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## Essay on the need for mid-career faculty members to turn down service requests

Submitted by Kerry Ann Rockquemore on July 23, 2012 - 3:00am

Last year, sociologists tested the hypothesis that women do more service than their male counterparts at mid-career [1] and found significant gender gaps in both service work (women do more of it) and advancement to full professor (men are more likely to advance). While working the same number of total hours, men spent seven hours more per week on research than women, who were investing that time in service and mentoring. I often work with mid-career faculty members (mostly women) who are overwhelmed with service requests, overfunctioning on departmental service, and feeling exhausted, angry and resentful [2] about the work. And yet, when asked why they keep doing more service, I hear the same thing repeatedly: "I can't say no."

Given the twin realities that mid-career women (especially the "nice" and "helpful" ones) get more service requests than their male counterparts and that too many yeses suck time away from the very activities that lead down the path to promotion [3], it seems to me that one of the most critical skills for success at mid-career is ability to say "no" clearly and confidently and to remove the phrase "I can't say no" from your professional vocabulary.

### What Keeps You From Saying No?

If you're someone who is overfunctioning on service to the detriment of your post-tenure pathway [3], don't worry! There's no shame in acknowledging it and moving toward an exploration of why that is your reality. In other words, if you know you should say "no" and you need to say "no" more often, then the most important question is what's keeping you from uttering the magic word?

I've observed three types of factors that keep mid-career faculty (especially women) from saying "no" more often, more confidently, and more strategically than is necessary to pursue their post-tenure path [3]: 1) Technical Errors, 2) Psychological Blocks and 3) External Realities

### Technical Errors

Sometimes mid-career faculty have a vague sense that they should say "no" more often and that their physical and emotional exhaustion can be traced directly to service overload. They are not however, putting any conscious effort into actually saying "no." This can be due to a variety of technical errors including:

1. You don't literally know how to say "no" in a manner appropriate to the context
2. "Yes" is your default response (and you feel must have an extraordinary reason to say "no")
3. You have no idea how much time "yes" takes

4. You haven't recognized the connection between the time required to fulfill "yes" commitments and the time you feel you're missing for truly important activities
5. You don't have a clear and consistent filter to help you decide when to say "yes" and when to say "no"

The great thing about technical errors is that they are easy to fix! If you don't know how to say "no," then practice (here are [7 Simple Ways to Say No](#) <sup>[4]</sup>). If "yes" is your unconscious default response, try making "no" your default response for a while and see what happens. If you don't know how much time a "yes" takes, start tracking how long each and every "yes" costs you. As soon as you start realizing that "yes" is a commitment to a unit of your most precious commodity (time), you'll get much more selective about how, when and to whom you give it away. If you aren't clear about the linear connection between the time you're giving away and the time you don't have for truly important activities, start holding a [Sunday Meeting](#) <sup>[5]</sup> each week. And if you don't have a clear filter to decide between "yes" and "no," either develop one or create a human filter (i.e., a service mentor, a buddy or an accountability group) to help you while you are building this muscle.

### Psychological Blocks

Fixing the basic technical errors will be helpful, but more often than not the reason you're saying "yes" too often is that there's a little something deeper going on and it requires a different process than a tip or trick. The goal of identifying psychological blocks is to become aware of why you feel compelled to say "yes" so often and then experiment with different beliefs and behaviors in your decision making. The most common psychological blocks to saying "no" I see among mid-career faculty are:

1. You're a pleaser (you're more concerned about people liking you than you are about meeting your own goals).
2. You're trying to be super-professor (trying to do a little of everything but not doing any one thing well).
3. You're a [perfectionist](#). <sup>[6]</sup>
4. You feel overly responsible for things that aren't entirely your responsibility.
5. You believe everything will fall apart unless you do the work.
6. You're overcompensating and/or trying to prove you belong.
7. You always put other people's needs before your own.

Unlike technical errors, psychological blocks are not immediately fixable with a new skill. Instead, resolving them requires an ongoing process where you first and foremost become aware of how you feel when you receive a request. And until you can gain in-the-moment clarity about what to say "yes" and "no" to, don't respond on the spot. Once you have some time, ask yourself why your first impulse is to say "yes." Once you can identify how you're feeling and if any of the common blocks are occurring, check in with a buddy, mentor or support system to discuss the costs and benefits of saying "yes" or "no" to a particular request. This process will help you to experiment with saying "no" more often, develop a clear and consistent filter for your decision-making, and lead to a more equitable and balanced service load.

### External Constraints

You can do all the inner work possible and yet sometimes circumstances outside of your control force you into a situation where your “yes” is a suboptimal but necessary response. For example, someone died and you’re the only person with substantive expertise who can step in and teach their graduate seminar halfway through the term. This happens to everyone at some point if you have a long academic career, so negotiate the best possible circumstances for your “yes,” get the support you will need to make the “yes” a realistic possibility, and lean into your network. It’s also critically important to adjust your expectations about what’s possible during those times in order to be focused on moving your agenda forward.

### Weekly Challenge

I know this is a delicate topic, but this week I challenge every mid-career reader who is feeling “stuck” to:

1. Reflect on your past academic year and gently ask yourself: Do I have a problem with “yes”?
2. If you determine that you are overfunctioning relative to your colleagues, take 10 minutes to identify what keeps you from saying “no” more often.
3. If it’s a combination of factors, pick one step you can take to move forward this week to set yourself up for the rapidly approaching fall term.
4. Write every day for 30-60 minutes. It’s the very best insulation you can provide yourself for the unexpected moments of external constraint.

I hope this week brings you the desire to explore your habits around saying “yes” and the willingness to take the first step in a new direction.

Peace and productivity,

Kerry Ann Rockquemore

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### Links

[1]

[https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2011/01/12/new\\_study\\_finds\\_unequal\\_distribution\\_by\\_gender\\_in\\_academic\\_service\\_work](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2011/01/12/new_study_finds_unequal_distribution_by_gender_in_academic_service_work)

[2] <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2012/07/02/essay-how-mid-career-academics-can-find-their-place-emotional-spectrum>

[3] <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2012/06/25/essay-how-faculty-members-can-chart-meaningful-post-tenure-career>

[4] <http://zenhabits.net/say-no/>

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

[6] <http://celestinechua.com/blog/10-ways-to-tell-if-you-are-a-perfectionist/>