

# Service roles in collaboration: *interview with Daniel Williams & Elise Sanger*

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LAAC members Jessica Steinlechner and Mikhail Korobko spoke to Daniel Williams and Elise Sanger about their experiences with service roles in the collaboration. See further information in the LAAC Corner article in the LIGO Magazine for Issue 28 (March 2026). Below you will find the full unedited interview.

What kind of service work are you doing/did in the past? Committee membership/chairing, working group/subgroup leadership, paper writing teams, etc. For the purposes of this article your roles as chairs would be most relevant, but of course we're interested in all experience you have.

**Daniel:** At the moment I'm the chair of the LSC DEI committee, and for the moment I'm the chair of the GWTC-4.0 Results paper PWT (though hopefully by the time you're reading this the paper will be published and I'll be out of a job!). I also served as the manager of the GWTC-4.0 parameter estimation project; I was part of the GWTC-3 PWT, and helped coordinate the parameter estimation (PE) for GWTC-2, 2.1, and 3.

**Elise:** I am currently the chair of the LSC Climate & Sustainability Committee. I am also on the PWT team for O4b TGR after serving as an analyst for the O4a TGR paper. I have also been involved doing various smaller tasks across the TGR and PE groups including results reviews and PE ROTAs.

What motivated you to do this?

**Daniel:** In both cases I think I stumbled into the positions. I became DEI chair when the previous chair needed to step down. The committee is made-up of a lot of very busy people, and I think I just happened to be the least busy! I also think it's a vital thing for the LSC to have, and I figured that if I could help to guarantee that it would continue I would step up.

I got involved with PE shortly after my PhD viva. I had started my first postdoc position and was keeping an eye open for new projects. My new supervisor, John Veitch, mentioned that the GWTC-2 PE needed to be started, but it was a very manual process. I figured I could probably help to automate it. A few months later COVID happened, and we suddenly found ourselves relying even more heavily on automating things, not least since we all found our attention split in multiple new directions. I continued to develop the

framework we used for automating everything (asimov), and eventually found myself coordinating the people doing the work as well as the code they were using.

**Elise:** I originally got involved in the Climate Change Committee (as it was called back then) because I care about climate change and wanted to help the LVK collaboration reduce its climate impact. When the previous chair stepped down, I was not very keen on taking up the role since I considered myself too junior. But after some other more senior people expressed their support and no one else being willing to take on the role, I accepted it because I believed in the committee and did not want it to die out because of no one stepping up.

As for the scientific service tasks, I usually got asked and thought "why not?". I believe it is important that we all try to contribute to some of these things to distribute the load so that it is not always the same people doing them. They might not always be the most fun things to do, but they are important and if no one does them, then we are all suffering in the end. I also thought they were a nice way of learning new skills, which has definitely been the case.

Which impact did it have on your career?

**Daniel:** The error bars on this one are quite large; it's not clear that it's helped a lot so far with things like the success of fellowship applications (I think the sort of thing I do isn't well understood outside the GW community, and that has been challenging). However I think being able to claim that I'm pulling my weight in an important international collaboration has been helpful for other grants I'm involved with. It was also an important component in my (successful!) application for promotion at my institution.

**Elise:** This we will have to see in the future. I am still a PhD student and haven't applied to postdocs yet so there is no data to draw any conclusions from. I hope the outcome will be positive.

Which impact did it have on your personal life/development beyond career?

**Daniel:** This one's interesting. I had leadership positions outside academia before these (I was the director of a charity), but my work in the collaboration has nevertheless made me much more confident doing different types of things! Sometimes, however, it's been very tough on my life outside work. Especially for the work on GWTCs there are often big deadlines which are very tough to meet. For GWTC-4.0 that meant working through my summer vacation, which is something I'd really rather avoid. For GWTC-3 it meant fielding panicked messages while I was at a wedding. I need to learn to get better at turning my

phone off! But the positives definitely outweigh the negatives.

**Elise:** I had already had leadership positions outside academia before (mostly in scouts), but each position comes with its own challenges and teaches you new things. These positions have improved my confidence and taught me to sometimes do things that are outside my comfort zone.

Some tasks I have taken on do have some negative impact on your life outside working hours. I try to not work in the evenings or on the weekends, but if a new GW event gets detected while you are on shift, then you will have to respond anyway. Luckily, this is not a very frequent occurrence and the excitement of new events and feeling the impact of your work at those times outweigh the bad.

Which obstacles did you encounter in taking on this role?

**Daniel:** The current situation internationally for DEI issues is very fraught, and that meant that I took the role on very abruptly, meaning I had quite a steep learning curve, and also had some eggshells to navigate initially. However, overall, aside from needing to learn how to balance quite a broad portfolio across my various collaboration roles, in addition to ones outside the collaboration, the process was pretty smooth! People have been very helpful (and understanding when I mess up!)

**Elise:** When I started as chair of the Climate & Sustainability Committee, I had only been in the collaboration for 1,5 years. This meant that I did not really know how the collaboration works, which for sure was a challenge when trying to formalize the committee in the LSC bylaws. The other challenging aspect is that the topic touches upon all the work that happens in the collaboration, from instrumentation to data analysis to meetings and so on. This combination meant I had to learn a lot while not knowing who to ask for help. Luckily, there were other (often more senior) people willing to help me and to guide me through the processes.

Did you encounter any difficulties as an ECR in your role, potentially being leader of a group including more senior people?

**Daniel:** Not really! I'd say more senior people are generally quite helpful. In a collaboration like ours everyone tends to have an opinion about what you're doing, but I've always found that trying to stay good-humoured helps.

**Elise:** Not really. Most senior people have been very helpful and appreciative of my work.

Of course there is always some criticism as well, especially with a more controversial topic like climate change, but I always took these as learning opportunities.

Did you encounter any extra appreciation or support due to being in your role as an ECR?

**Daniel:** I don't think so, but I've generally found people have been very appreciative of what I do! I'm not always comfortable with praise, so any appreciation always means a great deal.

**Elise:** People seem to generally appreciate all the effort I have put in.

What did you learn doing this job? Which new skills did you acquire?

**Daniel:** At school I used to think that if science didn't work out I'd try being a diplomat: I really enjoyed Model UN at school (in fact, in what I realise might have been portentous, I was the president of our Model UN club...). I have definitely picked up some new diplomatic skills over the last few years in the collaboration, particularly navigating disagreements constructively and building consensus across multiple viewpoints, and if I ever find myself outside GWs I might just have a second career in international relations! More seriously, it forced me to learn much better project management skills: my life now has a lot more Gantt charts in it.

**Elise:** I realized that I can struggle with managing my time when I have many different tasks to do, but I am learning to become better at this. As part of that, it has taught me to sometimes say no if I already have too much on my plate.

Do you have any words of encouragement for other ECRs considering taking such roles?

**Daniel:** Do it. It's worthwhile for its own sake aside from any of the career benefits you might get from it. But make sure you have something else in your life to allow you to escape when you need to. For me that was sport (it's good to have an outlet for excess energy and sometimes very mild frustration!) and painting Warhammer minis (and I'm trying to learn how to paint watercolours, which feels like an entirely different pace from LVK business!)

**Elise:** Do it! While it might not seem like it immediately improves your career chances, the skills you learn along the way are useful in all aspects of life and I believe they will positively impact your career because of that. Meeting nice people that you otherwise would not have met is also a bonus. Definitely worth the effort!