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How to Advocate for Yourself as an Early-Career Scholar



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As I lament having to teach for the sixth out of seven summers, I've been reflecting on public perception of academic life. People, including students, think we teach a few classes a couple of days a week — if we can fit them in between

international lectures and book-launch parties.

Sure, some Ph.D.s *are* public intellectuals who regularly appear on the national news, or who manage to publish books about current events just three weeks after they occur. But most of us are just run-of-the-mill people who were fortunate enough to realize our dreams of earning a Ph.D. And to be honest, very few of us had any idea of what being an academic would really entail. When we begin our professional journeys — on the tenure track or not — we are often shocked by the amount, pacing, and variety of work required of us. And, while we did sign up for a demanding career, we still must learn when to say no and how best to advocate for ourselves.

The reality of the job. Any academic will tell you: You spend 60 percent of your time doing things for which you will never receive "official" recognition. That mostly includes service work — advising, being on committees — that happens in addition to teaching a full course load, mentoring your actual advisees, and making sure you meet institutional expectations for research. Add to all of that the mental and emotional challenges of adjusting to a new workplace, getting to know colleagues, and learning campus norms and practices, and you begin to understand why early-career scholars are often overwhelmed with the demands of the job.

Too many new faculty members — especially women and people of color, perhaps because of their tenuous relationship with academe — simply accept this as "the way it is" when, in fact, it doesn't have to be.

Indeed, much has been researched and written about how white men, in particular, advocate for themselves in ways that women and people of color do not: They aren't afraid to request higher salaries, reduced course loads, bigger

offices, new furniture, research equipment/materials, or additional research funds. Likewise, they are not afraid to say no when asked to go above and beyond their job duties. Academe is a political place and, frankly, you have to play the game if you are going to be successful. That includes knowing when, how, and to whom you can say no.

Let me be clear: As an untenured or contingent faculty member, you can't refuse to do everything your chair or deans ask you to do. What I am suggesting is that you be strategic about what you agree to do and what you politely decline.

How to say no. It can seem flattering to be asked for your input on campuswide or departmental issues, but understand: Rarely is it just your opinion they want. They are really asking for your time, and your cognitive and emotional energy. They want you to do outside research, attend meetings (sometimes organize or lead those meetings), follow up with everyone, and then draft a strategic plan.

What you initially thought was a hallway conversation can quickly turn into a yearlong task force. Don't fall for it. As a new(ish) faculty member, you need to prioritize your time to make certain you are getting your career on solid ground. Here are a few areas in which it is probably okay to say no:

- Search committees. Unless it's your department doing the hiring, decline invitations to be on hiring committees. They are incredibly time consuming (reviewing hundreds of applications, attending dinners, talks, teaching demos) and rarely count toward your official service work.
- Extra advisees. Students will ask you to be their adviser because they like you. That's flattering but you should hold them off until they become declared majors in your department. And if that number is already at capacity, be honest and tell them that you can't take any more advisees.

- Task forces. This is another name for "committee" that makes it appear to be short term because there is, allegedly, a specific job to do. This task will undoubtedly still take at least an entire semester to complete.
- Extra courses. Even if there is extra pay involved, think carefully before adding another course — particularly a new one — to your workload to make sure it's worth the effort. Teaching an unfamiliar topic or through novel methods (online or hybrid courses) is especially time consuming and will require you to alter your work routine. And if this course is in the summer, definitely say no (if you can afford to). Try to reserve as much of your summer for rest and rejuvenation as you can.
- Leadership roles. There is no need for you to be the chair of anything in your first couple of years. Not only do you not have the time or energy, you probably don't have enough institutional knowledge or social capital yet.
- Developing/revising anything new on campus. Your colleagues will love your "fresh perspective," but don't let them talk you into revising curriculum, programs, policies, etc. This is probably the most time-consuming thing you can do, and it will require you to have dozens of meetings with vested parties as well as learn a lot about what happened before you appeared on the scene to ruin whatever already exists. You will inevitably upset 70 percent of the people involved because academics don't like change.
- New collaborations. Starting new projects at a new institution is difficult enough. Don't add to your own labor by working with new people, especially if they are at a different institution. This project will inevitably be pushed to the back burner as things you encounter on a daily basis will take precedent.

Saying "yes, but." Sometimes as an early-career scholar it's OK to agree to extra work because the opportunity will enhance your professional well-being. Here

are a few examples of things you should say yes to:

- Webinars, workshops, and conferences. All of those are good opportunities to gain new knowledge, skills, and connections.
- Assisting on grants. Working on a grant — not as principal investigator — can be very educational and not as time-consuming as having your own grant. You learn how to write a grant proposal, how to administer a grant, and how to write annual reports. Grants look good on CVs, and offer you extra (and possibly novel) research opportunities. However, because you are not the PI, be sure to clarify your input and role in the project at the beginning of the process so that you are given appropriate recognition and you aren't being taken advantage of.
- Serving on influential committees in Years 4 to 6. Do this only if it is your primary service assignment. These committees are where you meet senior professors whose opinions matter around the campus. It can never hurt to have allies and advocates outside of your department.

If you do say yes, get something in return. The additional caveat to saying yes is that you should always request the appropriate compensation for whatever new task you've agreed to do. That doesn't necessarily mean money (although it could!). Sometimes, especially when the tenure clock is ticking, being allowed to teach one fewer course during a semester can be more valuable than money. Other types of "compensation" you might receive in exchange for extra work include:

- Equipment. Especially for scientists, research materials and space are at a premium. Asking for a new piece of equipment is a perfectly reasonable request in exchange for extra labor. For all of us nonscientists, new computers, software, or even office furniture can make us feel like we are

being paid what we are worth.

- Title change. If you are doing the work of a chair or director, request that the title be officially added to your contract, even if only temporarily.
- Policy change. If you find yourself continuously being asked to do extra work, you may want to request that the work become officially acknowledged in department or institutional policies. Many academics have successfully argued for their additional service to be considered as part of their tenure and promotion review requirements.
- Credit in your annual review. If you can't change campus policies so that your extra work "counts," make sure you get credit for it in your annual evaluation (and that you give yourself credit in your self-report).

Indeed, early-career academics should get in the habit of documenting everything, even if it feels silly to do so. At the beginning of every academic year, open a new document, and create sections for teaching, scholarship, and service. Every time you consult on a project or meet with an administrator, make a note of it. When you are nominated for awards, jot it down. When you revise a syllabus, detail exactly what you did. You will be glad for the documentation when you prepare your next job-market or tenure-and-promotion files.

If you've negotiated additional compensation in return for your extra work, take it upon yourself to follow up with the chair, dean, or provost. Do not rely on other people to advocate for you. If your compensation has not shown up in your checking account, don't be afraid to stop working on the special assignment. We may think of ourselves as professors/teachers/scholars, but to the institution, we are employees. As such, it is obligated to honor business contracts.

Similarly, sign a contract with yourself to recognize and leverage your unique talents and skills. Academe, like any business, will try to get the most out of you

that it can for as little as possible. It's your job to know your own worth and advocate for it.



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