

Service and Gender Inequity among Faculty

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ABSTRACT This article describes social structural inequities in the academy that contribute to gender imbalances in faculty service demands, which can slow women's career advancement. The author criticizes as ill-considered and ineffective the popular notion that the solution rests with individual female faculty, who should "just say no" to service. Instead, she proposes structural and cultural solutions to this systemic problem, including a reevaluation of faculty labor required to maintain the day-to-day operation of institutions of higher learning and research.

Editor's Note: This article is part of a short series organized by the Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession (CSWP) on topics relevant for gender and politics. This article reflects the CSWP's efforts to move the conversation on gender inequity beyond the old paradigm of the 1970s to consider the often-subtle structural and cultural barriers toward full equality in academia. We encourage other scholars to contact the CSWP if they have work to share. —Kristen Monroe for the CSWP

Women's advancement in university faculty positions is currently stalled relative to men's (Bird forthcoming; Martin 1990; Monroe and Chiu 2010; Park 1996; Rosser 2004; Rosser and Lane 2002; University of California, Office of the President 2003). Female faculty perform a disproportionate share of care labor and "institutional housekeeping," while men devote less time to teaching and service and more to research (Bird, Litt, and Wang 2004; Bird forthcoming; Morley and Walsh 1995). Female faculty of color are especially overused in service roles and as mentors (Turner 2002). Gender inequities in the distribution of service occur despite the counseling of female faculty to "Just Say No" to service and focus on research (e.g., Hogan 2010). Clearly, the "Just Say No" approach has not been successful.

In this article, I ask how gendered structural conditions undermine the success of the "Just Say No" approach to service and, further, obscure and exacerbate faculty gender inequity. Many explanations for faculty gender inequity are "women-centered," emphasizing women's behavior, choices, abilities, and biology (Rosser 2004, 52; see also Summers 2005) and overlooking sys-

temic barriers to women's equality, such as organizational structures, policies, practices, norms, and presumptions, that appear gender-neutral but in reality have gendered effects that promote men's careers or hurt those of women (Bird forthcoming; Britton 2000). Institutional barriers to gender equality are embedded in everyday taken-for-granted university practices, making them difficult to recognize, let alone be transformed (Bird forthcoming; Sturm 2006). Given the complexity of the barriers to faculty gender equity, it is easier to focus on individual-level responsibility, such as the "Just Say No" to service approach. However, individual solutions to systemic problems not only fail, but also frequently result in the blaming of victims (Ryan 1976).

The demand for women's service is especially acute at universities emphasizing shared governance. This demand is often overlooked when successful, senior, mostly male colleagues denigrate faculty (disproportionately female and/or non-white) for spending too much time with students, performing "too much service," and not "just saying no" to service. The presumption that faculty service commitments and student mentoring are optional and under faculty control diverts attention from how structural inequities and bureaucratic hierarchies breed gender differentials in service labor and contribute to women's slower advancement in faculty careers.

HOW GENDER STRUCTURAL INEQUITIES INCREASE DEMANDS FOR FEMALE FACULTY'S SERVICE

At every faculty rank, men outnumber women, with the proportion of women being lowest among full professors. At the most prestigious universities with very high research activity, women account for slightly more than one-third of all faculty (36%). Female full professors are 7% of the total faculty on those campuses compared with the 28% of total faculty who are male full professors (Monroe and Chiu 2010). This gender disparity and the need for

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gender diversity on committees increases pressure on women to serve; those who decline service requests are often asked to reconsider, as no other woman is available or qualified. Women who refuse service work transfer the burden to other female faculty, whose resentment they might inspire. Men do not face this structural pressure and are thus freer to “just say no” and criticize faculty who do too much rather than too little service. The gendered university structure thus pushes and pulls women in entirely different ways than it does men (Bird forthcoming).

The low number of female faculty and their concentration in junior ranks creates pressure for them to serve earlier in their careers. Many research-oriented universities try to protect junior faculty from service, but rules rarely prohibit administrators and higher-ranked faculty from asking junior women to do service.

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Junior faculty who want to limit their service load are forced to say no to senior colleagues and administrators who issue service requests, creating a classic double-bind situation: saying “no” communicates disrespect to higher-ranked colleagues, while saying “yes” saps time and energy for research. Protection against high service loads dissipates with tenure, when women can be hit with a bevy of requests.

The need for gender diversity and the small pool of female full professors means that women often serve above their skill level as the most junior and least experienced members of committees with heavy and specialized workloads. Furthermore, their lack of access to “old boy” networks in which information about campus politics and policies is exchanged not only hampers their efforts at remedial learning, but also undermines their social capital.¹ These factors mean that women have to spend more time than men in comparable service roles.

WHY WOMEN SAY YES TO SERVICE

Systemic gender inequities constrain women’s ability to “just say no” to service. Asked to serve more often, they must say “no” over and over to limit their service load. Being asked more increases feelings of obligation and guilt, especially if told no one else is available to serve. Women, who are socialized to be cooperative, are often reluctant to refuse requests for service (Gartrell 2008). Additionally, they can feel honored to serve on important, highly visible committees and personally invested when the service solicited is on behalf of women’s interests, like gender equity. Saying “no” can mean refusing to address problems that women face on campus, contradicting feminist values of connection with other women, and transferring the service burden to other female faculty.

Despite structural inequities, it is not the system but the individual women who are blamed and punished when their service

workload hurts their research productivity. They might be viewed as mismanaging their career and blame themselves, resulting in lower self-confidence. Because the “Just Say No” to service discourse obfuscates the systemic source of women’s troubles and holds them personally responsible, it represents a type of “doublethink.” Faculty service labor is *not* optional, nonessential, unskilled labor; rather, it is vital to the day-to-day and long-term operation of the university. Yet it is treated as volunteer work when not performed by high-paid administrators. Casting service labor as optional and undeserving of recognition, reward, or remuneration hurts not only women but also keeps the salaries of all faculty down and contributes to an unnecessarily harsh workplace. The reluctance of female professionals to “say no” is related to positive traits like empathy, thoughtfulness, and sensitivity

(Gartrell 2008). Because these traits are essential for creating community, high morale, effective communication, and successful leadership, they need to be rewarded, or else they will be in short supply in the academic workplace.

COMPARISON WITH THE “JUST SAY NO” TO DRUGS MORALITY CAMPAIGN

The illogic of the “Just Say No” to service discourse is even clearer when compared to the “Just Say No to Drugs” campaign (Mackey-Kallis and Hahn 1991). While drug pushers are criminalized as evil wrongdoers, academic “service pushers” are neither demonized nor blamed. Indeed, they are among the highest status members of the academy. Like drug pushers, however, “service pushers” often misrepresent the negative effects of that which they push by overestimating the rewards and underestimating the costs.

The motto of the “war on drugs” is “A Drug-Free World: We Can Do It.” Should the rallying cry for the “war on service” be “A Service-Free University: We Can Do It”? As the notion of a “service-free” university is absurd, instead of the “Just Say No” approach, we ought to consider a new motto: “Just Don’t Ask!” If you do ask, and if I say yes, be prepared to acknowledge and reward my service labor. Otherwise, “Just Don’t Ask!”

FROM INDIVIDUAL TO SYSTEMIC REMEDIES

Nothing short of a dramatic cultural shift in the meaning and value given to service labor is necessary if we are to forge gender equity among faculty. Faculty need to resist the “Just Say No” to service discourse and educate those who engage it about how the denigration of service labor promotes institutional gender discrimination. Those faculty saddled with high service loads should not be demeaned or punished with stagnating careers, but rather rewarded with course releases, pay raises, research assistance, or

similar forms of compensation. Administrators are compensated for a high service load; why should the situation be different for faculty? Faculty can request better accountability among “service pushers” and a more equitable distribution of service labor. For example, instead of overrecruiting from the smaller pool of female faculty in trying to get women’s interests represented on committees, we can enlist the service of male faculty who are known to be committed to gender equity. After all, it is this commitment, rather than gender per se, that creates a well-rounded committee. Last, and most important, we need programs designed to train faculty and administrators about gendered organizational structures and how to “see” systemic gender inequity (Bird forthcoming). Only then will they be able to understand the need for systemic solutions to systemic problems. ■

NOTE

1. Female faculty partnered with male faculty or administrators who have access to “old boy” networks can have more information, power, and protection from sexism than other female faculty. They can face resentment as “Aunt Janes” from female colleagues if they do not acknowledge their relative privilege, support other female faculty, or address issues of gender inequity in the academy.

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