Tips for easing the service burden on scientists from underrepresented groups


During Neil’s first semester as a faculty member, a group of Black undergraduates came by his office to welcome him to the department. It was a kind gesture that he remembers fondly, but one of the things they said stuck with him: “We’re so happy that you’re here. We never thought there would ever be another one,” by which they meant another Black professor.

At first, he thought it was an odd statement. Why did they doubt that there could be two Black professors in the same department? But then Neil remembered being in their shoes. As an undergraduate, he’d spent 4 years at the same university double-majoring in economics and psychology and was never once taught by a professor who looked like him. The first time he met a Black professor was when his university flew one in from 5000 kilometers away to speak about the consequences of being underrepresented on university campuses.

The students in Neil’s department, like students elsewhere, noticed a pattern—one that replicates on many university campuses and in other scientific institutions: the makeup of the scientific labor force is often more homogeneous than the broader population that labor force is drawn from. Moreover, although some scientific disciplines have made headway in diversifying their workforce as a whole, individual departments often employ researchers who end up being the only ones who identify as being a member of particular groups (e.g., gender, race, sexual orientation, and the intersections thereof). Being in that situation—having what psychologists call “solo status”—can
The team-written Letters to Young Scientists column offers training and career advice from within academia.

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For instance, solo-status scientists often perform more service duties than colleagues who don’t identify as members of underrepresented groups within their fields. One study of tenured and tenure-track faculty members estimated that female professors spend an extra 30 minutes per week serving on committees—work that isn’t valued by tenure and promotion committees as much as other duties, such as research. This dynamic exists in part because many universities—at least in the United States—are striving to put together committees of people with diverse backgrounds. This may be well-intentioned, but it quickly overburdens the few people who provide “diverse” perspectives and hinders their prospects for hiring, tenure, and promotion.

What are we to do when good intentions at an institutional level have the potential to inflict negative impacts on individual researchers? There are two sets of solutions: one for scientists from underrepresented groups, and another one for their employers and colleagues.

**Strategies for solo-status scientists**

The strategies we recommend for solo-status scientists build on strategies we’ve shared before in previous letters to new graduate students, new principal investigators, and scientists more broadly. The first thing to do is think long and hard about what goals you are trying to achieve as a scientist and what it takes to achieve those goals, listing out all of the individual tasks involved. Then, put those things on a calendar to give you a sense of how long they’ll take, ensuring that you leave enough time to devote to your other life priorities. This will help you figure out how much time you have left over, which can then serve as the basis for your “service duties” time allotment.

When a request comes in and you have time to accommodate it, you can say yes. Otherwise, you can kindly alert the requester that your schedule is full. Or—if you think the committee is important—Jay recommends asking your department chair to remove you from another committee (ideally one that you do not enjoy) to free up time to take on this new responsibility. This can also help promote departmental equity for service responsibilities.
If you are like us, you will likely feel bad about saying no. You may also hear this thought ringing in your mind: “If I do not do it, there is no one else who will bring a perspective like mine to the table.” That may very well be true. But if you say yes to everything and end up burning out or failing to make sufficient progress in your scholarly work, you may not be around to bring that perspective to the table in the long run. Keep your long-term plans and potential for impact in mind when making these tough decisions.

The reality is that it is not your job to bear the burden of your institution’s goal of creating diverse committees; it is the institution’s problem to solve. If it wants more people like you on every committee or team, it should hire more researchers from underrepresented groups. You should also be compensated—for instance, with a teaching release or additional funding—if the institution wants you to take on more responsibility than your peers. That brings us to institutional solutions.

**Strategies for employers and colleagues**

The challenges faced by solo-status scientists are symptoms of larger organizational structures and cultures. In the long run, institutions can make progress by hiring a more diverse workforce. In the interim, institutions should reduce the unfair service burden on existing solo-status scientists. One simple thing they can do is to keep track of service requests made to researchers and associated time commitments to ensure that they are not asking more of some researchers than others. If there is an imbalance, they should work to equalize it, compensate for the additional work, or weigh service work more heavily in promotion decisions.

Colleagues can also serve as allies by actively listening when solo-status scientists raise issues of concern and by stepping up to address those issues rather than being passive bystanders. It can be exhausting for solo-status community members to feel like they are the only ones representing issues that intersect with their identities. To cultivate an environment that is truly inclusive, people from a variety of backgrounds need to play a role.

If you don’t hold a minority identity yourself, that does not prevent you from learning about and promoting issues about equity and inclusion. Anyone can broach conversations about these issues and hold groups accountable. For example, if you’re invited to represent your field at a conference or meeting, you can ask about the speaker roster and what steps the organizers are taking to foster diversity. And if you’re not satisfied with their answer, you can decline the invitation or recommend additional speakers they should consider inviting.

A White male mathematician told *Science* Careers earlier this year that he declines to attend meetings that don’t have a diverse speaker roster. “I have a limited amount of time,” he said. “I would much rather spend my time on conferences that show commitment to the quality that diversity brings rather than those that don’t.” He also advocates for diversity issues when he serves on committees, recognizing that solo-status scientists—already overburdened by service commitments...
play a role in generating such a workplace.

Send your thoughts, questions, and suggestions for future column topics to letterstoyoungscientists@aaas.org and engage with us on Twitter.

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