

[Welcome to Column 2 of Hey Jane! This is a project of the SWS Career Development Committee. Questions and answers are generated by the committee and SWS members. Answers are compiled from several anonymous sources. All columns are archived on our committee's page on the SWS website.]

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Hey Jane!

“How/when can I say “no” to service work such as serving on committees, directing theses, etc.?”

Jane says:

All of us must do some service to show that we are good citizens and to remain connected to our colleagues. However, in many departments, a handful of people (often women) do more than their share of service. Even in the academy, women are compelled into the social housekeeping and emotion work done by our sisters in every walk of life. Saying “yes” to extra service work often takes time away from the work of research and teaching that departments most value. Yet, saying “no” is not always as easy as it seems.

Things to think about:

* What are your departmental expectations? How much committee work is expected from pre-tenure and post-tenure faculty members? Some institutions limit the amount of service work pre-tenure faculty do. Find out the norms by asking around.

Saying no: Once I have tenure, I would be happy to consider this service opportunity. But for now, I need to focus on the work of getting tenure.

Saying no: I would love to, but I have been advised by senior faculty in my department to cut back on my service as I work towards tenure.

* What is your current service workload? Are you on relatively demanding committees? Pick committee and service assignments wisely, fill your time up with these, and then you can say no to less desirable assignments because you are already committed.

Saying no: “I would really like to work on that but right now I'm buried in committee work.” If you want to do it, you can add: “Please ask me again when this term of service is over.”

* One way of figuring out if you're doing too much is to look at your time commitments in terms of your department's allocation of your responsibilities. For example, if you are supposed to be spending 40% of your time on teaching, 40% on research, and 20% on service, that corresponds to the equivalent of 2 full days on total work related to teaching and 1 day on all

service combined. Of course, during semesters things get a bit out of balance but it's a rough calculus.

* Student committees: How close is the research project to your own expertise? How will serving on an additional committee affect your ability to serve your current students?

Saying no: "I cannot take on any more students as I would not be able to give your work or my current students' work the time everyone deserves."

* Why are they asking YOU to serve on the committee? Try to avoid saying "yes" because you are flattered into doing the service. You might be a great committee member/chair, you might make going to meetings more pleasant and valuable. This is a manipulative and gendered strategy that can make you commit to a service opportunity that you would not have selected.

* Ask trusted senior colleagues for advice! If you trust your chair or dean, those are two excellent people to ask if a particular service opportunity is a good idea or not. Senior colleagues not in administration might have your best interests more at heart than those in administration. But remember that everyone has their own agenda and you are your own best advocate.

* Why DO service? When should you say yes? Service can connect you to colleagues and students and stem the social isolation that often accompanies our jobs. Service can get you out of your writing cell and help prioritize your commitments in a meaningful way. Service can further you towards administrative appointments, if that is one of your goals. Service is also a stimulating way of learning about the politics and governance of the department, college, and university. Finally, service can provide you valuable visibility around campus if your tenure and promotion committees are campus-wide.

* When you do serve, here are some tips on picking assignments:

-- How visible is the committee or service opportunity? If you are going to do the work, it can't hurt to select an assignment where you will become visible to senior faculty and administrators. To learn what service is most visible, check out the records of the most visible senior faculty. On the other hand, invisible committees might have the lightest workload.

-- What type of clout does the committee have? You can truly effect change in a system with faculty governance on a curriculum or budget committee than on a library or parking committee.

-- Is it a feel-good committee that has immediate, positive benefits? Awards committees, for example, can simply feel good to be on.

CAVEAT to all professional advice: Always check with your departmental colleagues, chair, dean, etc. to find out what the norms and expectations are in your institution.

I hope this helps! Stay tuned next month for Question 3!
-- Jane