One of the most frequent and difficult pieces of advice we receive as a faculty member is "just say no." Well, easier said than done, especially for underrepresented faculty. When you're the only _____ in your department, you will receive a disproportionately high number of service requests from across your campus in the name of "diversity." Even though it feels so urgent at the time of the request, the reality is that this additional service doesn't carry the same weight as research and teaching. Service cannot function as a substitute for published research (at a research-intensive university) or offset lackluster teaching evaluations (at a teaching-intensive institution). While "just say no" is important advice for all tenure-track faculty, it is essential for underrepresented faculty to say "no" more frequently (and to a broader range of campus leaders) in order to have the necessary time to work on research, writing, and teaching. If you're someone who is in a position to intervene when underrepresented faculty are bombarded with service requests, we encourage you to lighten the load.

We continue to struggle with the "just say no" advice, but we have improved over time. The keys to making it work are: 1) self-awareness about why you feel the need to say "yes" so often and 2) developing a process for evaluating and responding to the never-ending stream of service requests you receive. Here are the six guidelines that Tracey Laszloffy and Kerry Ann Rockquemore write about in *The Black Academic’s Guide to Winning Tenure Without Losing Your Soul.*

**1) Avoid Saying "Yes" On the Spot**

Whenever someone asks you to do something, avoid saying "yes" before you've had time to consider the request. Try to buy some time by saying something like "Let me check my calendar/workload, and I'll get back to you," or "I'm currently overwhelmed, so I need to think seriously about taking on any additional service commitments," or "I'll email you tomorrow." If you're consistently holding
your **Sunday Meeting**, then one look at your weekly time map will make it clear whether you are available to accommodate any additional requests.

### 2) Estimate How Long It Will Actually Take You to Complete the Request

We keep track of how much time various routine requests take so that we can be informed when we make decisions. For example, while a search committee always sounds like an exciting and important opportunity to meet new scholars, shape the future of the department, and enjoy a few free dinners, it’s also an enormous time commitment. Specifically, it takes 70-80 hours of time from the initial meeting to the receipt of a signed offer letter. An independent study = 15 hours, an article review = 6 hours, an "informal talk" to a community group = 5 hours. Your time estimates may be different than ours, but what's important is connecting any request you receive with actual hours of work. And if you don’t know how long something will take, don’t guess – ask your colleagues, peers and/or mentors (then multiply by 2 to correct for academic’s tendency to underestimate the amount of time tasks take to complete).

### 3) Consult Your Calendar

Like most of you, our calendars are jam-packed and the further we get into the term, the less time we have available. When someone makes a request, ask yourself: what specific day and time do I have available to complete this task? Not in a general sense, but literally what day and what period of time are available in your calendar for this activity? Given that you’re not going to compromise your daily writing, research time, or class time, this often makes the decision clear and easy. If you can’t schedule it in your calendar, then you don’t have time to do it.

### 4) Ask Yourself: Why Would I Say "Yes"?

For a long time, "yes" was an unconscious default response. We automatically responded "yes" and thought we had to have a special reason to say "no." Then each term, we ended up spending too much time on service, got exhausted, and became angry, resentful, and inter-personally unpleasant. Finally, we started asking ourselves: "Why do you keep saying yes all the time?" For Kerry Ann, it was some combination of bad gender socialization, wanting to please people who had power over her, trying to avoid the punishment she imagined would occur if she said "no," overcompensating for other aspects of her work where she felt less
confident, trying to correct long-standing historical and structural inequalities at her institution, and seeking to nullify all negative stereotypes by being super-minority-faculty-member. With all those intentions operating under the surface, no wonder she kept saying "yes" to every request or alternatively, feeling intense guilt, shame, and disappointment on the few occasions she said "no." Thankfully, once Kerry Ann became aware of why she said "yes" so often, she was able to develop new criteria for evaluating requests. She’s flipped the default upside down. Now her automatic response is "no," and she requires a special reason to say "yes" (but don't worry, there are still plenty of those!).

5) Figure Out How to Say "No" And Do It.

There are so many ways to say "no," and we're always shocked by how easily people accept "no" for an answer and move on to find someone else to accommodate their request. You could say "no" in any of the following ways:

- "That sounds like a really great opportunity, but I just can't take on any additional commitments at this time."
- "I am in the middle of __________, __________, and __________ [fill in the blanks with your most status-enhancing and high-profile service commitments], and if I hope to get tenure, I'm unable to take on any additional service."
- "I'm not the best person for this. Why don't you ask ______________?"
- "If you can find a way to eliminate one of my existing service obligations, I will consider your request."
- "No." [Look the asker in the eye and sit in silence].

In this moment when COVID-19 is adversely affecting so many aspects of our lives, no one should judge you for saying "no" to a request.

6) Serve Strategically

Finally, the best advice a mentor gave us was to be strategic about service. That means getting clear about what percentage of your tenure and promotion evaluation will be based on service (this is hard, we know). It doesn’t have to be perfectly precise, but whatever the percentage is, use it as a rough guideline for how much time you can spend on service each week. If service only counts as
10% of your promotion criteria, then spending anything more than 4-6 hours per week on service activities means you’re over-functioning in that area. The percentage will be different according to your institutional type and culture, but once you know approximately how much time you can spend on service each week, then say "yes" only to the things that fit your broader agenda or make substantive sense for your participation.

Learning how, when, and why to "just say no" isn’t easy; it takes time, practice, and clarity. But doing so is an important part of making time for the things that really matter to your long-term success and keeping you from getting burned out while on the tenure-track.

**The Weekly Challenge**

This week, we challenge you to do the following:

- If you feel overwhelmed by service commitments (or aren't happy with your research and writing productivity), patiently ask yourself why you say "yes" so frequently.
- Gently acknowledge that the reality of life on the tenure-track is that you will ALWAYS have more service requests than time to fulfill them.
- For one week, say "no" to EVERY new request you receive (just to see what it feels like).
- With each request, let "no" be your default response, and wait for a reason to say "yes."
- If that seems too challenging, then at least commit to reviewing your calendar and existing tasks before saying "yes" to any new commitments.
- Re-commit yourself to at least 30 minutes each day for your writing.
- If you haven't *[created a strategic plan]*, it's not too late.
- If you want to go deeper into the *[Art of Saying No]*, why not watch our core curriculum webinar recording?

We hope this week brings you insight into the reasons why you say "yes" so frequently and the strength to say "no" often, confidently, and without guilt.