The Calculus of Yes and No: How One Professor Makes Decisions About Academic Service

by Kimberly A. Griffin

It usually comes in the form of an email, which is a little long and very formal. But sometimes it’s a phone call, or a knock on my door by someone with an expectant and hopeful look in their eyes. Regardless of the format, all of these situations deliver some sort of “ask.” They are all requests, motivated by someone’s desire of me to do something related to academic service, “the catchall name for everything that is neither teaching, research, nor scholarship.”¹ For me, this means service is like the “potpourri” category on Jeopardy; it includes a little bit of everything. Service is mentoring undergraduate and graduate students; it is the committee work that I do on campus and beyond; it is anything I do related to professional associations or editorial boards; and it certainly relates to panels I sit on and the workshops I lead for students and colleagues.

As a faculty member at a research-intensive institution, I am evaluated on how much I engage in research, teaching, and service. However, service’s place within the academic triumvirate is, in a word, complicated. Tenure and promotion decisions, particularly at institutions like mine, are almost always based on research productivity.² Time spent working on committees or with students is time that could be spent working on research projects and journal articles. So, while it is expected that I will participate in service, and it is widely acknowledged that faculty engagement in service is important for student outcomes and institutional

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governance, I have been regularly cautioned by well-meaning senior colleagues and mentors to be leery of engaging in it too much. I have been told to guard my time. I must be careful of becoming overburdened by my service responsibilities.

While I admittedly find the emails easier to say no to, I still find that word very challenging. I often say yes. I agree, I take on the extra obligations. Some may say I am a softie or a pushover or a workaholic, but for me, it is more complicated. Some may say that it is simple arithmetic: as academics, we have a certain number of hours in a day that we can spend on work. If our professional success, especially at research-intensive institutions, is based primarily on scholarly pro-

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ductivity, then we should prioritize our work time accordingly. That may not leave much time for other activities, meaning that there needs to be a lot more “no” in terms of service requests.

I thought how I made decisions about whether to engage in service was just messy and complicated, but upon reflection, I realized that I was looking at it in an oversimplified way. In fact, my process bears closer kinship to advanced mathematics than addition and subtraction. For example, one of the core concepts of calculus is differentiation: the calculation of a derivative, which, in very loose terms, measures how much one thing changes in response to something else changing. This feels like a better way to capture my decision-making process. Whether or not I choose to engage in a particular service activity is a complicated balance of moving pieces considered in relation to one another. As I calculate my own equation, the factors are the same; however, their salience and meaning are always moving. For example, time is always a part of my equation. I must consider how many hours I have in a day and how much energy I have to spare. I know I cannot spend all my time on service, and despite my best intentions, there will be things I will have to quite simply decline. But then there are other things I consider in my personal equation, that never remain constant, and that have to be calculated and then re-calculated as I decide whether or not to engage in a particular service activity. These factors push and pull at my schedule, my research agenda, and my commitments to myself and my community, and I will discuss them in detail below: who I am, my professional development, and my personal interests and commitments.

**W H O  I  A M**

I identify as a Black woman, and my identity shapes my interests in service just as much as it shapes my interests in my research and scholarship. Ben Baez writes
about the role of race-related service in the lives of faculty members of color, noting that while they found it relatively easy to say no to general service, they had more ambivalence and ambiguity around engaging in service which directly related to their racial and ethnic communities. Faculty of color often focus on the cultural benefits associated with service, such as creating important opportunities for interpersonal and cultural connections across campus. For example, Richard Reddick and I have both found that Black professors have a unique appreciation for their mentoring relationships with their Black students, choosing to invest extra time and energy in these interactions because of the close kinship they feel and sense of responsibility to make a larger contribution to uplifting their communities.

While it may be true that many faculty choose to participate in service activities because they feel a special commitment to do so, it is also important to acknowledge women and faculty members of color are often expected to engage in service, regardless of their level of interest. A growing number of scholars suggest women—and women of color in particular—are expected by their students to engage in a more caring, “motherly,” time-consuming form of mentoring and advising than their male colleagues. Research also suggests women and faculty of color are more often invited to serve on committees. While faculty may acknowledge the importance of their voices being included and supporting students, their small numbers on many campuses leads to the same female and minority scholars being asked to participate in service over and over. This can be time consuming, physically draining, and emotionally exhausting. Saying no may seem to be a simple alternative here. However, some scholars have highlighted the ways in which racism and sexism can shape the more subjective aspects of the tenure and promotion process, leading to more negative assessments of their collegiality. Thus, women and faculty of color may be concerned about potential professional repercussions if they decline service requests.

Simply stated, who I am matters and shapes the choices I make. But it does not matter in the same way all of the time, and it does matter in the same way for each person. We each have a unique understanding of our multiple identities. Others can have expectations or beliefs about what our identities are and mean that may be more or less congruent with our own. Negotiating this space can have a complex influence on choices about engaging in service. It is fair to say that in some cases, my identity as a Black woman in the academy pushes me to say yes when I might otherwise say no. I care about contributing to and being

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"Transitions and Transformations Series: Time Place Redux 073012," 2012. Acrylic and polymers. 24" x 40".

The artist, Julia Morrisroe, is an associate professor of art at the University of Florida. See juliamorrisroe.com for more.
part of a larger project of supporting communities of color on campus, and I am more likely to say yes when I am asked to engage in work that is related to promoting access and equity for underrepresented populations in the academy. It is hard for me to say no when it comes to working with women and students of color because I see a bit of myself in them. But it is also fair to say that more is expected and asked of me. Whether those expectations are always an accurate reflection of what I actually want to do is another question. In many cases, there is simply more in my inbox from which I can choose; partially because I am sought out, and partially because I am more open, in some cases, to being found.

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WHAT CAN I LEARN

As a professor at a research university, I must admit that I have been socialized into an ambivalent relationship with service. As noted above, it has been consistently reiterated to me that service draws time away from my scholarship; however, there have been times when colleagues have admitted that service, particularly post-tenure, is an opportunity to meet new people, network, and increase one’s visibility in one’s field.8

Given this, I consider not only what it means to be a good colleague and member of an academic community, but also how a service opportunity will relate to my development before saying yes or no. Are there lessons that I can learn through participating in the work of a particular committee that will allow me to better engage in my work as a faculty member at my institution, or allow me to better serve my students? Will the committee connect me to colleagues or administrators that would be helpful for me to know? When I am asked to serve on a conference planning committee, it is important for me to ask myself about the national networks and conversations to which I will be introduced that I might not have been included in otherwise. Will it allow me to expand my professional network beyond my institution in a meaningful way that will make the time investment worthwhile? Or is this something I have done before or learned before?

Further, rather than just assuming it will detract from my productivity, I consider whether my participation in some form of service will actually fuel my scholarship or inspire me in a new way. I have talked to professors who think mentoring isn’t only a time-consuming obligation to train the next generation of scholars, but also an opportunity to stay current in their respective fields and engage in collaborations that allow more and better scholarship. This is not to say all men-
Mentoring relationships are this way or all students are equally able to collaborate with faculty and inspire their work as scholars. I have talked to faculty who are in fields not well suited for collaboration, or who prefer to work alone, who see research with students as too time intensive or are uncomfortable engaging in these collaborations because it can be unclear who should take ownership of the ideas generated. I cannot say yes every time a student asks me to work with them or assume they all will be able to contribute to my work, just as I cannot assume they all will be unable to collaborate with me in meaningful ways.

In the end, I take a moment to reflect not only on what I stand to lose professionally in terms of time, but what I potentially could gain from any service activity. For example, while the time investment may not yield the same rewards that would result from working directly on a research project or a paper, if I can find something that would be valuable to learn or a skill to develop, my response may be yes rather than no. However, I have to be realistic; there is no need to learn the same thing over and over again. And what is learned or the professional gains I make may not, in the end, be as valuable as the time I end up investing, which may lead me to say no.

Playing to My Strengths

My final consideration in the decision-making process is relatively simple to explain: there are just some things that I like better. For example, I have always enjoyed working with students. Mentorship and student-faculty interaction are central aspects of my research agenda. I am fascinated by the different behaviors that take place within these relationships and how they relate to personal and professional outcomes for mentors and mentees. I am most certainly not perfect, but I spend a good bit of time thinking about how to be a better advisor and mentor and invest a fair amount of time and energy in these kinds of activities. So when asked to mentor or advise students, it is hard for me to say no. I genuinely enjoy it, especially when there is a good match and we have a lot to learn from each other.

Conversely, there are some things that I just don’t like to do, and my disdain makes it much easier to say no. I am the first to admit that patience is not one of my virtues. I am not the biggest fan of long or terribly frequent meetings. I feel that my strength is figuring out concrete steps to complete a task, rather than articulating and brainstorming a larger vision. I am generally not very good at asking other people to do or give me things. Not only would I be fairly unhappy
engaging in service activities that rely on these skills, it is likely that the organizers of these activities would not be very happy to have me! While I cannot always choose to only do the things that I would like to do and avoid those I do not like, whether or not the activity actually allows me to engage in something that I enjoy certainly factors in to my decision-making.

**CONCLUSION**

This paper started out as a reflection on how I decide to say no to service requests. In my head, “no” was the hardest response to give. “No” sounds mean; it disappoints someone, and I hate disappointing people. Not serving on a committee or working with a student means not living up to the image of a professor that I have in my head, and that can be challenging. But I have been often reminded that “no,” is necessary. The old cliché is true: there really are only so many hours in a day, and there is only so much one person can do. So I am empowered in my “no,” when it is delivered, knowing that I have given careful consideration to the opportunity and whether it meets my needs and fits within the constraints of my schedule at that point in time.

Just as individuals must be empowered and encouraged to say no, to decline requests that do not make sense for them, it is also important to acknowledge the agency that can be present in saying yes. Yes can be an affirmation of one’s identities, opening the door to professional opportunity and potential for career advancement, or resonating with one’s interests. And maybe we can reframe conversations about service, where “yes” and “no” are not inherently good or bad. Rather than thinking of service as the addition and subtraction of hours spent on a variety of tasks, a new paradigm could frame service as a somewhat complex, but strategic set of decisions faculty will have to make. I have always been encouraged to define a research agenda, which helps me identify what new projects to take on, collaborations in which to engage, and grants to write. What if each person had a “service agenda” of sorts, that incorporated their own unique identities, their potential opportunities for learning and development, and interests, which allowed them to strategically consider which service opportunities to incorporate into their experiences throughout their respective careers? If I had a service agenda, my decision making about service would still be complicated, but at least people would know they were looking at calculus instead of arithmetic, helping me figure out whether I should say “yes” or “no.”
ENDNOTES

1. Blackburn and Lawrence, Faculty at Work: Motivation, Expectation, Satisfaction, p. 222.

2. See, for example, Padilla, “Ethnic Minority Scholars, Research, and Mentoring: Current and Future Issues,” and Tierney and Bensimon, Promotion and Tenure: Community and Socialization in Academe.

3. See Baez, “Race-Related Service and Faculty of Color: Conceptualizing Critical Agency in Academe.”


7. See for example Exum, et al., “Making it at the Top: Women and Minority Faculty in the American Labor Market”; and Reyes and Halcón, “Racism in Academia: The Old Wolf Revisited.”

8. For example, Neumann and Terosky highlight the opportunities that increased engagement in committee work and leadership in professional organizations provide newly tenured faculty to learn more about how to work effectively with others, build professional networks, and better navigate their institutions.

WORKS CITED


