

## Postdoc Academic Chat # 8

# Academic Couples - Take Me, Take My Partner

Wednesday, May 8, 2019

### Readings

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### **#1. Married Profs Sound Off on Dual Academic Career Hiring**

The article below gives some interesting insights into the life of dual career academic couples. It is by Stephanie Liou from the Tuesday, February 9, 2010 article that appeared in the Stanford Daily [<http://www.stanforddaily.com/>]. Copyright © 2010 Stanford Daily. All Rights Reserved. Reprinted with permission.

Whether they have shared last names, work in similar fields or have completely separate academic identities, married professors are not uncommon at Stanford and add a certain “nerdy-romantic” dynamic to the Farm.

Sociology Prof. Andrew Walder and his wife, political science Prof. Jean Oi, were jointly recruited to Stanford and have collaborated on publications and other academic endeavors.

“We definitely wanted to work at the same school, not only for convenience, but because we share similar interests and it’s nice to already have a colleague you like to work with,” Walder said. “Harvard, where we worked before, was definitely more discouraging [of having married faculty].”

Current freshmen may be well acquainted with another academic power couple, Michele Elam, English professor, and Harry Elam, Jr., drama professor. Aside from moderating the Three Books talk at the beginning of the year, the Elams taught the “Beyond Survival” Introduction to the Humanities (IHUM) class together this fall quarter.

“We share similar tastes, interests and commitments and are close intellectual companions,” said Michele Elam. “We submitted a proposal together to teach an IHUM because we are both interested in diversity, art and politics. Students quickly realized that

we were married, and I guess this led to some entertainment value during class when we would appear to disagree.”

The Elams also collaborate on research and are currently writing a book together. They said they are not fazed by the overlap between their professional and personal lives.

“No — I absolutely love working with my wife!” exclaimed Harry Elam. “We are excited by each others’ work, intellectual curiosity and love of teaching.”

Working closely together has only enhanced their relationship, the Elams revealed. They share an office at home and enjoy “talking about Stanford all the time.” And while occasional confusion occurs when students contact the wrong Dr. Elam, they say they are incredibly happy with their situation.

Christine Wotipka, education professor, shared similar sentiments about work with her husband.

“We’re both workaholics,” Dr. Wotipka admitted. “With such busy lives and two young kids, any chance to be together is appreciated. Even if it’s a meeting, work becomes time together.”

However, she and husband Anthony Antonio, education professor, also work in the same department, which has the potential to complicate matters.

“I feel like having an academic couple work in the same department would be less beneficial due to issues with voting,” Walder said. Michele Elam agreed, pointing out the increased opportunities for conflicts of interest as well as the constant — perhaps excessive — contact.

“Because we still work with different programs, there are no conflicts of interest,” Wotipka said. “Plus, I benefit from having a nurturing, ‘in-house’ mentor, which can be difficult for many junior faculty to find.”

The University also stresses the attention it pays to Dual-Career Academic Hiring.

“[It’s] a very serious topic,” noted Londa Schiebinger, history professor and director of the Clayman Institute for Gender Research. In addition to being the wife of Dr. Robert Proctor, a fellow history professor, Dr. Schiebinger published a detailed research paper and policy guide regarding dual-career academic couples in 2008.

According to her research, over a third of academic professionals are married to another academic professional, and finding suitable employment for a spouse is considered a very high priority by most. Over the past decade, the joint hiring of academic couples has increased significantly, and many universities have started to realize the potential value in having a couple work together to recruit and retain top talent.

The Elams and Walder agreed that they would have had no qualms about choosing a less prestigious institution if Stanford had not hired their respective spouses. Their opinions reflect Dr. Schiebinger's research, which found that 88 percent of dual-career faculty nationwide would have refused their current position if their spouse had not also been hired.

This also supports the steps that Stanford has been taking in order to acquire top-notch faculty, which include creating a special administrative position to assist with dual hires, encouraging departments to find suitable positions for spouses and operating several databases containing information about available jobs on campus and in the area.

"It's impossible to hire some of the best without hiring a couple, and Stanford does a really good job at this," Walder said. "I can't think of any place in the world that would be more open!"

Although they met and married at Stanford after being hired separately, Antonio and Wotipka left Stanford briefly to pursue promising positions and were only convinced to return when the University was able to make an attractive offer to both parties.

"If we were to come back, it had to be as a family," Wotipka said. "Luckily, Stanford definitely has more resources and great staff to attract dual hires."

Evidence suggests that dual-hiring might boost faculty satisfaction and retention rates and improve hiring for minorities and women, without many detriments. Even when a second professor is hired because their spouse was recruited, productivity levels do not drop, and Stanford in particular is still very strict about upholding its high standards.

"People come with lives — it is definitely beneficial to the couple and to the institution if a couple can receive tenure at the same place," said Michele Elam. "Of course, both candidates still need to undergo the same rigorous vetting processes, but more priority or a second glance will be offered in a potential dual-hire. And it is important to note that this applies to same-sex couples at Stanford, as well."

Students have also noticed advantages to having professors who are content and share good camaraderie.

Taylor Nguyen '13, who was a member of the Elams' "Beyond Survival" IHUM, felt that having a married couple co-teach a class "actually added to the dynamics of the class."

"They are both brilliant professors with a lot of valuable insight," she said. "During lectures they were very professional, but [during discussions] you could definitely tell that the seamless flow of the discussion was aided by their years together."

Also, it was just nice to see professors working together "who had such great respect and admiration for each other," she added.

## **#2. Dual-Career Academic Couples – What Universities Need to Know**

In August, 2008 the Michelle R. Clayman institute for Gender Research Stanford University published an important research on dual-careers in academia. Called, Dual- Career Academic Couples – What Universities Need to Know, the executive summary appears below. The full report can be found at [http://gender.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/DualCareerFinal\\_0.pdf](http://gender.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/DualCareerFinal_0.pdf) and you are urged to look over the table of contents and read about any topics that are of particular interest to you. One of the authors of the report, Londa Schiebinger, will be one of our guests on September 24, 2013.

### Executive Summary

Meting the needs and expectations of dual-career academic couples— while still ensuring the high quality of university faculty—is the next great challenge facing universities. Academic couples comprise 36 per- cent of the American professoriate—representing a deep pool of talent (Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> The proportion of academic couples (i.e., couples in which both partners are academics) at four-year institutions nationally has not changed since 1989.<sup>2</sup> What has changed is the rate at which universities are hiring couples. Academic couple hiring has increased from 3 percent in the 1970s to 13 percent since 2000.<sup>3</sup> In a recent survey of Canadian science deans, couple hiring emerged as one of the thorniest issues confronting their faculties.<sup>4</sup> Administrators in this study concur.

### SEE

[http://gender.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/DualCareerFinal\\_0.pdf](http://gender.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/DualCareerFinal_0.pdf)  
**PAGE 1 for figure.**

One department chair commented that no other aspect of his job arouses as much controversy as dual-career hiring.

Despite the sizable number of academic couples in the workforce, little institutional and national data exist describing their career trajectories.<sup>5</sup> Institutional approaches to couple hiring tend to be ad hoc, often shrouded in secrecy, and inconsistent across departments. Faculty tend to be unfamiliar with key issues and solutions, and many know little about their own university's policies and practices.

But change is afoot. Universities across the country have begun devoting attention to dual-career issues. In recent years, a number of conferences and collaborative

### **Support for dual careers opens another avenue by which universities can compete for the best and brightest.**

efforts have sprung up, and university hiring practices are evolving to keep pace.<sup>6</sup> In the same way that U.S. universities restructured hiring practices in the 1960s and 1970s in response to increased access to higher education and the advent of equal opportunity legislation, institutions are again today undergoing major transitions in hiring practices with respect to couple hiring.

Ten percent of faculty respondents in this study are part of a couple hire, or “dual hire,” at their current institutions (this figure includes both recruitment hires and retentions).<sup>7</sup> Ten percent is a small, but important, proportion of faculty hiring. Universities are in danger of losing some of their most prized candidates if suitable employment cannot be found for qualified partners. In independent internal studies analyzing factors influencing failed faculty recruitment, two prominent U.S. research universities found that partner employment ranked high (number one or two) in lists that included salary, housing costs, and some 14 to 15 other factors.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, a German study found that 72 percent of German scientists abroad cited “career opportunities for the partner” as a decisive factor for scientists contemplating a return home.<sup>9</sup>

There are three key reasons for taking a new look at couple hiring:

**Excellence.** Our study suggests that couples more and more vote with their feet, leaving or not considering universities that do not support them. Support for dual careers opens another avenue by which universities can compete for the best and brightest. A professor of medicine in our survey commented that talented academics are often partnered, and “if you want the most talented, you find innovative ways of going after them.”

**Diversity.** Over past decades, universities have worked hard to attract women and underrepresented minorities to faculty positions and, in many instances, are meeting with success. The new generation of academics is more diverse in terms of gender and ethnicity than ever before. With greater diversity comes the need for new hiring practices. Institutions should not

expect new participants to assimilate into current practices built around old academic models and demographics. This undermines innovation, opportunity, and equity. New hiring practices are needed to support a diverse professoriate—and one of these practices is couple hiring.

**Quality of Life.** Faculty today are a new breed determined more than ever to strike a sustainable balance between working and private lives. Couple hiring is part of a deeper institutional restructuring around quality-of-life issues. To enhance competitive excellence, universities are increasingly supporting faculty needs, such as housing, child care, schools, and elder care, in addition to partner hiring. Attending to quality-of-life issues has the potential to contribute stability to the workplace. Faculty may be more productive and more loyal if universities are committed to their success as whole persons. While often costly up front, assisting faculty address the challenges of their personal lives may help universities secure their investments in the long run.

As a relatively new hiring practice, couple hiring is fraught with complexities and pitfalls. The reality is, however, that 21st century universities increasingly hire couples. One purpose of this report is to help institutions do a better job of partner hiring. To this end, we recommend that universities develop agreed-upon and written policies or guidelines for vetting requests for partner hiring and seeing that process through the university. The ultimate goal is not necessarily to hire more couples but rather to improve the processes by which partner hiring decisions are made.

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### **3. Pas de Deux: Dual-Career Searches**

From Inside Higher Ed November 11, 2015

*Elizabeth Simmons and R. Sekhar Chivukula, a dual-career academic couple, offer advice on navigating joint searches for new positions.*

Academics are increasingly part of dual-career couples, and when one partner is ready to make a transition to a new position, perhaps in a new location, two professional trajectories need to be maintained. If you are confronting your first job search as a couple, you may wonder how to

undertake the search jointly and what factors to bear in mind.

We would like to share some ideas on how to approach these transitions, based both on our experiences as spouses who have been through several job changes together and on stories from friends who are in dual-career couples. We are married to each other and both of us are physics professors at the same institution. We met when Sekhar was in graduate school and Elizabeth was an undergraduate, wed after finishing our doctorates, and have raised two children (one grown, one still at home). We place great value on living together in one household and have made career choices with this in mind. We have worked at both private and public universities, have undertaken a long-distance midcareer move together, and have dealt with a year where one of us split time between two cities.

This essay will talk about aspects of dual-career searches that span the full transition cycle: from preparing to apply through the interview process and establishing new routines. The focus is on a subset of issues that particularly impact dual-career couples.

## **Negotiations**

While we usually think of negotiation as happening near the end of a search, as one responds to a job offer, a couple needs to engage in a process of negotiation when preparing for a job search, especially if it involves the possibility of relocation. Many factors go into the choices that must eventually be made; these should be openly acknowledged and discussed with care.

For instance, you will need to decide where to apply for jobs. Of the 4,000 institutions of higher education in the U.S., which would appeal to the academic members of your household? If one of you is not an academic, which locations would offer appropriate career opportunities? Each of you, working separately, might identify a different set of institutions (or locations) that look interesting for particular reasons. Working separately to enumerate the viable possibilities and the key factors governing your choices is a good place to start. Along the way, each of you should examine your current situations: What works well now professionally and personally? What is missing?

To identify opportunities of mutual interest, you will need to reconcile your

understanding of the current situation with that of your partner and combine your lists of appealing institutions (or locations) before sending out résumés. So set aside time for a conversation. Since this will be a negotiation, perhaps you should review the basics of **integrative** or interest-based bargaining beforehand.

Start by exploring each person's underlying priorities (interests), whether academic or personal, and be flexible about detailed solutions (positions). For example, first discuss the relative importance of general geographical issues, such as proximity to family, daily commuting times or weather, before suggesting specific regions in which to focus your search.

### **Trade-offs**

Can you recall the last time you moved to a new home either as an individual or as part of a couple? You probably thought about where to live relative to your workplace(s). The various locations you considered for your home likely varied along many dimensions, such as affordability, proximity of recreation facilities or quality of K-12 schools. Yet some neighborhoods that were desirable for those reasons may have also required a longer commute or using a car to reach your workplace. You probably made trade-offs among different factors in order to pick where to live.

Job searches are notoriously rife with trade-offs. Even if you will continue to live in the same home as before, you may have to choose among factors like commuting time, salary and job satisfaction. Working farther from where you live may enable you to make enough money to retire earlier or to purchase services that make the commute more tolerable. Perhaps a job that promises more interesting or fulfilling work will be more attractive than one that is better compensated. When your search involves possibly moving to a new home, the inconvenience of moving and the changes to your quality of life should be included in your evaluation of the relative merits of different jobs.

But the trade-offs inherent in a dual-career search are even more complex. Each pair of positions you contemplate will present a different combination of benefits and challenges, whether you are looking at professional or lifestyle issues. Each of you may have different preferences. For instance, one of you may be far more amenable to taking on a longer commute in return for a higher salary or shorter workweek.



Each person's choices can also have dramatic effects on the other partner. For example, every hour your partner spends commuting is potentially an hour less you spend together as a family. To understand the interplay of these issues, it is crucial to discuss the factors and your preferences openly. That tempting pair of job offers in adjoining towns may turn out to be a nonstarter if the affordable homes near the biking trails are far from the workplace of the partner who finds long commutes exhausting.

Even when you are attempting to promote the careers of both partners, it is likely that a given move will offer a more interesting opportunity or better professional fit to one partner at any given time. If both are academics, for instance, one may be moving to a department with many potential teaching or research collaborators in their area while the other will be the only person working on their topic at the entire institution. It is important to remain aware of this throughout the search and to explicitly compare the opportunities available at every new place to the possibilities for each partner in the current location.

### **Sticking Together**

One of the murkiest stages of the dual-career job search is the interview process. Ultimately, each of you must interview for specific openings and be considered on your individual merits as a prospective employee. But when one of you is invited to campus, it may be unclear how to ensure the other will also be interviewed by a nearby employer. The path toward that additional interview may be full of long waits, sudden requests for information and last-minute applications for positions not originally on your radar.

Some institutions offer assistance in connecting the partners of employees or new hires to job opportunities at the university or in the area. For example, a list of universities advertising dual career programs is [here](#). Alternatively, the Academic Human Resources website of an institution often contains information about whom to contact for further details on these issues.

Higher Education Recruitment Consortia ([HERC](#)) and regional employment networks (see e.g., [MI-WIN](#)) are now becoming more widely available. National dual career search tools enabling academic couples to search for institutions where there could be jobs for both of them are now also being offered online, including [one](#) at Inside Higher Ed.

At some point, you will likely wish to inform an institution that you are part of a dual-career couple. People's strategies in this regard vary widely according to their circumstances. An early-career academic, or anyone who must definitely make a move, may prefer to receive a job offer before requesting spousal accommodation. This enables them to discuss the issue when they have the maximum leverage and when they know the request will not impact their candidacy. Indeed, addressing dual-career issues is now commonly part of negotiating the details of a job offer (see, e.g., this [essay](#)) so the employer will not be surprised if the issue is raised at that point.

On the other hand, someone who already has a permanent position, or who otherwise does not feel compelled to move, might ask about the possibility of dual-career assistance even before submitting an application. This gives the institution more time to explore options for the second partner, which can increase the probability of a successful dual recruitment. If both of you are senior academics, and especially if the search committee is likely to already know you are both academics (e.g., if you are both in the same small field), then you may wish to contact the college dean or the associate provost of academic human resources for a confidential conversation about how the university handles dual-career situations.

During the interview stage, you may be tempted to focus on one ideal outcome to the exclusion of others. But you should consciously resist. The world does not owe you a solution to your unique situation; happenstance, your priorities and your degree of flexibility will all play a role. If it is important for your professional satisfaction that both of you achieve tenure-system positions, do not assume one will definitely materialize for a partner who is initially hired in a fixed-term or postdoctoral position.

If either of you is entering an untenured position, do not bank on achieving tenure. The vagaries of the national and state economies, enrollment trends, grant availability, the publishing industry and other such factors are beyond your control -- and any of these could derail your assumptions.

As you complete the interview phase, be sure to get all of the important elements of each job offer in writing. If tenure requires a vote of the Board of Trustees, wait till the trustees have actually voted before making decisions predicated on your having tenure. If relocating depends on your both receiving jobs in the new location, make sure you each have a written

offer in hand before resigning your current posts or putting your house on the market. Even with the best intentions on all sides, unwritten promises may not survive the term of the administrator who made them.

## **Projecting the Future**

When preparing to choose among your options (and we hope you will have several), think through in detail what it will be like to live and work in a new location, in comparison with your present lifestyle.

For instance, locate your proposed workplaces, the neighborhood where you would probably live and any amenities you would visit regularly (e.g., grocery, gym, schools, medical clinics) on a map. Talk through your typical days as if living them on fast-forward. Given your professional schedules, who will be responsible for daily chores like walking the dog, picking up dry cleaning, cooking dinner or gathering kids from day care?

If one of you has a schedule that will require longer or fluctuating work hours (e.g., being on call or attending dinner meetings), does that mean that the other person will have to take on more home-based responsibilities for a time?

If you are moving from a situation where you both had similar hours and commutes to one where they will be quite dissimilar, it is especially important to talk this through in advance. We went through such a move once and had not anticipated the impact of differential schedules. As a result, our first year was more frustrating and exhausting than it need have been; each of us felt the other was failing to appreciate the “true” stresses of the new situation. With some advance planning, we could have set up clearer expectations for ourselves.

As mentioned earlier, a contemplated move will often be more beneficial for one partner than the other. This is the time to discuss in detail how you will handle the situation and to decide whether the differential benefit is acceptable or is, ultimately, a deal breaker. For instance, are there opportunities for further training or education that would enable the less-advantaged spouse to prepare for later professional advancement while living in this location? Are there accommodations that can be made in your personal life to partially compensate for professional disadvantages? Finally, be aware that each partner may develop new interests or encounter

fresh opportunities over time. Anticipate evolution. Don't consider only how to optimize life during the first year after you move; try to project likely future configurations that may emerge.

For instance, suppose that you are moving because one of you is becoming department chair and the other will be a regular faculty member at a different institution. Clearly, you should think about how the details of everyday life will work under that scenario, where one partner needs to keep administrative 8-5 hours and the other has greater flexibility, including the ability to elect a longer commute and shorter workweek.

But no one is chair forever. Five years down the line, the partner who was chair may well return to the faculty and the other partner may be asked to lead a campus research center. Will the way you are thinking of configuring your life be able to accommodate such a shift? Or should you rethink where you might live?

Making a move as a dual-career couple is truly a challenge ... and the impact continues long after the last box has been unpacked. While the professional aspects of the new location may be paramount in your minds, don't forget to tend the home fires: talk about complex issues related to family, as well as career, when they arise.

Over time, keep examining the balance of duties each of you is undertaking at work and at home as your jobs change and as your children grow or your parents age. The practice that undertaking the job search will give you in communicating your priorities, asking for (rather than guessing) your partner's viewpoint and preparing for a variety of possible outcomes will stand you in good stead.

## **BIO**

Elizabeth H. Simmons is dean of Lyman Briggs College and R. Sekhar Chivukula is associate dean of the College of Natural Science, both at Michigan State University.