

Just Say No, or How to Manage Your Life Outside of the Classroom

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When I volunteered to write something for the SAWH mentoring toolkit on how to manage professional responsibilities, I thought I would turn it out in a month or so. Now, more than a year later, I've had a long time to think about how to "just say no." To save the time and energy to do the many things you want to do professionally (like writing this essay), it's necessary to decline other opportunities. For most SAWH members, who are highly motivated and competent people, that's easier said than done. Most of us got to our positions by saying "YES!"

What follows are simply some modest and flawed suggestions on how to behave in a perfect world. These are not necessarily rules I have always been able to follow, but ones to which I aspire. Gleaned from my own mentors, from my own mistakes, and from advising graduate students, these guidelines simply impose some sort of structure on chaos. They may not suit you, but I hope that they inspire you to think ahead about your own boundaries and establish some ground rules for giving away your most precious commodity: your time.

We hear a lot about the "demands of the profession," but it's important to remember that we *are* the profession. If we agree to those demands without doing our best to shape them, we are feeding the monster. Committee work, searches, public talks, travel and conferences, student demands, service to community, reading colleagues' work, manuscript reviews, book reviews, tenure reviews: where does it all end? Actually, it doesn't end, it simply accumulates. One day you will wake up covered in commitments, trudging through day after weary day, vowing next time to "just say no." The life that you imagined as a teacher and a writer eludes you. Reading becomes a guilty pleasure. You are a history factory.

It doesn't have to be this way...does it? Err... maybe, maybe not. It depends on whether you set some ground rules for everything that is optional in your professional life. First decide exactly what is optional. There are a few ways to do this. Think of the last two things that you said yes to and then wished that you had not. Or go through your calendar for the past six months and figure out just how much more time you would have had if you had said no more often. Try to divide the "optional" things you have been doing into categories to determine if they are driven by employer expectations, professional demands, or individual aspirations.

It is not easy to determine what your college or university expects of you outside of the classroom, but one thing is certain, your employer will keep asking until you say no. The tricky part is to figure out what kind of service is expected, what kind of service is valued, but not necessarily expected, and what kind of service doesn't really count for much. If you are a new to a university, this can be confusing. You can turn to your chair

for advice, but it is also a good idea to ask your mentor and your peers. Generally employer service falls into two major categories: university and departmental.

Women, especially minority women, are asked to serve on university committees so that the committee will be “representative.” If the faculty isn’t “representative,” this means that committee work falls more heavily on women and minorities. In many universities, demands come at you randomly from a variety of deans, programs, and standing administrative functions. It’s likely that no one but you knows how many committees you have been asked to serve on until you complete your activity report at the end of the year. Don’t assume that just because you are asked you should say yes. Find out exactly what is involved in the service that the university is asking you to perform. How regularly does the committee meet and for how long? (Beware of committees that meet outside of term.) Is there reading or other work outside of the committee? If so, how much lead time do you have with that material? Why did they ask you to do this: do you have some special talent that you can lend to the endeavor or are they simply trying to fill seats? Is there a natural progression from this service to other service, and do you want to continue to pursue this sort of activity? Some universities have a system for protecting junior or new senior faculty, but others simply let the demands flow.

Never accept any assignment on the spot. Say that it sounds interesting and you will get back to them with questions the next day. Try to find someone who has done that assignment in the past and find out what it really requires. Have a formal conversation with your chair and another department member about expectations for university service. My general rule of thumb is to accept one demanding university service assignment each year, along with perhaps another ad hoc committee. If you decline university service, be sure to mention that the other university committees on which you already serve are time consuming. Of course, saying no to university service is easier when you have tenure; however, service often eats up time that you can use to write and get tenure. Only you can manage these assignments. It is on university committees that you meet deans and your colleagues across the university. If you take on such assignments, you have to be able to do them calmly and cheerfully.

Expectations for departmental service wax and wane, and many departments try to protect new faculty from overextending themselves. Be sure to discuss departmental service with your chair and with your mentor. Get a sense from your peers of your departmental culture. Does everyone go to departmental meetings every time? Should you go to every job talk or only to those in your field? Your options for saying no to your chair are probably limited; however, you may need to remind the chair of the responsibilities you have already taken on for the department before you say yes again.

You may also be involved with interdisciplinary or non-departmental programs in the university that depend on time contributions from people like you who are paid by other departments. These can often take a great deal of time and sometimes offer little university or departmental recognition. While these activities can be your most fulfilling service, be sure that you don’t overextend yourself too much. Your colleagues will understand if you are very active one year and less able to give your time the next.

Because women's issues were not traditionally imbedded in university structures, women faculty sometimes find themselves doing the university's work on those issues. For example, a university committee may exist to oversee employee benefits, but it falls to an unofficial group of women faculty to improve day-care options on campus. If you and your colleagues are working for gender equity, representation, or simply on issues that impact women faculty more directly than men, try to move these activities into the mainstream of university life. For example, if day care is an issue at your university, try to get the university to take responsibility for the issue, rather than leave it to women professors to solve in their spare time. Be sure that your university recognizes service on women's issues in the same ways in which it recognizes service on other issues.

The demands of your university and department pale compared to your students' ancillary demands. Here again, each institution has its own culture for how available professors should be to students outside of the classroom, and each person is different. Try to put your students first, try not to fall into a habit (common in some cultures) of complaining about them, and keep a clear idea of what a reasonable demand looks like. For me, a reasonable student demand begins with the student doing all of the work he or she can do before turning to me. For example, this means that the student submits work in the format I specify in the place I specify at the time I specify. In other words: hard copy in my box in the history department by 2:00 Friday, not an emailed attachment at 10:00 p.m. Sunday. It means coming by during office hours or scheduling an appointment (gladly given), not showing up as I'm rushing off to pick up my kids. It means keeping student/professor e-mail within the bounds of the course and its requirements. There isn't any need for late-night correspondence or frantic exchanges: professors taught students perfectly well before e-mail. The rule of thumb here is simply good manners and a soupcon of business etiquette. You are not in thrall to your students' e-mails; in fact, you are in control of your own time.

Finally, there are all sorts of professional demands: book reviews, manuscript reviews, tenure reviews, giving papers, commenting on papers, serving on SAWH (and other organizations') committees, giving talks at other universities, and mentoring colleagues within and outside of your institution. All of these are worthwhile and important contributions to our profession, but you can't do all that you will be asked to do or all that you want to do. First, write down what you have promised to do. Believe it or not, you may forget your promises until they all land on you at once, usually right at the end of the semester. Second, try the Rule of Two: 2 book reviews a year, 2 manuscript reviews a year, 2 outside talks a year, 2 tenure reviews a year, etc. Then when the third demand of that sort comes up, say simply, straightforwardly, and right away: "I'm sorry, can't do that, I have all the (reviews/talks, etc) that I can handle right now." As with everything else in life, you have to honor your commitments, so if the third request is asking you to do something fabulous, you can't back out of the first two. You have to consider whether it's worth adding on.

Before I became a historian, I had another career. My hours, days, weeks, and years were filled with doing what other people told me to do. My intellectual pursuits followed the

assignments that my employer gave me. We are very lucky to be able to be in control of our lives, to pursue our own intellectual interests, and to interact with fresh groups of students each semester. Save some of your energy to renew the intellectual excitement that brought you to this profession in the first place.

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