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## Just Say No

Submitted by Kerry Ann Rockquomore on September 27, 2010 - 3:00am

One of the most frequent and difficult pieces of advice I received as a pre-tenure faculty member was "just say no." I always felt frustrated by this advice because (while well-intended and correct) it is far easier said than done, *especially* for underrepresented faculty. This difficulty is due to the fact that being the only \_\_\_\_\_ in your department means you will receive a disproportionately high number of service requests from all across your campus in the name of "diversity." That additional service will neither be rewarded nor serve as a substitute for published research (at a research-intensive university), nor offset lackluster teaching evaluations (at a teaching-intensive institution) when it comes time for your promotion and tenure decision. While "just say no" is important advice for all tenure-track faculty, it is *essential* for underrepresented faculty who are challenged to say "no" more frequently, and to a broader range of campus leaders, in order to have the necessary time to excel in the areas that matter most to promotion: *research, publication, and teaching*.

I continue to struggle with the "just say no" advice, but I have improved over time. The keys to making it work are: 1) **self-awareness** about why you feel the need to say "yes" so often and 2) **developing a process** for evaluating and responding to the never-ending stream of service requests you receive. Here are the guidelines that [Tracey Laszloffy](#) <sup>[1]</sup> and I suggest in [The Black Academic's Guide to Winning Tenure Without Losing Your Soul](#). <sup>[2]</sup>

### Avoid Saying "Yes" on The Spot

Whenever someone asks you to do something, avoid saying "yes" before you've had time to consider the request. Try to buy some time by saying something like "Let me check my calendar/workload and I'll get back to you," "I'm currently overwhelmed, so I need to think seriously about taking on any additional service commitments," or just "I'll email you tomorrow." If you're consistently holding your [Sunday Meeting](#) <sup>[3]</sup>, then one look at your weekly time map will make it clear whether (or not) you have time available to accommodate any additional requests.

### Estimate How Long It Will Actually Take You to Complete the Request

I keep track of how much time various routine requests take so that I can be informed when I make decisions. For example, while a search committee always sounds like an exciting and important opportunity to meet new scholars, shape the future of the department, and enjoy a few free dinners, it's also an enormous time commitment. Specifically, it takes 70-80 hours of my time from the initial

meeting to the receipt of a signed offer letter. An independent study = 15 hours, an article review = 6 hours, an "informal talk" to a community group = 5 hours. Your time estimates may be different from mine, but what's important is connecting any request you receive with actual hours of labor. And if you don't know how long something will take, don't guess – ask your colleagues, peers and/or mentors (then multiply by two to correct for academics' tendency to underestimate the amount of time tasks take to complete).

## Consult Your Calendar

Like most of you, I have a jam-packed calendar, and the further we get into the semester, the less time I have available. When someone makes a request, ask yourself: **what specific day and time do I have available to complete this task?** Not in a general sense, but literally what day and what period of time are available in your calendar for this activity? Given that you're not going to compromise your daily writing, research time, or class time, this often makes the decision clear and easy. If you can't schedule it in your calendar, then you don't have time to do it.

## Ask Yourself: Why Would I Say "Yes"?

For a long time, "yes" was my unconscious default response. I automatically responded "yes" and thought I had to have a special reason to say "no." Then each semester, I ended up spending too much time on service, got exhausted, and became angry, resentful, and interpersonally unpleasant. Finally I started asking myself: *"Why do you keep saying yes all the time?"* For me, it was some combination of bad gender socialization, wanting to please people who had power over me, trying to avoid the punishment I imagined would occur if I said "no," overcompensating for other aspects of my work where I felt less confident, trying to correct longstanding historical and structural inequalities at my institution, single-handedly making up for all the systemic failures my students had experienced in their academic careers, *and* seeking to nullify all negative stereotypes by being super-minority-faculty-member. With all those intentions operating under the surface, no wonder I kept saying "yes" to every request or alternatively, feeling intense guilt, shame and disappointment on the few occasions I said "no." Thankfully, once I became aware of why I said "yes" so often, I was able to develop a new criteria for evaluating requests and flip my default upside down. Now my automatic response is "no" and I require a special reason to say "yes" (and don't worry, there are still plenty of those!).

## Figure Out How To Say "No" And Do It!

There are so many ways to say "no" and I am always shocked by how easily people accept "no" for an answer and move on to find someone else to accommodate their request. You could say "no" in any of the following ways:

1. "That sounds like a really great opportunity, but I just can't take on any additional commitments at this time."
2. "I am in the middle of \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_ [fill in the blank with status-enhancing and high-profile service commitments] and if I hope to get tenure, I'm unable to take on any additional service."
3. "I'm not the best person for this, why don't you ask \_\_\_\_\_."
4. "If you can find a way to eliminate one of my existing service obligations, I will consider your request."
5. "No" [look the asker in the eye and sit in silence].

## Serve Strategically

Finally, the best advice one of my mentors gave me was to be *strategic* about my service. That means, you want to determine what percentage of your tenure and promotion evaluation will be based on service. It doesn't have to be perfectly precise, but whatever the percentage is, use it as a

guideline for how much time you can spend on service each week. If service only counts as 10% of your promotion criteria, then spending anything more than 4-6 hours per week on service activities means you're over-functioning in that area. The percentage will be different according to your institutional type and culture, but once you know approximately how much time you can spend on service each week, then say "yes" only to the things that fit your broader agenda or make substantive sense for you to participate in.

Learning how, when and why to "just say no" isn't easy. It takes time, practice, and clarity. But doing so is an important part of making time for the things that really matter to your long-term success and keeping you from getting burned out while on the tenure track.

## The Weekly Challenge

This week, I want to challenge you to do the following:

- If you feel overwhelmed by service commitments (or aren't happy with your research and writing productivity), patiently ask yourself why you say "yes" so frequently.
- Gently acknowledge that the reality of life on the tenure track is that you will ALWAYS have more service requests than time to fulfill them.
- For one week, say "no" to EVERY new request you receive (just to see what it feels like).
- With each request, let "no" be your default response and wait for a reason to say "yes".
- If that seems too crazy, then at least commit to reviewing your calendar and existing tasks before saying "yes" to any new commitments.
- Recommit yourself to 30-60 minutes each day for your writing.
- If you haven't [created a semester plan](#) [4]; it's not too late.

I hope this week brings you insight into the reasons why you say "yes" so frequently and the strength to say "no" often, confidently, and without guilt.

Peace & Productivity,

Kerry Ann Rockquemore

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### Links:

[1] <http://www.drtraceytherapy.com/>

[2] [http://www.amazon.com/Black-Academics-Winning-Tenure-Without-Losing/dp/1588265889/ref=pd\\_bbs\\_sr\\_1?ie=UTF8&camp=s=books&qid=1233292596&sr=8-1](http://www.amazon.com/Black-Academics-Winning-Tenure-Without-Losing/dp/1588265889/ref=pd_bbs_sr_1?ie=UTF8&camp=s=books&qid=1233292596&sr=8-1)

[3] <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/surviving/fall2>

[4] <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/winning/winning1>

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