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Avoiding disgruntlement and burnout from too much service work (opinion)

Submitted by Sarah Bray on February 5, 2020 - 3:00am

Dear Mentors,

I just got back from a conference, and it was so good to see friends from graduate school and past colleagues and students. What I noticed, though, was that every conversation focused around how swamped everyone was with service. People just kept complaining ... and to be honest, I was one of those people. I've read a lot about saying no and having boundaries, and I guess I'm still struggling. On the one hand, I really care about contributing to the university community, and service is a big part of that. On the other hand, I've been feeling resentful that it's the same people doing all the work, and we're not compensated for this extra service. In fact, the more service I do, the more people ask me to do -- which makes me feel like no good deed goes unpunished. I don't want to end up disgruntled, resentful and bitter. I want to be at peace with the things I am doing, and I want to feel appreciated for the work I contribute without being taken advantage of ... Can you help?

Sincerely,

Future Disgruntled Professor

Dear Future Disgruntled Professor,

Thanks for writing to us and for articulating something that we have observed in academe, too. We appreciate that you don't want to become bitter, angry and resentful and that you're recognizing that you're on your way there at the moment.

You raise some important issues around the distribution of workload and the effect it can have on people over time. Saying no sounds easy and effortless in theory (“Just say no!”), but when the requests actually come in, it can be hard to determine what to do. What we know is that associate professors are some of the most unhappy ^[1] people, as well as some of the most overworked. When we dig down deeper into the data, research shows that women do more service ^[2] at this level (and are typically doing less prestigious service) and underrepresented minorities perform an unquantifiable amount of invisible labor ^[3], both pre- and posttenure.

People who do more service can take longer to advance in their careers, often end up feeling unhappy with how that service is distributed in the department and are more likely to face burnout or leave the academy altogether. That raises questions about equity and compensation for that labor, as well as the costs imposed on people’s research and promotion.

Here are our top tips for framing and approaching service work.

Accept that some nos are going to be harder than others, and that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t say no. There are countless forms of service within the university. Some are within your department, such as a curriculum or graduate admissions committee. Some are within the college and university, like the college budget committee or a university search committee for a dean of students.

Diversity panels are a classic example of service that falls primarily on women faculty, faculty of color and underrepresented faculty, who are bombarded with requests to talk about their experience or share their “unique perspective” within the university, their discipline and the profession at large. Even though one might say, “Oh, it’s just a one-time thing,” they still take time, and soon such faculty members find they are the go-to “diversity voice” that is always being summoned for a panel.

And then there are those noncommittee forms of service that tend to fall in the laps of women and underrepresented faculty. It’s often the case that students instinctively turn to their women faculty and faculty of color for a certain type of emotional support that is not expected of white male faculty members.

Let's be real. It's easy to say no to committees where you have no interest. But for those who have benefited greatly from this one-on-one type of mentorship from the "one" woman or person of color faculty member, it is a lot harder to say no. In fact, it's incredibly important to say yes, because you are helping reshape the landscape of the academy with these service acts.

At the same time, you must remember: you can't pour from an empty cup. At some point, if you try to share your voice on *every* committee or panel you're asked to serve on (even those that align with your ideological mission) or you try to mentor *every* student that comes along, you will burn out. If you burn out, you'll be no good to anybody. We're not just talking about the academy. You won't be any good to the people outside the academy who are just as important: your partner, your family, your community and, most important, yourself.

Develop and refine your filter. Determining where to spend your precious time and energy can be even more difficult if you don't have any filters in place. We define filters as a set of guidelines or values that help you determine the things in which you are willing to invest your time. One set of filters might revolve around your broader career goals. Where do you want to be in five or 10 years? If you have clarity on those goals, then choose service or activities that will help you move toward them. For example, if you know you want to go into administration, then say yes to opportunities that will give you leadership experience. If you know that you'd like to start your own spin-off company related to your research, perhaps you'd be better off developing your skills as an academic entrepreneur.

Another way to think of a filter is to develop a set of questions that will help you.

- Is this opportunity involving something that I care about deeply?
- Do I feel uniquely called to do this type of work?
- Will engaging in this type of service be rewarding?
- Will it help me to cultivate new skills?
- Is it part of my efforts to push on a growth edge?

Sit down and jot down some questions that you can use as your own filter. Having this conversation with yourself will serve as an anchor to remind you

what really matters to you in your career.

You could also use other people as a filter. We think of it as your Committee of No. One of us, Rachel, had a colleague who would give her a pep talk before they walked into any faculty meeting. He knew that she had a tendency to volunteer for things too readily and that her focus needed to be on earning tenure. So he'd give her a look and just say, "Whatever it is, just say no. Practice with me." As we've acknowledged, some nos are harder than others, but he taught her to exercise this muscle.

You can find a friend or colleague to check in with any time you get asked to do something. They can help you think through the pros and cons before deciding what to do. Remember, never say yes on the spot. Giving yourself time to consider the request is crucial.

Be intentional about the service you choose, and advocate for yourself.

Using the filters above, be *proactive* instead of *reactive* with the service you choose. How many times has someone walked into your office and asked you to help with something or serve on a committee? Instead of waiting for someone to ask you, decide what you care the most about and what you're committed to, and then focus your efforts there.

Have you heard the phrase "An obligation without a commitment is a mess"? Actively consider the issues and committees you care about on the campus, in the community or in the discipline. Then strategically choose to perform service in those areas, if possible. If you are serving on some high-profile committees, that can also allow you to point to that service and politely decline additional requests. Although we might need to say yes regardless of our level of commitment in certain cases, things usually work out better for everyone if we can contribute in areas where we feel committed.

You can also take this work a step further and advocate for yourself. That can take two forms. One option is to make sure that your department chair or others are aware of the service you're performing. We recommend keeping a separate list that helps you to remember all the service you're currently doing and also to show others when new requests come up. If you are interested in taking on a new service duty, see if you can negotiate to relinquish your

responsibilities in another area. Remember, when you say yes to one thing, you're saying no to other things -- even if you don't know what those things are yet (or even if those things are your personal health, wellness and time with those you love).

A second approach to advocating for yourself involves keeping track of your actual service time for a week or two. Even though it's painful to track your time in 15-minute increments, looking at data can be eye-opening and can help you advocate for yourself. A junior faculty member we worked with had a joint appointment in two departments, and through time tracking, she found that the doubling of service (think two faculty meetings, two sets of department colloquia and so on) was costing her a lot of time she needed to dedicate to research. She was able to take the data from time tracking to her two department chairs and ended up negotiating a course release every four semesters to help compensate for the time. Tracking your time, especially in the realm of service, can give you a clear idea of where your time is going and what time you have left and can also give you data to ask for additional resources, if appropriate.

Work for a fairer system. We hope these tips are useful for you as an individual, but to combat biases in who takes on more service, we all must work to create departments that are based more on equity, transparency and fairness. Research from the Faculty Workload and Rewards Project spotlights [best practices](#) ^[4] for helping departments to cultivate equitable workplace environments. Specifically, they suggest creating faculty dashboards that make the data about individuals' service commitments available to everyone so that people can identify any inequity issues when they arise as well as have more data when evaluating requests. They also recommend that departments revise policies and procedures to establish expectations and accountability around service. And they urge departments to create a rotation system so that people can share in more onerous assignments.

If you're in a position of power, why not make creating a system that is fairer for everyone part of your service work? Or, if you're not in a position of power, perhaps you can encourage your chair or perhaps a standing committee --

such as an executive committee or the diversity, equity and inclusion committee -- to take up these issues.

As recently promoted associate faculty members, we will be the first to tell you that service obligations can sneak up on you out of nowhere. If you are swamped already, consider experimenting with the tools we've explored here - especially saying no, a muscle that requires constant exercise.

It may be the middle of the academic year, but it's the start of a new calendar year. Let's use the latter to our advantage and start exercising the skill of creating healthy boundaries. Whether you're advocating for yourself or for others, know that it is a skill that gets better the more you hone it and practice it. Trust us, you'll notice the difference in how you feel when the academic year comes to a close.

Peace and productivity,

Rachel McLaren, associate professor in communication studies, University of Iowa

Anthony Ocampo, associate professor of sociology at Cal Poly Pomona and director of campus workshops for National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity

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Links

[1] <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Why-Are-Associate-Professors/132071>

[2] [https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11162-017-9454-2?](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11162-017-9454-2?wt_mc=Internal.Event.1.SEM.ArticleAuthorOnlineFirst)

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[3] <https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Invisible-Labor-of/234098>

[4] https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2018/06/27/how-make-faculty-service-demands-more-equitable-opinion?utm_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm_campaign=117abc9646-DNU_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1fcbc04421-117abc9646-198228137&mc_cid=117abc9646&mc_eid=0e307ffb34