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## Dual-Career Academic Couples

*"I am a hard-working Ph.D. with multiple publications and over 24 independently taught courses,"* reports one academic woman. Unlike her husband, she is not on the tenure track. She met her partner in graduate school, where they both completed their Ph.D.s on identical timelines. But when it came time to go on the job market, her husband received the first offer. As a result, she accepted part-time teaching in her husband's department as part of his hiring package.

*"The tiny salary made me wince, but with the ink still wet on my diploma, it didn't occur to me to negotiate. Never mind that I hadn't yet tested my Ph.D. on the job market. Never mind that I'd held better and more lucrative teaching posts as a graduate student. My partner and I felt lucky. Unlike so many other academic couples, we would have the privilege of living in the same city."*<sup>1</sup> Several years later, the gap between their careers seems insurmountable.

Compared with her husband, she teaches more, earns less, and is nowhere near entering tenure-track in his department.

### Dual-Career Problems Common

This story is but one example of the hiring roadblocks encountered by dual-career academics. The phenomenon of dual-career relationships, which accounts for 65% of the U.S.

workforce, is even higher inside the "ivory tower."<sup>2</sup> Among academics, nearly 80% are coupled with working professionals, over one-third of whom are also academics.<sup>3</sup> Both married and domestic partners in dual-career relationships suffer decreased job mobility and lesser benefits in terms of the opportunities, experience, salary, and working conditions that mobility can bring. This is especially true for women in the sciences, who are more often partnered with other academics. While only 7% of the members of the American Physical Society are women, an astonishing 69% are married to other scientists. A remarkable 80% of women mathematicians and 33% of women chemists are married to men in their own fields.<sup>4</sup>

In 1998, two scientists from the College of William and Mary published a detailed survey of dual-career couples in physics. The results

were startling and well-publicized. Although men and women might both encounter difficulties as dual-career academics, the survey showed that women face greater barriers to advancement in their fields. More women than men reported that they had taken a lower-level science position, or a job outside science, in their most recent job search. Such partnerships in the sciences are detrimental to women's advancement given the rarity of dual offers.<sup>5</sup>

### Dual-Career Responsiveness Lacking

Responsiveness to dual-career issues is perhaps one of the greatest challenges faced by public and private academic institutions. Current institutional policies, which range from formal to ad hoc, rarely create tenure-track positions for

accompanying hires. Spousal employment as part-time, adjunct, or nontenure-track faculty is determined on a case-by-case basis.

Research on dual-career academics by Lisa Wolf-Wendel, Susan B. Twombly, and Suzanne Rice found that "dual-career accommodation requests, even at places with formal policies, relies on serendipity, timing, and flexibility."<sup>6</sup> In many cases, accompanying partners

are subject to the personalities and informal practices of various departments. When the accompanying partner is female, potential employers may assume that her ambitions are limited enough to accept a position that is beneath her qualifications (or no position at all).

The 1998 survey documented how hiring committees send mixed messages to academic couples. The hiring committee at one university offered this solution to the female partner: "They suggested that I might consider giving up my career." Another academic partner was told by the department chair "that trying to find two jobs was a bad strategy and that things worked best if one partner took the best job available and the other stopped working." Perhaps the most outlandish recommendation reported by a dual-career academic was a hiring committee professor who "suggested to my husband at his

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interview that one way to solve the two-body problem was to divorce me.”<sup>7</sup> It is unsettling to think that negative stereotypes about dual-career academic couples still have such traction within the academy.

## Dual-Career Hiring, Retention Addressed

How can colleges and universities retain highly qualified academic women in large numbers unless they solve the dual-career issue inside the academy? In November 2006, the Clayman Institute at Stanford University launched the first nationwide faculty survey to address in-depth issues concerning dual-career academic hiring and retention. We are surveying over 30,000 faculty from 13 top research universities across the country. Follow-up interviews and focus groups will commence in the spring of 2007. Persons interested in following the progress of this project are encouraged to visit our website at <http://gender.stanford.edu>.

## Policy Recommendations Needed

The Dual-Career Academic Couples study will culminate in policy recommendations aimed at helping universities recruit and retain greater numbers of women in leading faculty and administrative positions. Restructuring university

practices will help transform the way universities do business and grow academic cultures where women, too, can flourish. ■

—Andrea Henderson  
Stanford University

Note: A 1998 WICB column on this topic, written by Caroline Kane and Sandra Masur, can be found at [www.ascb.org/index.cfm?navid=112&id=1554&tcode=nws3](http://www.ascb.org/index.cfm?navid=112&id=1554&tcode=nws3).

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Vera Taz (pseudonym), “Not Dead Yet,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (24 October 2005).
- <sup>2</sup> Lisa Wolf-Wendel, Susan B. Twombly, Suzanne Rice, *The Two-Body Problem: Dual-Career Couple Hiring Policies in Higher Education* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), p. 53.
- <sup>3</sup> Helen S. Astin and Jeffrey F. Milem, “The Status of Academic Couples in U.S. Institutions,” *Academic Couples: Problems and Promises*, Marianne A. Ferber and Jane W. Loeb (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).
- <sup>4</sup> Ann Gibbons, “Key Issue: Two-Career Science Marriage,” *Science* 225 (13 March 1992): 1380.
- <sup>5</sup> Laurie McNeil and Marc Sher, “Report on the Dual-Career-Couple Survey,” (1998). <http://physics.wm.edu/~sher/survey.html>, pp. 3, 5.
- <sup>6</sup> Lisa Wolf-Wendel, Susan B. Twombly, Suzanne Rice, “It’s Really a Three-Body Problem,” *Science* (28 March 2003).
- <sup>7</sup> McNeil and Sher, pp. 10, 12.

**Restructuring university practices will help transform the way universities do business and grow academic cultures where women, too, can flourish.**

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