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## Professional Etiquette for the Mature Economist

By DANIEL S. HAMERMESH \*

This paper offers guidelines for professional behavior in circumstances that one confronts increasingly as seniority is acquired. Elsewhere (Hamermesh, 1992) I have offered suggestions for professional etiquette in situations facing newly minted Ph.D. economists.

### I. Writing References

The purpose of these letters is to help the individual obtain a job. When your commitment to the person is very weak, refuse to write rather than providing a letter that guarantees the subject a rejection. The decision is especially delicate when a colleague asks for a recommendation. In that case, agree to write, but end the letter by stating that you hope the colleague stays. (Even if you want the colleague to leave, anything less than admiration reduces the chance of achieving your mutual goal.) If the colleague is someone who has been denied tenure, refusing to write is particularly odious.

In your letter:

Don't "puff"—exaggerate the person's achievements and potential. If some claims are grossly inconsistent with the written record, even your correct statements will be ignored. Worse still, they will generate a negative dynamic spillover onto your future letters, as with the distinguished

economist who each year claimed a student was, "the best I have ever had."

Don't be gratuitous—especially if you must make comparisons. One recommendation for a new Ph.D. stated that he, "is clearly better than two young tenure-track economists at [school X]," to which the letter was addressed.

Don't illustrate your point in a way that reduces the subject's chance of obtaining a position. One letter claimed, "She has not done any teaching here; but she did babysit for my children, and she did a very good job, so I believe she will be a good teacher."

Don't contradict yourself, an increasing possibility as you write more letters. In letters for three different candidates one economist stated that the subject was "the best student we have this year."

More schools are seeking letters from outside reviewers as part of the promotion/tenure process. (Some now even request letters to reappoint an assistant professor for a second three or four years.) In most cases these letters are designed as much for the higher administration as for the candidate's colleagues.

You are under no obligation to comply with a request for a promotion letter. It is acceptable to state that you are busy. A lame but perhaps believable excuse is that you no longer respond to requests because, "...recent court decisions have destroyed confidentiality." Whatever your excuse, do suggest alternative writers. In no case should you state that you have not heard of the person, unless you wish to harm the subject's chances. If you agree to write, be sure to meet the deadline. Most administrators view the absence of sufficient letters as negative evidence, so your delay is not neutral.

A reasonable model letter starts off stating your acquaintance with the subject and

<sup>†</sup>*Discussants:* Edward Lazear, Stanford University and NBER; Michael Rothschild, University of California-San Diego. Orley Ashenfelter (Princeton University and NBER) also presented a paper, "An Editor's Perspective on Publication," but elected not to publish the work here.

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familiarity with his or her research. (Stating, "I was not familiar with any of his work before receiving your request," is extremely damning.) It then summarizes the main scholarly contributions, placing them in the perspective of the entire subfield. After that, or at least somewhere in the letter, it discusses in some detail several of the publications. (Otherwise the reader may conclude that you have not actually looked at the candidate's work.)

Many requests ask specifically for comparisons with other researchers. It is not necessary to make them; but if you do, be careful about the set you are using (particularly the subfield and the Ph.D. cohort):

Don't make a ranking that most economists would view as bizarre.

Don't make comparisons that involve your own junior colleagues, as you are likely to be biased in their favor.

Don't make comparisons to anyone currently at the department to which you are writing. Do not write, for example, "Over the long run my guess is that Professor X's impact will be smaller than Professor Y's [in your Department]."

Many requests ask something like, "Would your institution be likely to grant tenure in this case," or "Is his research output consistent with his holding tenure in a department of our quality?" If you answer these questions, you implicitly compare standards at your school and the school requesting the evaluation, absent knowledge of that school's standards. Without making these comparisons you can indicate subtly that a given record might be outstanding at Podunk State or insufficient at Snob U. To tailor your response explicitly to the perceived quality of the school seeking your advice is patronizing in the one case and fawning in the other.

## II. Discussing Research

A discussant should avoid nastiness and remember that the purpose is to improve the quality of the research and increase understanding of the subject among the

program's participants. The discussant's tone should be geared to the level of the author: a gentler tone is in order for a more junior author. In most cases a junior author will take your comments more seriously and be more disheartened by even the appearance of any gratuitous comments. President Truman once remarked how bad he felt after telling a high-school student that his question was not very clever.

Don't intersperse "in" jokes and obscure nonsubstantive references, since they necessarily exclude people without your experiences.

Don't address your comments to one author if others are present. Addressing a better-known coauthor implies that the junior coauthor was merely an assistant. Aside from perhaps being incorrect, that tack insults the junior coauthor and creates an oral "Matthew effect" (Robert Merton, 1968).

If you are making a technical point, be very sure you are correct. Audiences tend to assume you are right, so that an error guarantees you are misleading people.

Don't use the discussant's role as a forum for your own results. You were invited to improve someone else's work, not to hawk your own wares. If your research is relevant, mention it, but only to enhance understanding of the paper you are discussing.

Ideally, and occasionally, a paper will actually be received several weeks or more in advance of the presentation. If you are prompt, you are tempted to communicate questions/problems to the author before the session. If the problems are major and you are going to be critical, indulge the temptation. That will improve the discussion and add to the paper's eventual quality. Do not, though, offer to "tell [the author] the nine problems I have with your paper," on the night before the session. This leaves the author no time to consider your comments carefully, and this thoughtless offer can destroy a junior author's confidence in presenting the paper.

Unfortunately, you often receive the paper a very few days before the conference (or even on the day of the presentation). You are under no obligation to discuss fully such a tardy paper. The author obviously has no real interest in your comments and no right to expect you to lose sleep working through the paper. At a small meeting where the main purpose is to provide comments to the author, refuse to take the time allotted to you. Simply say, "The paper is interesting, and the topic is important, but I just received it last night." Then sit down. This might not improve the author's future behavior, but at least it will leave more time for discussion of papers by more responsible authors. At a larger conference where the main purpose is enlightening the audience, a fuller but still abbreviated set of comments is in order.

### III. Writing and Presenting Papers

Senior economists have opportunities to travel to present research, attend conferences and meet other researchers that are the envy of junior colleagues. Despite your possible indebtedness to others:

Don't list immense numbers of people who offered helpful comments on the work at various stages. (The recent record in journals was 30 people in one footnote.) Doing so equates someone who gave fundamental aid with others whose help was less important.

Don't list large numbers of venues where you presented the work. If they are numerous, write, "... at seminars at many institutions." The purpose is to show that people have seen the paper, not to publish your itineraries. (The recent record was 26 separate locations.)

A leading researcher is often invited to present a research paper at a much less distinguished institution than is customary on his or her usual circuit. A frequent practice is to present a "dummied-up" version of one's research, or to offer a low-level lecture appropriate to a class in intermediate theory. This insults the audience and

makes the trip useless for your own research. If you expect the audience to be devoid of talent, insist on a more general forum. In fact, institutions far below yours in average quality may have economists of some distinction, and you will often receive comments that are useful and original.

If you have accepted an invitation to present your work at a conference or meeting and find that you do not wish to attend, cancel with a kindly refusal at least several weeks in advance.

Don't send a young colleague "as my personal representative," or your graduate student "because I will be out of the country," without *explicit prior approval* from the conference organizer and session chair.

As with the tardy author, the session time can be used productively by others. While deputizing junior colleagues or graduate students offers them useful exposure, this bait-and-switch tactic is an insult to the session organizer and to others on the session. A discussant is justified in ignoring such a paper so long as he or she makes it clear that the culprit is the self-important absent senior researcher, not the student or junior colleague.

If more than one coauthor is present at a seminar, the senior or more talkative author needs to exhibit self-control. Having the junior author present the work is fine, if you can avoid repeated interruptions and an eventual (hostile?) take-over of the session. A good approach is for each author to present part of the paper, with the other observing a Trappist silence.

### IV. Constructing a Résumé

Our curricula vitae (CV's) are used for a variety of professional purposes. These change as we mature, as do the kinds of items that are appropriately listed on a CV. Your CV should exhibit some minimal background information and offer evidence on the professional activities that make you unique. A good general rule is to exclude activities that are routine for someone of your experience and stature (as indicated by your complete list of publications).

Don't begin with a summary or abstract of your vita (as on one vita that began, "During a distinguished academic career..."). *Res ipsa loquitur* applies to résumés as well as to negligence cases.

Don't list the journals for which you have refereed. A widely published senior researcher is assumed to have refereed widely.

Don't list all the seminars you have presented and conferences you have attended. If you have a large publication list, don't list any. (One senior economist has a 40-page CV, of which 25 pages are a life-history of professional presentations.) The CV is not a travel diary.

Don't list any of your media appearances on your CV, unless you seek a position with CNN. (One economist with a large reputation includes interviews with local radio stations and newspaper references to his research.)

More difficult issues arise over what demographic information to include. A complete history is grotesquely out of place. Including, as did one vita, the name of and date of marriage to one's first spouse, the data of divorce, the same information for one's second spouse, and the names and birth dates of one's children, is absurd. One approach includes only age, marital status, and number of children. But since none of these should be relevant professionally, excluding *all* demographic information makes sense. Why indulge the reader's ageism, sexism, or (the neologistic) "parentism"?

Public service and miscellaneous awards belong on a CV, but only if they are relevant and unexpected. It is appropriate to specify one's formal education, including dates degrees were obtained, but listing a secondary school (or, as an associate professor did, that one was class valedictorian) is callow. Even listing your dissertation title and advisor after you have attained tenure is out of place. A complete chronological list of post-baccalaureate academic and other positions is essential. Titles and dates of grants should be included (but not their monetary amounts).

There are many reasonable ways to list publications. One appealing method demonstrates that you are currently active and indicates that common threads run through your research by listing publications in reverse chronological order within several major subject categories. Designating one section for books and one for articles is not unreasonable, as is simply listing all publications in chronological order. However:

Don't list separate categories of books, refereed articles, unrefereed articles, chapters in volumes, etc. The distinctions should be obvious to any reader of the CV.

Don't number your publications. It is embarrassing if you have few; if you have many, it suggests that your major concern is with quantity.

#### V. Hunting for a Job?

A major use of a CV is to provide information to prospective employers. When you are already tenured, job-seeking should be done delicately. Before doing anything, consider why you are contemplating searching. Are you a category-I searcher, trying to improve your current position because of the common inability of academic administrators to pay for productivity without some external verification, or a category-II searcher, seeking to leave your present position? A third possibility, a belief that you should always be in the market, is a guaranteed way to spend huge amounts of time agonizing over job prospects, to obtain the reputation for being an academic nomad, and to antagonize colleagues and potential employers.

If the purpose is to better your current wages and working conditions, you should remember that there is a distinct possibility that your employer will call your bluff, leaving you with the choice of looking foolish or accepting a position you may not want. Therefore:

Don't visit another institution unless the *ex ante* subjective probability is at least 10 percent that you would take an offer if

it were better than your current circumstances.

Don't consider a position as an administrator unless you want one. A category-I searcher was recently quite surprised to find that his employer ignored this non-competing offer.

Don't present an offer to your own department from a school that is of substantially lower quality.

No offer is real until it is in writing from the competent authority at the school you have visited. (Indeed, in any dealings with academic administrators *get any agreement in writing*. Tomorrow's administrator may not feel bound by today's oral understanding.) Saying you are talking to another institution about a huge salary increase will cause your current employer to yawn. No sensible administrator should respond to an oral offer; and no decent administrator should ask you to leave your current job on the basis of mere talk. Present only a written offer, and don't expect a very rapid response (academic bureaucracies move slowly); but if it is speedy, wait awhile before declining the outside offer. One senior economist responded negatively two weeks after getting a written offer, leading people at the other school to the proper conclusion that they had been used to raise his salary.

If you seriously wish to change jobs:

Don't tell people that you are unhappy with your current salary. Doing so signals that you are a category-I searcher.

Don't demean yourself by accepting repeated visits before obtaining an offer, or by accepting a visiting position as an audition. Offered such a position, one distinguished professor said, "Professor X [who had moved there two years earlier] didn't serve an apprenticeship. Why should I?"

Do say you seek better colleagues or students, or a more attractive location. You should expect a second campus visit, with your spouse; and if you want a visiting po-

sition to examine the place in detail, ask for one; but both visits should come only after an offer has been made. Potential employers have your CV and have heard you lecture; if they still cannot decide on an offer, it is probably a bad match.

Throughout the search/negotiations remember that most job offers to tenured faculty are declined. This occurs partly because there are many successful category-I searchers. Partly, though, it stems from the increasing importance with age of non-job-related ties to one's current position and to the realization that one's most helpful colleagues and coworkers are scattered across the country (or even around the world). If you resign, though, leave your current employer sufficient time to rearrange schedules, doing so by May 15 (in accordance with AAUP's *Statement on Recruitment and Resignation of Faculty Members*, January 1961). In no case accept a job only to turn it down months later (or, as has occurred, on August 31, the day before the new job was to begin).

#### VI. First of All, Do No Harm

Like medical doctors, senior "talking doctors" exercise power over others. By recognizing this and avoiding abuse of this power you can make your colleagues' lives, especially junior ones', easier. On the positive side, diligently serving as a discussant and on review panels, commenting on junior colleagues' work, writing recommendations and offering prompt referee reports are reasonable expectations for a mature economist. That these enhance your own reputation shows that there is no conflict between the social and private benefits of proper professional behavior.

#### REFERENCES

- Hamermesh, Daniel, "The Young Economist's Guide to Professional Etiquette," *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Winter 1992, 6, 169-79.
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