For years, women in academe have complained that they are assigned a disproportionate share of departmental service duties -- work that needs to be done but that doesn't carry much weight when it's time to decide who gets promoted.

A study on the issue -- by Joya Misra, Jennifer Hickes Lundquist, Elissa Dahlberg Holmes and Stephanie Agiomavritis -- is being released today in Academe. It explores the subject through surveys of and interviews with 350 faculty members at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst in 2008-9 -- and finds significant gender gaps in service assignments and advancement of male and female professors. The study examines patterns related to specific service duties as well as allocation of time.

One duty studied was serving as director of an academic department's undergraduate program. Of associate professors, one third of women but only 17 percent of men had served as undergraduate directors. "Because undergraduate directors spent more time teaching and working with undergraduates -- tasks that research universities tend to undervalue -- gendered norms may contribute to women associate professors spending more time in devalued roles," the paper says.

In fact, the study finds that women associate professors who served as undergraduate directors took, on average, 12 years (rather than the typical 7) after receiving tenure to be promoted to full professor. Male associate professors who served as undergraduate directors moved to full professor at the normal pace. While the study acknowledges that a range of factors beyond serving as undergraduate director may be involved, it notes the significant gap in years.

In terms of time on various tasks, the survey asked faculty members at different ranks to measure the hours spent in various activities. For most ranks, the faculty members reported only modest differences by gender, with women spending a little more time on mentoring and service. But associate professors reported "remarkable differences" by gender, the report says. These disparities are significant given recent attention by the Modern Language Association and others to the face that women's advancement up the academic ladder seems to stall at the associate professor level.

Male and female associate professors reported working the same number of hours in total (around 64 a week). But men spend seven and a half hours more a week on research than did women. Assuming no gaps in time spent during summers or semester breaks. Even if these differences in research time occurred only during semesters, not during summer or holiday breaks, this would mean that men spend in excess of two hundred more hours on their research each year than women did, the report says.
How are the female associate professors spending their time? On average, they devote an hour more a week to teaching, two hours more a week to mentoring and five hours more on service.

Of overall time, male associate professors reported spending 37 percent of their hours on research (the activity most likely to earn them advancement) and 20 percent on service (the activity least likely to result in advancement). Women, in contrast, reported spending 25 percent of their time on research and more -- 27 percent -- on service.

Those surveyed were asked about their preferences for work assignments -- and women and men were equal in feeling that they had too much to do and not wanting additional service assignments. So the paper argues that these gaps can't be attributed to women wanting to do more service than do men.

The paper offers several strategies that may deal with the pressure felt by faculty members -- especially women -- on service duties. First, it suggests that colleges work to replace lost faculty lines. By relying increasingly on adjuncts -- many of whom do not serve on committees, have formal advising duties, and so forth -- colleges have forced more service duties on associate professors. (Many departments try to protect junior faculty members on the tenure track, so they can meet research expectations for tenure.) But "cultural changes also matter," the report argues, regardless of how many faculty members are in a department. "Deans and department chairs or heads need to examine teaching, advising, mentoring, and service responsibilities to ensure that all faculty members pull their weight and are rewarded accordingly," the study says.

— Scott Jaschik