

OTHER THINGS EQUAL

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Donald N. McCloskey
University of Iowa

How to Host a Seminar Visitor

Your chair asks you, a promising assistant professor just out of grad school, to supervise the biweekly Departmental Seminar. You are flattered and accept the assignment. The problem: you have not a clue.

Fortunately, just in time to save you from your vanity, this column comes to your attention. If you will follow its advice in every detail, which I urge you to do, you'll get a reputation for administrative skill. The reputation will serve you well, leading in the future to department chairdoms and associate deaneries and other natural but agreeable unemployment.

First the objective function. Ask yourself: What's the purpose of a seminar series? I mean, aside from such administrative imperatives as "make sure you spend every nickel this year so that our budget is not cut next year" or "do the job of hosting people with the minimum damage to your reputation and your golfing time."

The purpose of having people give talks is twofold: Partly to keep you-all in touch with the conversation of economics and partly to advertise the intellectual merits of your department. In truth the keeping in touch is better done per dollar by going to conferences and getting on xerox and e-mail lists, or, horrible thought, reading a book. (Read Bob Frank's latest, for example.) Deans: take notice.

But there's no better way than the outside visitor to advertise your department. I still have a soft spot for Southeast Missouri State University at Cape Girardeau because of the nice way they treated me sixteen years ago. The Economics Department at the University of Tasmania strikes me as a swell place, and gets a good word from me every time it comes up, largely because one of its faculty back in 1983 took seriously my yammering about "rhetoric" and arranged while I was in Australia for the department to show its best side. On the other hand, I travel a lot, and I've been on enough visits organized by the Three Stooges to know that a badly organized visit can do a department damage. I won't tell you the name, but a major department on the West Coast earned my low opinion of its intellectual life with two—count 'em, two—fouled-up visits; and I visited a college recently that couldn't talk itself intellectually out of a wet paper bag.

For most departments, in other words, the advertising of your reputation is more important than the keeping in touch, and easier to foul up. To get a unified objective function, suppose the weighting between keeping-in-touch and investing-in-reputation is set at about 20-80. The weighting towards reputation is contrary to the surface rhetoric of the visit, as understood by the departmental secretaries and the millionaire endowers of lecture series. They talk as though the main point of a visit were The Big Speech. The rhetoric makes it hard to remember that it's you-all, the Department, who are performing, not the speaker.

All right. How to do it?

Collect suggestions about whom to invite from your colleagues. It's wise to do it by letter, so that no one feels left out. View suggestions as ideas, not votes. If you just take the suggestion with the largest number of votes (by three assistant professors, actually), you'll merely reproduce the latest fashion in the field. Taylor's Series Scholarship follows the latest wiggle in economics as closely as the first few terms of a Taylor's series will allow. Taylor's-series visitors do not provide education, because what they say is callow and will be obsolete in five years. And remember: the advertising of your reputation is the main point anyway. It's better therefore to invite older people, such as Lester Telser at Chicago, who is always about ten years ahead of the latest fashion, or Richard Sutch at Berkeley, who believes in collecting his own data. These are economic scientists, not trainees.

If you've "never heard of Professor X " (where X = such intellectual heavyweights as Tom Schelling or Mancur Olson or Barbara Bergmann) consider that at your age it may be your problem, not theirs. Consider that you may not yet have read everything in every field of economics, and that What's Hot in your infinitesimally small Ph.D.-thesis neighborhood (a set of measure zero, actually) might after all not survive into next week, much less into the next century. So think big, and think old. It's better for your reputation.

The success of the visit depends on details. Get them right. For example, do not use a travel bureau of your own to make the travel arrangements. You'll think it saves money, or is something that people want done for them, but in fact it irritates a seasoned traveler. Her own travel agents know what she likes and can get the best ticket. My wife, who is a big deal scholar in nursing, was invited to give a big deal speech in a big deal city once, but was given a ticket that ran her all over the country to save a few bucks. Not big-deal thinking. She canceled out when the fog descended on our airport.

Pick her up at the airport. Do it yourself, since visitors assume that whoever picks them up is the organizer of the visit. You might as well get the credit. If you have to send someone else, don't send a student: few students have spent enough time in airports to know what to do when something goes wrong, as it does about a quarter of the time. Picking the speaker up at the airport is necessary regardless of the age or rank of the guest, but neglecting to do it is particularly irritating to senior people, even if able bodied. They have a lot to think about (more, even, than the average assistant professor), and figuring out how to get from the airport to the seminar is not one of their top priorities.

Actually read something, anything, the person has written. At a minimum this will give you something to chat about as you drive the guest from the airport. It's your personal chance to show what a good little scholar you are, and it's elementary human nature that your speaker will think highly of someone who knows her work. Unless you are running the series at the top ten or so universities the arrogance of not having read anything is not an available strategy. Nor is other arrogance, come to think of it (at the luncheon for a seminar I gave once at Harvard one of the faculty, a former colleague and alleged friend of mine, read a book half concealed under the table throughout the meal). Flattery will get you everywhere. For example, if the

person writes books it's a good idea to inform the college bookstore a month or more in advance, so they can have the books on display. College bookstores like to do it.

Don't *underwork* the visitor. That means you should give her a full schedule of classes, lectures, luncheons, parties, one-on-one talking. I visited the University of South Dakota a while ago to give a lecture in a series which two years before had been graced by my friend Theodore Schultz (born South Dakota 1902; professor and head, Iowa State University 1930-43; Chicago 1943-1968; Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Science 1979). They kept asking me if I was tired, to which I asked each time, "Did Ted do it?" Ted, age 90, had. By the end of two days of following Ted's schedule I was exhausted. At least I defended the honor of us 50-year-olds.

On the whole the students don't get much out of a visitor and should not be the focus of your use of her. A "special treat" of a class lecture by the visitor is too much like the substitute teacher in grade school to work (remember how you massacred the substitute teacher). If you go for it anyway, make sure the instructor impresses on the students for weeks in advance how Incredibly Eminent the visitor is, and makes the point by having the students read something accessible written by the visitor (test them on it beforehand). And for all lectures, talks, luncheons, and so forth make sure to give the visitor an exact schedule, and tell her personally what the professor with whom they are talking does for a living and to what stage the class has gotten and, right on the spot as she begins her talk, what sort of people are in the audience that actually showed up. I visited a university Down Under at which my host took me directly from the tea room to an auditorium with 250 people already assembled "for the lecture on Victorian economic failure," *which he had not told me about*. It was like a scene from a nightmare. I discovered that the human mind can work on three levels: speaking at one level, planning two minutes ahead at another, and planning twenty minutes ahead at still another, all at once. I think the lecture was all right, and no one was the wiser. But I was sweating bullets. No surprises.

It's the faculty, especially the junior faculty, who earn the imports from a visit. Remember, though, that it's exports that you're mainly interested in. You are displaying your faculty. Meals are the best places to capture the imports. Make sure five people come but no more. More than five is a waste, since it's too large a group to talk with the guest in one conversation. As to the Big Speech, remember who's on display. Get your colleagues to come and urge them to think up intelligent questions: export or die. The visitor has not left the bosom of her faculty to speak to a half-dozen ignorant faculty with nothing better to do at 4:00 pm. A big, informed, enthusiastic audience is what you want to aim for. Worry about it, though put a bright face on things if the big audience doesn't materialize. This means speaking to your colleagues personally about the visit, not just making a sign-up list available or posting notices the day before.

Undergraduates again make poor filler, unless they come with preparation and enthusiasm. I stutter, and nothing is more irritating to me than watching a couple of undergraduates in the fifth row giggle to each other about my *A Fish Called Wanda* performances. It doesn't improve my stutter, or my opinion of the place. I never allow it from my 430-student Econ 1 class. If there's anything peculiar like this about the speaker (old age, disfigurement, boring delivery, odd speech pattern, excessively

highbrow ideas about speech making) make sure you warn the adolescents to behave themselves, or, better, stay away.

Remember that for the best visitors some of your colleagues elsewhere will be interested, too, which will spread the name of your department within your own college, and in neighboring colleges, which will be encouraged to think of you-all as Where the Intellectual Action Is. And remember that your administrators will want to press the flesh with the Nobel laureate, actual or prospective, that you have finagled into coming. Exercise judgement. If your dean is a fool, keep the visitor away from him. Export.

Talk economics and only economics. The visitor expects it and if seasoned knows how to do it. You don't make a good impression by asking about low-level professional gossip or How About Them Hawks.

Young people (that's less than 40 years old, fella) will be happy to stay in faculty houses. But in that case you are committed to entertaining the visitor all the time. Older people will prefer a hotel, unless they have a close friend on your faculty. Accommodations on campus in quiet surroundings are the standard. For Lord's sake make sure the room is quiet and that the guest can get a decent night's sleep. Bed and breakfast places are much better than the local El Cheapo Motel, and more characteristic of the part of the country you're in. Chances are you've never stayed in El Cheapo, or when you did stay in it you were interviewing for the job and were at an age when having your own TV and shower gave you a big thrill.

Convince your local accountants *not* to report reimbursement for expenses on the same form as honoraria. The one is nontaxable, the other is not, but many universities merge the two. Sure, the speaker can deduct the "unreimbursed business expenses," if she can remember to. Save her the trouble.

And many other tips, left as an exercise to the assistant professor. Don't worry. All that will happen if you foul up is that you and your colleagues will never be able to participate in the economics profession in a serious way, because you will have offended the people who run it. Relax. And enjoy the visit.

Other Things Equal, a column by Donald N. McCloskey, appears regularly in this *Journal*.