

Dear Aleksandra,

*I recently received tenure at a large state university. Suddenly I'm being asked to serve on tons of committees, to head up this and that. I find it so hard to say no. I want to be helpful and collegial, but I don't want my research to just stagnate and I can't get anything done because I'm always running off to one meeting or another. What do you advise?*

*Swept Away in Paperwork*

Dear Swept Away,

So, first things first—congratulations on getting tenure. Take a moment to enjoy that. OK—time to move on, as you are being carried along in a raging current of administrative responsibilities. A problem in which you are not alone.

A recent study confirms what previous research and anecdotal evidence has long demonstrated: “women faculty perform significantly more service than men, controlling for rank, race/ethnicity, and field or department” and this differential is primarily accounted for by internal service - that is, within the university - rather than (the more visible) service off-campus to the profession and the community.<sup>1</sup> The reasons for this are myriad. In one case that I know of, a male department chair, keen to protect the research time of the young, white male scholars with whom he identified, routinely saddled junior women and men of color with burdensome service obligations. Regardless of the explanations, women are asked and agree more often to do service. That fact makes saying no a justifiable act of feminist resistance.

It is, however, not so easy to say no, even with tenure. Women are typically acculturated to be cooperative and giving. There is something to be said for modelling these admirable qualities as good university citizens. But women collectively seem to be modelling this good citizenship more or less to other women. Men are not stepping up in the same numbers to take on all the tasks that need to get done. By saying no more, women nudge/cajole/drop kick men into shouldering their fair share. As Gandhi said, “if we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. ...We need not wait to see what others do.” We can lead by saying no, showing our female colleagues how it’s done and quietly extracting a more equitable workload from our male colleagues.

Not all service responsibilities are created equal. Some jobs are more interesting and more visible than others. What would interest you? Where do you see yourself in five years? Do you want to be department chair some day? Do you want to be the director of international programs? What could you be doing now that puts you in line for what you want to be doing? Give some strategic thought to how to manage your career so that you are not just tossed hither and yon, but are heading toward a goal. If an opportunity comes up that interests you, but you’re bogged

<sup>1</sup> Cassandra M. Guarino and Victor M.H. Borden, “Faculty Service Loads and Gender: Are Women Taking Care of the Academic Family?” Institute for the Study of Labor Discussion Paper Series, No. 10010, June 2016, 1, <http://ftp.iza.org/dp10010.pdf>.

down with other obligations, can you work with those up the food chain to get some of your burdens shifted to others? Apparently, there's a bunch of men standing around with time on their hands for research and teaching. You can perhaps negotiate for them to do something you're doing now in order to be able to put your time into something you'd enjoy more.

Service obligations need to be balanced against the full range of our personal and professional ambitions, which change throughout the course of our careers. You may be on fire right now about a book project and now is not a good time to say yes to one thing or another. You might have small children or elderly parents and you can't do this or that—or this *and* that. Or you may simply not be interested. Setting priorities and maintaining boundaries is not self-indulgence, but the most basic self-care.

Sadly, though, you cannot say no to everything. Service is part of the job and we all have to do our bit, taking our turn at the most onerous tasks, though there is an escape clause if you feign total incompetence. Especially at mid-career, there is an expectation to take up serious administrative duties. You can say no a lot, but you have to say yes to *something*. Seek out the opportunities that you feel will allow you to make a difference—whether it is to undergraduates, graduate students, or colleagues.

In comradeship,  
Aleksandra