. The second iteration of a survey was administered in the summer of 2024 again through flyers posted at the ASEE conference and later through email solicitations with multiple ASEE divisions. The survey was designed to explore institutional policies on university service through faculty perspectives with multiple open-ended questions suitable for qualitative analysis. The survey asked questions related to faculty demographics, professional background, and institutional practices related to service with emphasis in the context of promotion and tenure. The survey aimed to capture how service is defined, measured, and compensated within academic institutions, as well as how faculty perceive the value and recognition of service contributions. The survey also gathered insights into how service obligations align with faculty roles, time allocation, and personal preferences. A more detailed summary of the types of questions is included in Appendix A.

Survey results were analyzed through inductive coding [13], [14], [15] and a thematic analysis [15], [16], [17] to identify commonalities and distinctions in the responses regarding how service is defined, rewarded at their institutions, and the criteria used to measure an appropriate level of service relative to teaching and research.

Study Population

The second iteration of the survey received over 90 responses from engineering faculty with 68 complete responses. A summary of the participant demographics for the 68 faculty members is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant Demographics for 68 Engineering Faculty Members

Job Title	Institution bb Title Designation		Years Experience		Engineering Discipline		History of being Department or program chair		History of serving on promotion and tenure committee		
Assistant Professor	29	Split Teaching and Research	11	Less than 2	12	Electrical engineering	9	Yes	16	Yes	31
Associate Professor	24	Teaching Focused	38	2-5 years	12	Civil engineering	4	No	52	No	37
Full Professor	15	Research Focused	19	5-10 years	13	Chemical engineering	7				
				10-15 years	13	Mechanical engineering	20				
				more than 15 years	18	Other	28				

Results and Discussion

Results from the survey lead to five themes related to the definition of service as well as data related to the opinions on the compensation for service, metrics for measuring service, and expected, actual, and preferred time spent on service. These results are presented and discussed in the following section.

Definition of Service Themes

The five themes related to the definition of service are non-teaching and non-research, support to institution and profession, community, ambiguity, and evaluation. Each of these themes were developed based on commonalities in the responses of each participant when asked, "In 1-3 sentences, how do you define service?"

Non-Teaching and Non-Research

The theme non-teaching and non-research defines service as the activities outside of teaching and research responsibilities. Responses to this survey question include committee work, advising, and administrative roles. One faculty member stated that, "Service is work that supports the function of the institution but is neither teaching nor research." Another faculty member described service as, "Anything you do outside of teaching and research that supports the mission of the university, department, or broader community."

This theme relates to the common opinion of service that it is most things outside of teaching and research. This definition by negation emphasizes what service excludes or avoids and does not focus on positive attributes. This way of defining something can be useful when defining boundaries, but it still requires additional clarification to limit the ambiguity of the definition. It is assumed that a faculty member would not mistake this aspect of the definition of service as an absolute and knows that not everything outside of teaching and research is considered service.

However, defining service as non-teaching and non-research does not help define what service is. Instead, this highlights the "third leg" description of service and how it typically does not carry the same value as teaching and research. While this does provide some boundaries to the definition, a more robust definition is needed to define what service actually is.

Supporting Institution and Profession

The theme "Support Institution and Profession" describes service as having contributions to the *smooth* functioning of the department, institution, or professional organizations. Examples of this type of work include supporting governance, policymaking, administrative work, leadership roles, and voluntary contributions aimed at improving organizational functioning and development. Two faculty members mentioned *smooth* in their responses stating that:

"Service is proving expertise, knowledge, manpower, time, and commitment to roles and duties that are administrative in nature that ensures smooth functioning, development, and growth of the department and university."

"Activities necessary for the smooth and effective achievement of organizational goals that are not directly tied to teaching and scholarship."

This theme highlights some of the operational and strategic importance of service in maintaining and advancing academic and professional organizations. Smooth functioning likely relates the efficiency and stability of service that fulfills institutional goals. However, the inclusion of administrative work with volunteer work suggests that a broad range of activities could meet this criterion and the weight or value of those activities would likely vary considerably.

Community

The theme "community" describes service as having some outreach, community engagement, and activities that represent the university in external contexts. Faculty members highlight this theme when mentioning that service should engage in, "the local, state, national, or international community to represent the university in any capacity. This is not limited to community service projects, K-12 educational outreach, recruitment and retention, or professional services", and "service is providing value to the broader community..."

This theme suggests that community service representing the university should be considered service. However, there are nearly no explicit details to what constitutes this service other than it should be external to the university. This suggests that volunteering at the local food bank or donation center could be service to the broader community. However, some faculty describe community as the "community of practice (department, university, organization, profession)". This suggests that community is also an ambiguous word and therefore requires further explanation.

Ambiguity

The theme "ambiguity" highlights how the definitions vary widely, emphasizing the complexity and often ambiguous nature of service. In some instances, service is described as multifaceted and often overlapping with teaching or research in certain contexts. Faculty describe this as, "Doing things that aren't teaching or research or leadership-related, but also could be in those realms, so it's messy", and, "Anything you do to promote the success of the university, students, and community, but the boundaries are unclear and overlap with other responsibilities." Another notable response, "What isn't required of me, but is also required for tenure and promotion, making it inherently ambiguous."

The messy nature of the definition of service highlights the diverse ways that faculty contribute to the success of their institutions. This ambiguity in the definition of what service is aligns with previous findings [1], and anecdotal evidence that motivated this research. There exists a duality of optional and essential work when service intersects with the responsibilities of promotion and tenure. Success ranges from promoting student development to the broader institution and the community. However, this diversity complicates a standard means to evaluate service because not all service commitments receive the same weight or recognition. This ambiguity can lead to a disparity in workload distribution and time spent with service commitments.

Evaluative

The theme "evaluative" relates to the evaluation of service and how it is often inconsistently valued or measured, with some activities deemed more prestigious or impactful than others. Faculty responses that relate to this theme include:

"Service is whatever is not research or teaching your own classes but varies sharply in prestige and applicability to promotion. Running a trivia night for students is nice, but here you must chair major university committees or run major university initiatives to earn full professor."

"The fact that expectations for service are not clearly outlined either at the department or university level is indicative of the continued discounting of service in the present model of faculty evaluation."

Faculty also mention that this confusion leads to a "disservice to faculty members who need guidance on appropriate levels of service", and that service is evaluated at a lower level of "specificity found in evaluative criteria for teaching and scholarship, leaving it undervalued and inconsistently assessed."

As presented, service contributions are often unevenly prioritized with prestigious or forward-facing roles (e.g., chairing a committee) receiving greater compensation or recognition than smaller scale like student engagement activities. Some might argue that student engagement activities like attending and supporting club events, advising and mentorship, study sessions, and outreach and recruitment as equally meaningful and vital contributions to institutional success and improved student experiences. However, the results from this study suggest that the impact

of these roles are not as prestigious as others. This impact is difficult to quantify which further adds to the ambiguity of service and the lack of a reliable means to measure faculty service commitments.

Results Related to Compensation

Faculty also responded to how service is or should be compensated, see Table 2. While some (21%) believe no compensation should be provided, the majority (79%) believe service should be compensated with some combination of money (e.g., stipends), time (e.g., course release/buyout, extended tenure clock) and recognition (e.g., awards). Participants who are compensated at their institution (41%), typically receive time or recognition with some (13%) receiving monetary compensation. Typically, tenure-track faculty positions include some requirement for service that is part of their job description. This requirement usually describes a certain percentage of job duties that must be service. This expectation is also discussed in these results.

Table 2: Responses to if service is and should be compensated.

	Should service be compensated	Is service compensated at your institution
Yes	79%	41%
No	21%	59%

Compensating service raises some unique concerns when it is already part of a faculty job description. The results from this study indicate that compensation for service is preferred and that most do not feel properly compensated. Proper compensation could incentivize service commitments and improve morale. However, the apparent lack of clarity on the definition of service would make it that much more difficult to establish clear metrics for compensating service. Additionally, compensating service could make service more of a transactional task rather than maintaining the communal nature and spirit that is typically part of a service commitment. While some concerns about compensation and equitable workload distribution remain, participation in service can also provide meaningful benefits to faculty themselves.

Faculty Benefits from Participation in University and External Service

Faculty participation in service activities provides benefits both within the university and in broader professional communities. Table 3 compares the benefits of participation in internal and external service for faculty members. Internally, service can strengthen the functioning of departments and colleges through contributions to academic governance, administrative support, and student advising. Faculty also develop leadership experience, enhance internal networks, and contribute to the achievement of institutional goals. External service extends the university's mission beyond the campus through engagement in professional societies, accreditation bodies, public outreach, and community partnerships. Both internal and external service activities

support professional development, enrich student experiences, and foster broader connections that reflect positively on the faculty member and their institution.

Table 3. Comparison of Faculty Benefits for Internal and External Service Participation

Category	Internal Service Examples	External Service Examples
Academic Governance	Departmental committees, advisory boards, university leadership roles	Committees in professional societies, accreditation review panels
Student Support	Advising, mentoring, enhancing curriculum and student organizations	Outreach programs (e.g., K-12 initiatives), community education efforts
Administrative Functions	Program assessment, accreditation work, governance initiatives	External conference organizing, university representation at civic events
Professional Development	Leadership within academic units, institutional policy-making experience	Participation in scholarly societies, journal editing, professional advocacy
Community Engagement	Building internal institutional relationships and community ties	Engaging broader community stakeholders, representing the university externally

Metrics for Measuring Service

Of the 68 faculty members, 30 are unsure about what metrics their institution or department uses to measure service (e.g., hours, # of committees, impact, role). The remaining 38 participants with some clarity on how service is measured, state that quantifiable measures are used such as hours spent on a particular task, number of committees, and number of advisees. Other metrics that are ill-defined include impact, roles, and effort which are meant to represent the value that service provides. One faculty member stated that "We don't have standard metrics; each person makes a case for their service advancing their and the department's goals." Another faculty mentioned that "nearly everything counts for tenure" and that you want the rank and tenure committee, "seeing that the service line isn't empty".

The evaluation of service is uncertain and inconsistent. Metrics like hours worked or number of committees help to establish quantifiable means of evaluating time spent on service. However, these metrics may undermine other service roles because they emphasize quantity over quality. This could also lead to diminishing commitment in service roles and potentially superficial engagement. This is consistent with previous research that emphasizes the importance of having clear metrics for service commitments [9], [12]. More clear and equitable criteria for measuring service would prevent subjective assessments where faculty must advocate for the value of their service, potentially leading to more service involvement and a better quality of service.

Time Spent on Service

Faculty also answered questions related to their expected and preferred amount of time that they must or would like to spend on service, respectively. The preferred time assumes that they are appropriately compensated. Table 4 summarizes these results and shows that expected and preferred do not differ greatly with preferred time spent on service being slightly greater than expected. This suggests that institutions could increase service contributions through proper incentives. Additionally, faculty reported the actual time they spend on service, which is presented Table 5. These results show that most faculty either spend the expected time or more on service with over 61% stating they spend more than the expected time on service. The extra time spent on service may negatively impact faculty work-life balance, job satisfaction, and limit their performance in teaching and research. These potential concerns echo concerns raised in prior research. Offering clear expectations for the amount of service expected for faculty at all levels may help to align faculty efforts with institutional goals while improving transparency and equity in faculty workload. Overall, this could lead to less strain on faculty and improve productivity within the institution.

Table 4: Overall Minimum, Maximum, and Average Percentage of Workload Distribution Expected and Preferred to be Allocated towards Service

	Expected	Preferred
Minimum	5	10
Maximum	54	60
Average	20	30

Table 5: Faculty perceptions of Overall Percentage of Time Allocated to Service Relative to Workload expectations

Actual Time Spent with Respect to Expectation	Number of Faculty
Less	3
More	42
As expected	18
Prefer not to answer	5

Limitations and Future Research

Multiple limitations should be considered when reviewing the results of this paper. First, while the sample size of 68 engineering faculty provides many perspectives, it may not fully capture a diverse enough population that represents perspectives across all institutional types, disciplines, and regions. Future research should consider expanding the sample size for a more representative distribution of faculty demographics and institutional types.

Additionally, the responses are limited to survey results which may introduce bias from a participant's interpretation of the questions or how candidly they are willing to respond. The authors plan to follow up with participants for interviews to supplement the survey data and build upon the definition and value of service with deeper insights.

This study also only included engineering faculty with perspectives that may differ from other academic disciplines. Future research should consider exploring other disciplines for variations in service definition, evaluation, and compensation. This could lead to the identification of broader trends and nuances across disciplines.

Additionally, future research could explore how internal and external service participation impacts faculty career development and job satisfaction. This could lead to additional trends in the data that start to describe underlying motivations for service commitments and connect faculty across multiple disciplines.

Lastly, the ambiguous definition and value of service creates challenges when defining and standardizing metrics. A more clear, equitable, and universal set of metrics is needed to properly assess service commitments. Future research could include longitudinal studies that focus on the long-term impact of service expectations on workload, career progression, and job satisfaction.

Conclusion

Based on the results of this research, service is essential to the success of an academic institution. Some may argue that service is more essential than research because service contributes to the function of an institution. Without service, committees would not exist, students would not receive the support they need beyond teaching, and institutions would struggle to operate.

This study highlights the inherent complexity and ambiguity of the evaluation and definition of service among engineering faculty members. The lack of a clear definition, accepted metrics, and equitable compensation limits the perceived value of service. Service is described as voluntary, unpaid activities outside the scope of teaching and research that contribute to the operation and growth of departments, universities, professional fields, and communities. The specific nature of this work is not clearly outlined but often includes roles such as serving on committees, advising and mentoring students, organizing outreach initiatives, and holding leadership positions within institutions.

Results from the survey indicate that faculty believe that service is undervalued and assessed inconsistently. Faculty prefer some form of compensation whether this is time, money, or recognition. Institutions should consider aligning compensation with faculty expectations to improve service participation and quality. This could potentially address the finding that a majority of faculty are spending more time on service than expected, which has been shown to lead to poor work-life balance and a reduction in the quality of teaching and research.

Clearer definitions of service, more transparent and equitable evaluation criteria, and the implementation of meaningful reward systems can address the challenges institutions face with respect to service. As a result, faculty satisfaction, productivity, and service quality should improve. Future research is required to further explore these issues and lead to greater fulfillment of institutional missions through faculty fulfilling their service commitments.

While this study aims to emphasize the challenges associated with defining university service requirements, it also acknowledges that faculty participation in both internal and external service can provide significant benefits. These benefits include enhancing professional development and leadership experiences, and broader community impacts that go beyond campus boundaries. Recognizing and understanding the challenges and opportunities of university service is essential for fostering an equitable and sustainable academic environment.

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Appendix A – Summary of the Types of Survey Questions

- Demographic and Background Information
 - o Current title and academic rank.
 - o Self-description (gender, race).
 - o Years of experience as a professor.
 - o Academic discipline/department.
- Institutional Designations and Roles
 - o Institution type (e.g., research-focused, teaching-focused).
 - o Experience as a department/program chair.
 - Service on promotion and tenure committees.
- Definitions and Recognition of Service
 - o Perceptions of how service is defined within the institution.
 - Whether service is weighted or rewarded similarly to teaching or research for promotion and tenure.
 - o Whether volunteering outside the university is considered service.
- Service Compensation
 - o Opinions on whether service should be compensated.
 - o Preferred methods of compensation (e.g., money, time).
 - o Current institutional compensation practices for service.
- Metrics and Expectations
 - Metrics used to measure service contributions (e.g., hours, committee roles, impact).
 - o Percentage of time expected to be spent on service based on rank.
 - o Actual vs. expected time spent on service
- Impact and Preferences
 - Effects of exceeding service expectations on promotion opportunities or recognition.
 - o Preferred percentage of time allocated to service if appropriately compensated
- Oualitative Feedback
 - o Open-ended definitions of service (1-3 sentences).
 - o Additional comments on compensation and institutional policies.