to some random committee that you have no passion for," says Cech. Once they have chosen committees for themselves, scientists can use those service obligations as reasons to decline less-desirable assignments.

After committing to a group, scientists should execute their duties diligently — it is always possible that the committee chair will evaluate them for a promotion later.

If the committee's goal is vague or discussions are unfocused, researchers can ask the chair to clarify the mission with administrators or to provide agendas in advance. During meetings, members should avoid making comments that do not directly serve the committee's purpose. For instance, when developing policy, people often tell anecdotes to show why the regulation is necessary, says Boss. "All it does is waste time," he says. Instead, the team should concentrate on the wording of the policy and ensure that it covers the necessary scenarios.

Researchers outside traditional universities may encounter a wide variety of expectations and styles. Scientists at the Janelia Research Campus have minimal service obligations so that they can focus on research, whereas those at the Wilderness Society, a conservation organization in Washington DC, are encouraged to serve on committees that influence policy and management decisions. At the Champalimaud Centre, a small group of neuroscientists has been shaping the direction of the budding programme. Faculty members are involved in more types of service than are those in academia, and their meetings can be more intense and efficient. For example, they all participate in hiring decisions, but rather than interviewing candidates over several months, they gather for a one- or two-day symposium to see applicants give talks.

Scientists should discuss committee-service expectations during their job-offer negotiations. A supervisor might even be able to provide precise requirements. Molina expects junior researchers in her department to spend no more than 5% of their time on committee work; mid-level researchers are expected to spend 10–15%.

Ultimately, science cannot run without service. Researchers need to review each other's proposals, contribute to professional organizations and help universities to foster strong research and student development. Faculty members who avoid all committees risk isolating themselves from the community or being perceived as slackers. "In science, people are expected to be givers and sharers," says Molina. Still, that is no reason to feel guilty for setting boundaries. "I believe in participating and volunteering," she says, "but there's a limit." ■

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CHRISTOPHER TRUE

TURNING POINT
Heather Schneider

For her postdoc, ecologist Heather Schneider joined Project Baseline, a nationwide US initiative that is developing a seed bank for future scientists to study how plants are evolving in response to climate change. The project has left her little time for her own research at the University of California, Santa Barbara, but the skills she has gained have broadened her career avenues.

What is a field season like?
It's really daunting. Project Baseline's goal is to collect seeds from 43 species — at 10 sites for each one. The project so far has collected 3 million seeds from species both native and introduced. My adviser, Susan Mazer, and I oversee collection in the western region — 237 distinct plant populations of 20 species — and this is the final of 3 field seasons. I spend January to March getting field permits to collect specimens in national and state parks, nature preserves and the University of California reserves. Then I use herbarium records to find historical populations. I try to visit each of our sites twice a season — once while plants are in bloom, to find populations more easily and to collect environmental data, and again to gather seeds. Last year, our field season ended in mid-October.

What about this project lured you away from a pure research focus?
Few things are as important as understanding how ecosystems will respond to climate change. I was interested in helping to create a resource that would be useful for both basic and applied science for the next 50 years. To me, that would have a big impact on ecology and evolutionary biology — much bigger than any single paper I would ever write. I also felt that I have the set of skills — field botany, plant identification and collection of herbarium specimens — necessary for the job.

Did it feel risky to move away from conventional research?
A little. Although my career trajectory has zigzagged, there has been one underlying theme — assessing the impact of human-made threats to ecosystems. I have focused on invasive species, air pollution and habitat degradation. I joke that when you work on short-term grants, you end up with a long tail of 'publications in progress' that follow you from job to job. I'm still working on papers from one to two jobs ago. So it was appealing that there would be less pressure to publish in this position, which could give me a chance to catch up on papers I'm still working on.

Does publishing less concern you?
The principal investigators on the project made sure that our efforts benefited my and the other postdocs' careers. Susan and I work on a greenhouse experiment in the off-season, when we're not in the field for Project Baseline. We have one paper in revision and one in review, so I still am getting papers out.

What are your hopes for future use of this resource?
The research possibilities are huge. Given my own interests, I hope that people will use it to look at ecological interactions. For example, as pollinator communities change, how will that affect wild-plant reproduction? I'm also interested in what the weedy species will do — will the geographical areas where they are found shrink or expand?

What are your job prospects?
I would be interested in a teaching job at a smaller university. I am OK not ending up at a top-tier research university because funding rates are not that encouraging. And the skills I have gained on Project Baseline — project management, budgets, organization, troubleshooting — are applicable to all kinds of other jobs.

Do you plan to promote use of Project Baseline data in future?
Yes. The postdocs on the project want to feel that this resource will be well cared for. I know there are plans to advertise it widely. The principal investigators invited all the postdocs to be on the advisory board, and it is nice to know that we will have a part in evaluating the proposals for its use in the future. ■

INTERVIEW BY VIRGINIA GEWIN

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.