



FOCUS

Professional development articles from
the American Economic Association's
Committee on the Status of Women
in the Economics Profession.

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About CSWEP

A standing committee of the American Economic Association, the Committee on the Status of Women in the Economics Profession (CSWEP) is charged with serving professional women economists by promoting their careers and monitoring their progress. CSWEP sponsors mentoring programs, surveys economics departments and freely disseminates information on professional opportunities, career development and how the profession works, both on the web and via free [digital subscriptions](#) to the *CSWEP News*.

CSWEP Focus features articles originally published in the *CSWEP News*.

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Managing Your Service and Administrative Workload at Mid-Career When to Say 'Yes' and How to Say 'No'

Terra McKinnish

While CSWEP has a history of organizing mentoring activities for junior women, we kept hearing from senior women that they would like opportunities to receive advice on mid-career issues. Out of these requests grew our annual mid-career peer mentoring breakfasts, offered annually at the ASSA meetings.

At these breakfasts we have heard from women that once they receive tenure, or advance to more senior levels in non-academic positions, they often find they are overwhelmed with service and administrative duties. In fact, research shows that women do perform more service than men (Porter 2007; Mitchell and Hesli 2013). Other recent research points to one potentially important factor: women are more likely to accept service requests, in turn making them more likely to be targeted by administrators who need to fill positions (Babcock et al. 2017).

This issue draws on the collective wisdom of three senior women who have spoken at our mid-career breakfasts as well as senior mentors from the CeMENT workshops to provide women with strategies for managing their professional lives at mid-career. Our CeMENT mentors weigh in with concrete language and strategies for "saying no" to service and administrative requests. Laura Argys, Professor of Economics and Associate Dean for Research and Creative Activities at the University of Colorado, Denver, provides an article full of practical advice as a "reformed volunteer." Adriana Kugler, Full Professor in the McCourt School of Public Policy at Georgetown, draws on her extensive experience as a former Vice Provost at Georgetown and previous Chief Economist at the Department of Labor to discuss the "art of making your own choices." Finally, Donna Ginther, Professor of Economics and Director of the Center for Science, Technology, and Economic Policy at the University of Kansas, weighs in with advice on time management and managing staff.

As an additional note, if you would like to join us at a future mid-career breakfast, please watch our webpage for announcements: <https://www.aeaweb.org/about-aea/committees/cswep/annual-meeting#breakfast2>

Also, join our distribution list by emailing cswep@econ.ucsb.edu so that you always receive our newsletters and announcements. ■



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Asked to give examples of language and strategies they have used in the past to turn down service requests, our CeMENT mentors came up with some great advice:

I appreciate you thinking of me for this committee but unfortunately I must decline. Recall that I'm already serving on committee X, which requires a significant time commitment. Taking on additional committee work at this point would adversely affect my teaching and research; I know the quality of both is highly valued by the college.

—*Mary Evans,*
Claremont McKenna College

What a fantastic opportunity to [fill in the blank]. I really appreciate the invitation—it sounds exciting and impactful. As you may know, I am already committed to {fill in the lots of blanks}, so if you think I could better serve the institution in this new capacity, let's think about which of these other commitments we should take off my already over-flowing plate.

—*Jessica Holmes, Middlebury College*

If it is something I don't mind doing: First, I like to say thank you, as in "thank you for thinking of me for this important task/responsibility." Then I might say something to indicate how busy I am, such as "As you know, my plate is pretty full at present." You could include an example, such as "My biggest service time commitment is..." or, I have two new preps this year and I'm chairing our search committee, I have a new grant that requires me to spend a lot of time on project X, etc. Then (if true) make it clear that you are happy to do it, but will need to be relieved of something else, such as, "I'm happy to do this for you/the university, but I'll need you to help me decide what I should stop doing (or take off my plate) in order to make the time to do this." You can suggest relief of your most

Tips and Language for Saying 'No' from CeMENT Mentors

onerous commitment. This will usually do it. If you make it clear that your doing the task has a high opportunity cost, the requester will usually find someone else, or indeed relieve you of another committee or prep. If it is something you don't want to do: say you really need to focus on your research and teaching right now, and sadly must decline the opportunity.

—*Catherine Eckel,*
Texas A&M University

1. I'd be happy to serve as your XXX. I recognize the importance of this work and given how much time it would take and the value of my own research agenda, the only way I'd be able to do it is to have a course release. It is my understanding that this is also what my predecessor had (last sentence only necessary if true).

2. I'd love to serve on that committee and I see why you've asked me given my past experience. Right now, I've got a terrific project underway and just can't spare the time. John also has expertise in this area and might be interested.

3. I know that we need someone to teach an overload and I appreciate that you've asked me. This is not a good time for me to engage in that given that I am also mentoring several honors students. I believe John might be available.

—*Susan Averett, Lafayette College*

"Yes, I would like to do X but at the moment I have too many obligations." Followed by:

"Could you come back to me next time you need help with this?" or "Could you relieve me of another committee assignment to free up time for this work?" or "Yes but I think person Y would be even better for this role." More fundamentally, I learned to never say "yes" or "no" on the spot. I would let an email message with a request for my involvement sit for a few days or if I'd received a request by phone would make myself say "I'll get back to you." That gives me

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Language for Saying ‘No’ ↑

time to think through what’s involved, to think about whether I want to take on the task, whether it fits with my schedule, etc. My immediate instinct is always to say “yes” and this has helped me overcome that.

—Ellen Magenheim,
Swarthmore College

More fundamentally, I learned to never say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ on the spot.

I’ve found that saying no can be a useful way to broadcast some of the other things you’re doing:

“I wish I could, but I’ve just agreed to be the co-editor of this journal and I don’t think I’ll have enough time.” Or, “This sounds interesting, but since I just agreed to chair the search committee, I think I’ll be pretty busy with that.”

—Jenny Minier, University of Kentucky

My guiding principle about service commitments is to ask yourself the following question: “Is this opportunity interesting to me and a good use of my time?” If the answer is not a clear “yes,” then politely turn it down. The best way to turn down a request is to simply say that you have many competing priorities and cannot find the time to commit to this project right now. I am on the other side right now (having to ask colleagues to do service) and believe me, lots of people say no for lots of reasons.

—Nicole Simpson, Colgate University

“Thanks for thinking about me for this job. It is a great opportunity although it comes at a time when I have already accepted many commitments, among which XXX and YYY: I will seriously think about it and let you know in due course.” This leaves me time to think about whether it is feasible for me to accept the job and, if not, how to say no.

—Barbara Rossi,
Universitat Pompeu Fabra

My advice would be to keep in mind that for the most part, Chairs want their faculty to continue to be productive researchers. In negotiating with your Chair, you might consider both making the case that the additional service will negatively affect your productivity and providing your chair with multiple options that will allow you to continue to be productive. Options might include funding an RA, course relief or some additional research funds.

—Anna Aizer, Brown University

The best strategy is the “yes-no-yes” strategy: “Yes, I would love to do this at some point in the FUTURE. Thanks so much for thinking of me. No, I can’t do this right now because _____ (fill in

the blank—research excuses and teaching excuses are good ones, or other service commitments).

Yes, thanks so much for thinking of me

—Ann Harrison,
University of Pennsylvania

I think it is most effective to discuss in the context of productivity—too much service comes at the cost of higher productivity, so I have said no (firmly) in order to preserve my productivity. (I generally highlight the other service I am already doing). The key is to be firm. It isn’t a question, it is a statement.

—Sandra Black, University of Texas

Advice from a Reformed Volunteer

Laura Argys

Saying no at work—what a great idea for a panel and particularly in a newsletter that reaches professional women. When I was asked to give advice to CSWEP newsletter readers, I immediately replied that “I’d be happy to.” Although this response may disqualify me from writing this piece, I urge you not to dismiss my advice too quickly. If you have a natural inclination to jump in and serve, mine may be exactly the advice you need. I hope that what follows helps those of you who struggle with deciding when to say no and, even when convinced it is the right decision, have difficulty declining an offer.

Offers to contribute to service at work can come in many forms and from people in a variety of positions. Sometimes it is as ‘simple’ as a request from a colleague or a student to help them out in ways that go beyond typical expectations. Other times it can involve relatively routine service assignments, like committee membership, that individually may not be terribly time consuming

but, in total, eat up valuable time. Finally, there are requests, often from Deans and Provosts, that really should be classified more as administration than service. Examples include serving as a program director, department chair, or chair of an important campus or institutional committee. Obviously, these are more time consuming, require more independence and responsibility, and ideally are offered only after one has earned tenure or been promoted to a more senior position in a non-academic institution. Although agreeing to serve in each of these capacities imposes different costs, the decisions to say no involve the same considerations.

Women are particularly likely to struggle with balancing service requests with other, more highly-rewarded work expectations like research and teaching. Women in academia spend more time doing service than their male counterparts (Misra et al. 2011) and this additional service is often associated with lower probabilities of (or longer time until) tenure and advancement. Professional women who are asked to do more

Reformed Volunteer

frequently are not as highly regarded as men for saying yes, and are regarded less favorably when they say no (Heilman and Chen 2005). Knowing when and how to say no are important skills for success in the workplace.

To serve? Or not to serve?

Although the focus of this column is on saying no, it may not always be in your best interest. There are some important questions to ask yourself.

- 1) Do I want to do it? If so, this is pretty simple—but economists know that the question really should be: Do I want to do it more than the things that I'll have to give up? From experience, saying yes often involves sacrificing research time, time with friends and family, or sleep.
- 2) Will I gain something from doing it? Refereeing papers or reviewing grants provides you with insight into the process and connections in the profession, but keep in mind that overcommitting can have a negative effect. Be sure that you can meet your obligations with high quality and prompt reports. Common requests to serve on committees can be beneficial by interacting with colleagues throughout the institution. This type of networking can be valuable, but with diminishing returns. It can be important to consider who is asking you to participate. When being considered for promotion to full professor, it is valuable to be seen as a contributor by one's Provost or Dean, so take this into account if they are the ones making the request. It is useful to be more than a name in a promotion file when it is decision time.
- 3) What will I have to give up if I say yes? Particularly pre-tenure and prior to promotion to full, this is an important question. Teaching, and particularly research, have disproportionately more impact on promotion decisions. It is also often the case that at precisely the time that the pressure is on to be strong in the classroom and to ramp up research

productivity, family demands are most acute.

- 4) Is it a change I (might) want to make in my career? At a more senior level, decisions to take on initial administrative responsibilities can be a stepping stone to an administrative career. If you aren't sure about pursuing administration, serving as a program director or a term as department chair can be a way to test the waters. Just be sure that you are at the right stage in your career to take the plunge. If you want to be a successful administrator at high levels, earn the title of full professor before taking on substantial administrative duties.
- 5) In all of these cases, the question that you should not use to make your decision is "Do other people want me to do it?" Of course they do! The right question to keep in mind is, "Can it be done by someone else?" Of course it can!

How to say no.

You've decided. Now how do you say no? Although you can find all kinds of advice about how to say no, in my experience it is much more effective if you find the way that fits you. The standard advice is to include something positive, "thanks for the opportunity" or "what a great project" and then decline. This helps avoid the impression that you don't value the person's contribution or cause.

My first attempts to decline offers of academic service or assignments were largely unsuccessful. To try to be sure that the person recruiting me wasn't left with the impression that their offer wasn't worth considering or that I was trying to avoid doing my fair share, I tried to provide a good reason why I wouldn't be able to serve. Early in my career I was asked to serve on a (time-consuming) search committee with a group of administrators. Knowing that I had a big research project in the works, and feeling like there were many qualified people who could fulfill this role, I decided not to participate. My response

went as follows, "I'm flattered that you've asked me to serve on this important committee, but I have a number of obligations through March and into April. I'm afraid I wouldn't have time to really contribute to the search." Be careful. If you explain why you must say no, they might solve the problem. In this case, the response was: "This is great! We have just posted the ad for the position and will gather applications for 6 weeks. The timing for reviews and interviews will be perfect." I spent April and May interviewing job candidates and showing finalists around the campus. Hence, I advise you to keep your response short. Don't give them an explanation that they can solve for you. In fact, I began practicing the following, all-purpose response: I'm very sorry, but I won't be able to.

That statement often feels abrupt. It is not a bad idea to wrap up on a positive note. You can decline the offer and still convey the importance of the task. For example, "I'm so sorry, I won't be able to participate in the search" could be followed by "It is such an important position and it is great that you will have faculty participating to help make the decision." Or even, "Thanks for thinking of me, I'd like to contribute to these types of decisions in the future, so please keep me in mind." If you take this approach, know that they may well 'keep you in mind.' A positive comment can go a long way to combat the sometimes negative perception of women who say no. It is a delicate balance to be "powerful enough to be heard, but likeable enough to be followed" (Cestino 2016).

There is a tendency to want to be sure that by saying no, you are not giving the impression that you are not willing to work hard. Sometimes it is appropriate to highlight other substantial contributions that you are making in other areas, but don't carry this too far. Saying no does not require a list of all of the other things demands on your time—family responsibilities in particular.



What if you've decided to say yes?

Not only are women more likely to serve, they are less likely to negotiate or set the terms for their service (Babcock and Laschever 2009). If you have decided that you'd like to consider an important opportunity but it requires a substantial commitment on your part, perhaps you can help offset the costs. If you've been asked to attend an event, or introduce someone or be a guest speaker in a class, no big deal. If you're being asked to serve as department chair, that's another matter entirely. Take some time to think about what you need to make it work. Do you need funding for a Graduate Assistant to keep your research on track? More resources to build the department? These requests have something in common—they will help you to be successful in the position at the same time that they help keep the institution productive.

I know that I'm hard-wired to be the 'volunteer' but I have found ways to temper my natural tendencies. You'll have to find the approach(es) that work for you. Better balance in your workload is worth it. I would note that the request to me to contribute to this CSWEP Newsletter was followed by the statement "If you know of anyone else who would be good for this panel let me know." My response: "I know someone who'd be great, but she'd say no."

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Making Your Own Choices: The Art of Saying No & the Art of Saying Yes

Adriana Kugler

As one moves up the career ladder, responsibilities and expectations grow. For those in academia, teaching loads may increase. One may also be more sought after by students and class sizes and advising may increase. Finally, administrative duties may also grow as others view you as a responsible professional with good judgment to handle these duties. Likewise, for those in non-academic careers, management of teams and projects may be part of jobs higher up the ladder and may require more time but also new skills.

At the same time, as you move up in your career, you may have new choices to make. Should you focus more on teaching or manage a new program or take a role in policy circles? A temptation is to try to do it all! Of course, time is scarce and so is attention and capacity to do a good job on different ends. It is important to understand one's bandwidth and one's capacity to multitask. Even more important, however, is to know what you are good at and play to your strengths and exploit your comparative advantage. It is crucial to know what will help you advance your long-term career goals and to know what you enjoy. Enjoying doing these new tasks is crucial since they may require quite a bit of your time and energy. If you don't enjoy doing these new activities, you may end up not doing a great job.

Once you decide whether a task plays to your comparative advantage, whether it advances your long-term career goals, and whether you enjoy doing these tasks, then you can decide whether to say yes or no to this new possibility. When you first move up, you may be able to say yes to a lot of new opportunities and still be able to handle them all. However, as more and more opportunities with more responsibility come your way, you will have to become

more selective. Clearly saying yes to everything is not wise, but likely saying no to everything is also unwise. If you just say no all the time, people in the profession or people in your institution will perceive you as someone who is not interested in taking on these new roles.

Sometimes you may be undecided. This may mean that you may be willing to accept a new position or role if the conditions are right for you.

Enjoying doing these new tasks is crucial since they may require quite a bit of your time and energy.

This is where, if you are on the fence, you may want to explore and negotiate for the right conditions for you and this may sway you to say yes. If you are negotiating, think about what is reasonable and make the case that you need what you are asking for to do the job well. After all, no one would want to recruit someone to do a job badly, so they should want to set you up for success. Of course they have limited resources, but if their entire goal is to get you at the best conditions for them then this job may not be the right job for you. Some things you may want to think about negotiating are:

- a reduction in teaching,
- a research assistant to help you out,
- a research fund,
- an extended sabbatical leave,
- an increase in salary.

If you say yes to new responsibilities, it is important to think about how to rebalance your time to continue to have time to do the things that are very important to you. Since new things are likely to consume more of your energy and attention, it is easy to leave other

Thoughts on Managing Time and Administrative Work

Donna K. Ginther

Economics is a “greedy profession” where the work we are expected to do expands to fill the time we give it. As we progress from early to mid-career, our work evolves to include leading committees, running organizations, and managing people. The demands on our time can literally expand at an exponential rate beyond the expected research, teaching, and service. Currently, I have seven doctoral students various stages of completion, chair a faculty governance committee, direct a research center and have four funded research projects. My work has several moving parts, and keeping track of everything can seem like a full-time job. Time is my most-precious resource, and here I provide advice on how to manage your own time and how to manage the time of people who work with you.

There are no right answers when it comes to time management because the demands on your time are always changing. The best you can hope to achieve is a local optimum; some days and weeks will go smoothly while others will leave you scrambling to make every commitment that appears on your calendar. I recommend three time

management strategies: know how you spend your time, know yourself, and experiment with new strategies to improve your time use.

I suffer from the planning fallacy—I underestimate the time it will take to complete a task. That said, if I give a project or activity too much time, I will invariably take all of the allocated time and then some. So it is important to gain a firm grasp on how you spend your time. I did an experiment where I kept track of my work time by activity for an entire semester. I divided my time into teaching, research (including refereeing/editing), service, administration/management, emails, and meetings and kept a spreadsheet of every 15 minutes that I was working. The results were revealing—over the course of one semester, I spent nearly 20 percent of my time responding to email, and I spent nearly 30 percent of my time managing projects, people or in meetings. My time was also being lost to transitions, for example, having to drive to or walk across campus to a meeting. Something had to give, and when I complained to my husband about all the time I spent on email, he asked the obvious question, “Well

why are you answering your email? If I’m on a project, I will ignore my inbox for up to a week.” I immediately made a change, becoming much more selective about when and how I dealt with my inbox.

Once I had a firm grasp on how I was spending my time, I chose to be more deliberate about when, where and how I did my work. I try to organize my life around the principle of doing more of the work I like to do (e.g. research) and less of the work that I dislike (e.g. meetings/email). This means doing the work that I like when I am most-focused and productive. That occurs for me mid-morning and early afternoon and in the evening after my children have gone to bed. I save my “best focused” time for my most-important work (like research) and my “less focused” time for meetings and email. I group meetings on teaching days, and work on research on non-teaching days as much as possible.

I also like to experiment with new strategies for managing my time. About a year ago, I was feeling completely overwhelmed with having too many obligations. I felt that my work was careening out of control. At that time, I had about six Ph.D. students in various stages of completion, several research projects, activities at my center, editing and refereeing, and an undergraduate course that increased my teaching burden. I needed to make a change. My mantra for a year became, “no new students, no new projects.” That meant saying no to students and even more difficult, no to new research ideas. Given that I am the type of person that falls in love with my newest research idea, this was especially difficult for me. But it worked. I knew that I could not take care of my own needs, the needs of my students and the needs of my collaborators if I said yes to anything new. I had to say “no” to other people, but it meant saying “yes” to myself and a sustainable work load. Some

Your Own Choices ↑

things behind. Be sure to allocate specific times to those other activities that you want to keep in your professional and personal life.

If you are clearly not on the fence and not interested, then it is better to turn down a possibility rather than negotiate and drag out the process. Also, it is wise to say no in a way that will not close off these opportunities in the future. After all, something that may not be right for you now could be very attractive later in your career. For instance, you may be in the middle of an important cutting-edge research project that you need to finish or you may just have just moved recently and are dealing with personal and professional issues related to your

move. If that’s the case, you can explain that it is not possible for you to take on this responsibility at this time but that you would be interested in the future.

As you progress in your career, it is most important that you feel that you are in charge of which direction it takes. Others may want to help you and may think they know what is good for you. At the end though, you know yourself best: you know your goals, your strengths and what you enjoy most. This may mean that you will want to weigh different factors and decide what will be a good career and personal move for you.

Enjoy the journey as you reach your new goals! ■

Managing Time

experiments do not always work out so well. I realized that if I give projects too much time, I will get caught tinkering with the estimates, figures, and tables so much that I never complete the paper. I had a deadline for a revision, so I scheduled a week to get it completed. I was well on my way to getting it done, and then I discovered a mistake that necessitated redoing much of the analysis. I did not get much sleep that week.

Time management is very challenging when you are responsible only for yourself. The challenge compounds when you are managing a committee, large projects, or people. The logistics of coordinating busy people's schedules can be a huge time sink. I lean on support staff to schedule my meetings whenever possible, instructing them to schedule them on my teaching days, and only freeing my schedule to accommodate a meeting if those days do not work out.

Have you ever been in a meeting that took one and half hours when 15 minutes would have sufficed? Nothing annoys me more than people who do not know how to run a meeting. When I convene a meeting, I have an agenda developed ahead of time. This prevents open-ended discussions that stray from the mission of the meeting. In a committee, we are often asked to make decisions or recommendations. In that case, I like to prepare a menu of two to three options for the committee. This will focus the discussion and allow the committee to work more efficiently towards a consensus or resolution. If you anticipate potential conflict in a meeting, it is important to talk to members of the various factions before the meeting to get a better sense of challenges that you may face and then plan accordingly.

Managing projects with several people and deliverables is challenging, and you need to understand your role and the role of your staff. As a project leader or manager, my role is to provide the vision for the "big picture," establish an effective infrastructure for the project (assigning tasks and deadlines to people), and to make critically important

decisions. Large projects require goals, timetables and accountability. They often come with a deadline. I solve these scheduling problems by working backwards from the deliverable date, to establish milestones for various steps of the process and the completion of the work. In this case, meetings are extremely helpful for identifying who is responsible for various aspects of the project and making sure that the research team is coordinating on the tasks at hand. My research team will be more likely to meet their deadlines if they know they are responsible to other team members.

Your staff and students will be more productive if they know why they are doing the work, the expectations for the work and that decisions will be made. As a manager, it is my job to make "difficult decisions" involving tradeoffs and challenges associated with the project. Some people may have difficulty making decisions, but I view agonizing over most choices to be a waste of time. It is important to make the best decision with the best information that you have, and if it does not work out as expected, you will have an opportunity to make a new and different decision. Making decisions is your job, so it is important to become comfortable with the process.

When managing students and staff, your approach needs to be tailored to their individual strengths and weaknesses. Ideally, I want to empower my staff to make decisions and take responsibility for their work. I do not have the time to micro-manage myself, let alone the people who work for me. But staff empowerment does not work for all people. In my experience, some people do not like to make decisions; others do not like to admit that they are having problems or struggling. At the other extreme, empowered staff can take the work in a direction that is not compatible with your preferences or expectations. I apply the same time management strategies to my staff as I do to myself.

First, communicating with your students and staff is key. I get to know each

staff member's working style, and tailor my management involvement to that style. I allow those that are comfortable taking responsibility for the work significant control over when and how they work as long as they meet their goals and deliverables. I check-in on their progress with phone calls, emails or meetings as the project progresses. Often a staff member will get lost in the details of the work or be reluctant to make decisions. I spend more time interacting with these people to make sure that they are not stuck at a decision node or spinning their wheels overwhelmed by too many details. Sometimes self-directed staff or employees encounter problems or difficulties, and they will hide these from me. My message to my staff is always the same: I want to hear bad news as soon as possible. I can plan for bad news that I know; I cannot do anything about what I do not know.

Despite all of the best-laid plans, life will get in the way. My schedule gets thrown into disarray when one of my children is home sick. My staff and students have encountered significant life changes such as having a child, ending a relationship, having surgery and moving. When this happens, it is important to accommodate people's needs within reason. The team will usually rise to the occasion and support the other team members. In most cases, those who are owed a deliverable will be willing to renegotiate a deadline. If your staff members know that they have your support in their time of great need, they will be more committed to working for you in the future.

Finally, when you are managing projects and people, it is very important to acknowledge and be thankful to the people who work with you. As your obligations increase, you simply cannot do everything by yourself. You need to depend on those who work with you, and you can only depend on them when you trust them and they trust you. Your students and staff work hard, and their work facilitates your success. Take every opportunity to let people know that their work is important, and thank them. ■