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Get Yourself a NO Committee

Guest post by *[Vilna Bash-Treitler](#)*, Professor and Chair of the Department of Black and Latino Studies at Baruch College, and Professor in the Sociology Program at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York

I have for several years now made a resolution not to work so hard in the coming year. I mostly fail to keep this resolution.

I have overworked for several years now. I worked so much and so hard that when I had a sabbatical, I overworked then too – and I didn't realize it until my husband asked "What are you doing???" when I would be in my bright but bleak foreign-city office weekends and evenings. Writing, while enormously difficult, was NOT my problem. It was saying no.

I had said "yes" to too many things for too long. Sure, all these opportunities sounded great when I was asked to do them, and the deadlines were so far into the future. After a while, deadlines jam up upon one another in ways that couldn't be anticipated at the time "yes" is being said. I wanted to build a successful career, but I only slowly realized that instead I was probably building the shortcut to a cardiac unit. I had to figure out a new approach to choosing among the opportunities that trickled my way as I went from graduate student to assistant-, associate-, and then full-professor. I realized that I just could not be trusted to figure out what I should or should not be doing because everything looked like a good opportunity for networking or getting a line on the CV. Lines on the CV are what we all want and need, right?

We also need some limits.

Forming a "No Committee" helped me get perspective on my limits. Let me tell you about my No Committee. On it, I have two friends who are both professors and the third person is my life partner. Their qualifications: they care about me, they know the academy well enough to know what challenges are there for me, and they keep up with me so that they know how much is too much for me to handle.

How do I use them? When an opportunity comes to me, I send them an email with the subject line "Here's one for the No Committee" and ask them for their advice. In the email I describe the opportunity, what information I have about what it entails (and whether I can trust the information I have), and further, I normally list all my reasons for saying yes to this thing plus whatever doubts I might have, and I hit "send." Then I wait. I think the subject line tells them enough that they each tend to

answer rather quickly. It probably also helps that I always listen to their advice. I have not yet ignored the No Committee's vote. That is, if they say no to me, I say no to the opportunity. Seriously. As I said, these are people who care deeply about me, and care less about my ambition or my insecurities which drive me to say yes more than I should. The one time in 2015 when I didn't ask their advice, I said yes to something I regret saying yes to! And once, I sent them information about an opportunity that I didn't want to take, and they outvoted me and each told me that I had to do it – and can you believe they were right??? Doing that thing has paid off in ways I surely couldn't anticipate at the time.

So, form a No Committee for the New Year, and see where it gets you. How?

- First, your committee must have an odd number of people. I find three to be perfect. While a five-person committee would probably work, I imagine you'd have to wait longer to get five answers to your questions. In any event, you need always to have a clear answer, and even numbers leave you at risk for tied votes. A clear majority vote is probably more helpful.
- Second, choose committee members who have three qualities. First, they must care deeply about your well-being, and make that paramount. Second, they must understand the quirks of the academy. By this I mean that have to get why you have to do extra work for which you are not directly paid, like service obligations, taking on mentoring or advising roles, or teaching a new prep that might lead you down some new professional roads. They might also get why you'd do the academic equivalent of herding squirrels, like organizing conferences, or contributing to or putting together an edited volume. (For the love of marshmallows, think twice before you do these last two things!) And they have to understand the personalities of the decision-makers and gatekeepers around you so that they get why moves in certain directions might be good/bad for you. And third, they have to be able to keep confidences.
- Third, choose people who answer their email.
- Finally, when you contact your people, be totally honest about why you want to or don't want to do something. They can only help you if you give them full information.

Make your first new year's resolution be "I will form and use my No Committee!" and see where it gets you. Happy new year!