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When and How to Say NO

Judy Walker

Mathematicians are often compared to toddlers in that we spend our professional lives asking why. Knowing that a theorem is true isn't enough for us: we must know why it is true. This is the entire basis for the idea of mathematical proof, and it's the drive that keeps us going.

Unfortunately, mathematicians—like most academics—tend to be unlike toddlers in a different way: While any parent of a toddler will tell you that the most common word they hear from their child is "No," we find it very difficult to use that word ourselves. This is especially true of, and can be especially dangerous for, those early in their careers. When we look at the particular case of female faculty, or faculty from other groups traditionally underrepresented in mathematics or in academia more generally, the problem becomes even more acute: these individuals tend to be asked to do an inordinate amount of service by well-meaning colleagues and institutions who are concerned about having diverse perspectives represented. Adding in the informal and sometimes invisible work that these individuals often take on in mentoring students from minoritized groups can make the situation untenable. In this short piece, I offer some advice, especially for early-career mathematicians, about saying "no."

Sometimes it's good to say "yes." Saying "yes" to service commitments can make you feel more connected to your institution, allow you to meet peers from across campus, and serve as a mechanism to get yourself known by people who may eventually be reviewing your file for tenure and/or promotion. Service work can also be interesting and both personally and professionally rewarding. Getting involved in a project about which you feel passionate can be an incredibly fulfilling experience.

But you should say "no" if the above conditions don't apply. Generally speaking, if the work you're being asked to do isn't interesting to you, say "no." If you don't have time to do the work, say "no." And, especially, if you won't be rewarded for doing the work, say "no."

Deciding whether work is interesting, how much time it will take, and whether it will be viewed as valuable and rewarded can be difficult for the brand-new faculty member, and high-quality mentoring is crucial here. Seek advice from your department chair or another senior member of the faculty, as these individuals ought to be able to offer insights that will help you decide whether a particular committee assignment will be interesting and/or time-consuming. Most importantly, because they are the ones who will be evaluating you, they will be able to tell you whether the work will be valued.

Again, there are definitely situations in which saying "yes" is absolutely the right move. In my own career, I said "yes" as a second-year assistant professor to spearheading an effort to nominate my department for the Presidential Award for Excellence in Science, Mathematics, and Engineering Mentoring. We won that award, and it led to an opportunity for me to say "yes" to cofounding the Nebraska Conference for Undergraduate Women in Mathematics and to speaking at various conferences and workshops about our department's successful track record in mentoring female PhD students. Eventually I said "yes" to being the lead PI on a large NSF mentoring grant; to being graduate chair, and then department chair; and now to my current upper-level academic leadership position. At the same time, I was saying "yes" to research collaborations, and to organizing research conferences, and to speaking at conferences and at other institutions. But I was also saying "no" to opportunities that I didn't find interesting, that I didn't sense would be valued, or, more often, that I simply didn't have time to do.

So let's say that you've decided that the right answer to a particular request is "no." Actually saying "no" can be very difficult, for a number of reasons: we don't want to disappoint people; we don't want people to think we're not good colleagues; we don't want to be seen as putting our own self-interest above the interests of our department or institution. Here are several strategies to help you say "no."

Avoid giving a response on the spot. This is easy if the request comes via email: simply resist the urge to respond as soon as the email arrives and instead give yourself an opportunity to think through the request. If the request is made in person, respond with something like "Thank you for thinking of me. Can I have a day to check my other commitments and get back to you?" This will give you an opportunity to think through the request rather than giving a gut-reaction "yes." Ask yourself: Is it interesting? Do

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I have time to do it? Will it be rewarded? If the answers to these questions are "yes," say "yes." Otherwise, say "no."

Form an "N-Committee." This idea, taken from the National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity's "The Art of Saying 'No'" Monday Motivator,[1] suggests that you be very deliberate about seeking mentorship specifically for the purpose of deciding what tasks to take on. Your N-Committee might include your department chair, a trusted senior colleague, or even peers who are at the same stage of their careers as you are. If someone seems to be telling you often that you're saying "yes" too much, ask them to be on your N-Committee. They will surely say "yes" (see what I did there?). Once you have your N-Committee, resolve to consult it before responding to any new requests.

Rely on your prior "yes" responses. You can't say "no" to everything, nor should you want to. Find something that interests you, that you have time to do, and—most importantly for this particular purpose—that will be valued by your colleagues and department/campus leadership, and say "yes" to that. Then when you are asked to do something that doesn't interest you, that you don't have time to do, or that you are convinced won't be valued, use your previous "yes" as a rationale for saying "no": "I'm very sorry that I can't take this on. I'm already doing _____."

Think of your career as a book with many chapters. This is another recommendation from the National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity's "The Art of Saying 'No'" Monday Motivator, and adopting it can be incredibly freeing. The idea is to take a long-term view of your career: over the course of your career, you can do everything you want to do, but you don't have to do it all at once. Your early-career years are the early chapters, and these chapters should be focused on the work you need to do to secure tenure and/or promotion. If you're in a research-focused position, then your early chapters will necessarily focus on your research: proving and writing up results, submitting grant proposals, and the like. You'll almost surely also want and need to pay some attention to teaching, but this may not need to be your highest priority in this section of your book. On the other hand, if you're in a teaching-oriented position, then your early chapters will necessarily focus on your teaching and mentoring of students, and you may need to postpone some of your research projects to a later section of your book. Things like mentoring other faculty, academic leadership, and serious committee work in most cases will be reserved for your later chapters. Seek advice from your department chair and senior colleagues about how your book should be structured. This approach can make saying "no" easier, because what you're really saying is "not right now."

Make "no" your default. This is another piece of advice from the National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity, this time from the Monday Motivator "Just Say No." As an early-career faculty member, you've got a lot on your plate already. When a new request comes in, search for a good reason to say "yes." If you can't find one, channel your inner toddler and just say "no."

Judy Walker

Credits

Author photo is courtesy of Greg Nathan/University of Nebraska–Lincoln.

BAD Teaching Evaluations—What Now?

Harriet Pollatsek

Love them or hate them, student evaluations of teaching are part of academic life. When they are positive, we feel better. When they are negative, we feel worse. But what can we *do* about them?

Caveats

Student evaluations of teaching are deeply flawed tools. Results can be improved by strategically administered chocolate or jokes. More troubling, results can reflect students' gender, race, or age biases.[2] Some evaluation forms only elicit numerical rankings, while others give students the opportunity to write in some depth about their reactions. (If yours include some thoughtful written responses, you are fortunate.)

Departments and institutions also differ in the additional means they use to assess teaching effectiveness, such as classroom visits, syllabi, teaching portfolios, and letters

[1] *The Monday Motivators are a members-only resource provided by the National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity,* https://www.facultydiversity.org.

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[2] *My colleague Alanna Hoyer-Leitzel has put together a helpful webpage about student evaluations of teaching (SET) for her students that addresses this issue and encourages students to make constructive use of SET:* www.mtholyoke.edu/~ahoyerle/misc/SET.html.

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