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Commentary

Clinical pharmacy academic career transitions: Viewpoints from the field
Part 3: Learning when and how to say yes

Meghan N. Jeffres[a,*], Allison B. Blackmer[a], Angela M. Thompson[a], Ashley E. Glode[a], Nila Mahyari[b,1], Megan Thompson[a]

[a] Department of Clinical Pharmacy, University of Colorado Skaggs School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences, Mail Stop C238 E. Montview Blvd, Aurora, CO 80045, United States
[b] Merz North America, United States

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ABSTRACT

The six authors of this commentary series, who have recently transitioned into or within an academic career, discuss challenging aspects of an academic career change. This is Part 3 of a three-part commentary series that focuses on when and how to say yes to the multitude of opportunities available to pharmacy practice faculty. Part 1 discusses feedback, evaluation, and advancement. Part 2 explains distribution of effort (DOE) and how to marry the different components of teaching, research, and service. While the entire series is intended to be read in continuity, faculty, or those interested in pursuing a career in pharmacy academia, can refer to Part 3 as a reference on how to screen opportunities within academia to maximize professional and personal growth and minimize career burnout. Schools of pharmacy may utilize this as a tool for new faculty members during orientation to help ensure faculty success.

Introduction

In academic pharmacy, there is a plethora of opportunity. One challenge faced by those making academic career transitions, either into a first academic role or between academic roles at different institutions, is evaluating and pursuing the "right" opportunities. To avoid faculty from becoming overwhelmed and potentially dissatisfied, common advice given to those new to academia is to say no on a regular basis.[1–3] While the intention of this advice is good, repeatedly saying no at any career stage is not without risk. Saying no can result in a faculty member being perceived as a poor team player, stifle relationships, and cause one to lose out on future opportunities. Rather than learning to say no, the authors of this commentary recommend that faculty should learn *when and how to say yes.*

Commentary

When to say yes

Baseline skills and knowledge, or the lack thereof, should initially guide new faculty about when to say yes. Faculty new to the

* Corresponding author.
[1] (Regional Medical Manager), Address at time of authorship: 1570 Grant Street, Denver, CO 80203, United States.
E-mail address: Meghan.Jeffres@ucdenver.edu (M.N. Jeffres).

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world of academia should pursue opportunities that are unique to the academic environment and encourage student engagement (e.g., precepting at student health fairs, judging a student competition, co-advising or mentoring a student organization).[3] These opportunities allow the individual to establish relationships with the student body during the initial transitional period. These do not need to be long-term commitments. Over time they can be limited to include causes that provide the most personal/professional satisfaction and growth to the faculty member. Additional yes answers should be reserved for opportunities that help the individual get to know the institution's policies and procedures. For example, say yes to observing at least one meeting of each standing committee within the school. This initial investment will allow new faculty to learn about policies and procedures within the institution and develop relationships with faculty peers. Additionally, the faculty member will be more informed about which committee to join if given the opportunity to pick.

If research is a new responsibility for faculty, saying yes when asked to collaborate in pilot studies, grant submissions, review articles, or other scholarly pursuits is advisable. The ideal situation would be: 1) the subject area is of interest; 2) the requestor is a successful researcher; and 3) the requestor is willing to provide mentorship throughout the project. This trifecta makes saying yes an easy choice. Even in the setting where only two of the above can be met, saying yes is still recommended as there is a significant upside to the new collaboration even if it is outside the faculty member's area of interest or the mentor is unable to provide significant mentorship. Faculty members should be wary of invitations to collaborate in which the requestor does not have a record of successful project completion, especially if the faculty member is a relatively unskilled researcher. Projects co-lead by faculty with little to no research experience should seek out a more experienced mentor within or external to the school. Without guidance, methodology flaws are likely, and new faculty can invest hours on a project that is disproportionate to the results. For example, hundreds of hours may be spent on a research project that results in a poster rather than a manuscript.

Lastly, it is suggested to say yes to joining professional academic organizations both at the local and/or the national level to connect with a new network beyond the reach of the institution. These relationships often reap great personal and professional rewards as the faculty member grows and evolves. All 50 states and Puerto Rico have an association or society (www.naspa.us) and are often in need of active members to drive the mission of the organization. Membership and participation in a state's pharmacy association or society frequently results in opportunities to plan or speak at state meetings, create state legislative policy, and foster relationships with pharmacists outside of the academic world. Similar benefits can be gained from national organizations but there is likely more competition for committee membership or leadership positions. It is worth noting that there is always plenty of committee work to be done and can quickly monopolize the schedule of an eager new faculty member. It is perfectly acceptable to be a member (voting or non-voting) of a committee, rather than taking on a leadership position within the committee or volunteering for large tasks, assignments, or projects during the first year of service.

The bucket approach to saying yes

For faculty who struggle with saying yes to everything and feel guilty when saying no, the bucket approach can help assess what opportunities should get a yes. In the bucket approach faculty identify three areas, or buckets, of focus. The goal is to marry all responsibilities of a faculty member as discussed in "Part 2: Understanding and Balancing of Distribution of Effort." The purpose of a limited number of buckets is ensuring that the faculty member gains depth of experience and expertise in a particular area or areas rather than learning a little about many different areas. Buckets can be broad or narrow focus areas. It is common for new faculty to have broader buckets that narrow with time and expertise in each topic. (Fig. 1) One example of three broad buckets, typical of new faculty, are infectious diseases, antimicrobial adverse reactions, and teaching strategies. Over time and career evolution, in the analogy these buckets are narrowed to "outcomes of Gram-negative resistance," "antibiotic allergies," and "active learning in infectious diseases education." As a career progresses some buckets are dropped to dedicate more time to others.

The bucket system is helpful even for established faculty who identify as overwhelmed. After creating bucket topics, faculty should list all current responsibilities and projects and organize them according to topic. Projects and responsibilities outside of the three preferred bucket topics should be evaluated for abonnement if possible. If the outlying responsibilities are necessary for job security, sharing or swapping responsibility with a colleague may be possible. For example, faculty assigned to coordinate or teach a class that is not a bucket topic can pursue switching for a course within the buckets. Through collaboration with the school and a clinical practice site, a faculty may be able to switch the patient populations or create a new service at the site that more closely mirrors bucket topics.

One author initiated the bucket system after feeling like her career was not adequately focused. After sorting all responsibilities into buckets, she realized that dozens of buckets would be needed to adequately fit all current projects, which was not reasonable or practical. Responsibilities beyond the three bucket topics were then ranked as: need to do, want to do, do not need or want to do. The "need to do" and the highest ranking "want to do" responsibilities remained with the goal or refining them into bucket topics. All other commitments were off-loaded or abandoned.

The visualization of dedicated areas of interest can help faculty first realize primary areas of focus, and then to stick to those areas. This then decreases the chance of saying yes to an exciting project without first assessing if it fits into a bucket. It is important to keep in mind that buckets should evolve based on internal (personal satisfaction) and external feedback (need for the work output).

The bucket approach may not work or appeal to all faculty. The idea of identifying and committing to a limited number of bucket topics can be anxiety inducing. An additional strategy is to seek advice from multiple mentors and experienced faculty. Mentors can provide insight and guidance about selecting career themes and how to best marry all aspects of a faculty members DOE. Mentors within the school can also provide background information about areas of interest of other faculty. With this information new faculty can either seek to collaborate with and/or differentiate from another's areas of focus. Additional external mentors within the new faculty's area of interest can give strategic advice about niches worthy of focus.