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# Proportion of Professors Hired as Couples Rises, Study Finds

By [ROBIN WILSON](#)

Thirty-six percent of professors at the nation's leading universities have partners who are also professors, and the proportion of faculty members who are hired as couples is on the rise. But even the nation's top research universities usually hire academic couples without written guidelines, raising questions about fairness and academic standards.

Those nuggets of information are among the findings in a hefty [new report](#) on academic couples by Stanford University's Michelle R. Clayman Institute for Gender Research, "Dual-Career Academic Couples: What Universities Need to Know." The institute's 98-page study—based on its 2006 survey of 9,043 faculty members at 13 top research universities—is one of the largest and most-detailed examinations yet of faculty couples. The 13 universities are not named in the report, but they are representative of the country's top research institutions, said Londa Schiebinger, director of the institute and a professor of the history of science at Stanford.

The report's authors wanted to study couples in academe because, they said, dealing with the so-called two-body problem—professors who have academic partners who want jobs at the same institution—is one of the most vexing issues in faculty hiring.

## **Complaints About Custom**

The practice is also controversial. The Stanford study found that 43 percent of the faculty members it questioned said hiring academic couples "prevents open competition." Nearly 45 percent said couples working in the same academic department create conflicts of interest, and nearly 30 percent said their departments had hired partners who were underqualified.

"We are not advocating that universities hire more couples," Ms. Schiebinger said in an interview. "We advocate they discuss the issue and put policies in place so when a partner for hire arrives you can vet that person in a rational, speedy, and reasonable way."

Ms. Schiebinger is interested in the issue both personally and professionally. Her longtime partner, Robert N. Proctor, is also a professor in her department at Stanford.

According to the report, the proportion of faculty members nationwide who are part of academic couples hasn't changed much since 1989. Forty percent of female professors and 34 percent of male professors are partnered with other academics.

What is changing is the rate at which universities are hiring professors as a couple. At the 13 top research universities Stanford studied, only 3 percent of professors hired in the 1970s came along with their partners, compared to 13 percent of those hired since 2000.

The Stanford Institute's extensive survey of faculty members uncovered other interesting details about academic couples. It found that only 2 percent of couples were recruited as a pair by the same university. Instead, in most cases in which couples get jobs at the same institution, one half of the pair receives an offer first and then helps negotiate an offer for the other. In 75 percent of those cases, the woman is the second hire.

## **Differences Between the Sexes**

Women are also more likely than men to turn down another job if their partner cannot find a faculty position at the same institution or in the general area. About 55 percent of women, compared to 41 percent of men, said their job mobility is limited by the fact that they are partnered with other professors.

The study also found that the top reason academic women who are part of an academic couple turn down an outside job offer is because their partner can't find a job in the area. By contrast, the No. 1 reason male professors who have academic partners do so is because of counteroffers they receive from their current universities.

The Stanford report also found that a large majority of academic couples tend to work in the same field, and women tend to do so to a greater degree than do men. Of female faculty members who are part of an academic couple, 83 percent in science are partnered with other science professors, 79 percent in law are partnered with other law professors, and 68 percent in medicine are partnered with other medical professors.

The Stanford institute's report urges universities to adopt policies to guide the hiring of academic couples so that the rules are clear. Only five of the 13 institutions the institute studied had such policies. The report says some of the negative feelings that other professors have about couple hiring may disappear if the process by which such hires are made were open and clear.

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