



Department Chair Online Resource Center

The Chair's Challenge: Hiring and Managing Couples and Partners

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Departments cannot ignore spousal or relational arrangements in hiring. The job plights of academic "stars" have received much media attention, but high-profile faculty represent only a small part of a typical university's vast partner universe.

In the traditional faculty hiring model, candidates were assessed strictly by academic credentials. Only recently have universities begun to comprehend the strategic importance of partner hiring. There are three kinds of dual-career couple job arrangements that a faculty member may present:

- 1) A partner employed outside the university
- 2) A partner employed in the same university but outside the department
- 3) A partner in the same department

With the first arrangement, a chair's obligations extend to only one person. But given the kinds of affiliations often forged in graduate school, it is no surprise that universities are filled with couples who either fall into or desire a version of the second or third arrangement. According to Ferber and Loeb (1997), 35% of men and 40% of women among full-time faculty have academic spouses. An even higher 55% of academics will have a partner employed at an academic institution at some time during their careers.

THE CHALLENGE OF HIRING COUPLES

The ideal prospective faculty member is an outstanding teacher; a highly productive researcher, scholar, or practitioner; and a solid department citizen. Giving priority to such hiring goals over the long term ensures a high-quality faculty. However, such criteria do not take partners into account, and a department thrives when it shows a humane concern for the personal realities of its faculty members. How then to balance the good of the individual faculty member with the good of the department, university, and students?

The most important response for a chair faced with a dual-career hiring situation is to do careful long-term planning that accommodates a range of potential scenarios. Once a couple is hired, both

partners may be at the same institution for decades. A strategic planning technique such as a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis helps predict the long-term viability of the hire. In the technique's simplest form, a four-box grid is drawn with Opportunities/Threats (how the hire affects the department/university) along one axis, and Strengths/Weaknesses (what the couple offers) along the other. By identifying and writing into each box a list that corresponds with each word, and then—the important part of the process—mapping the interactions, the chair can better evaluate the potential effects of the hire(s) on the department's mission.

When hiring is a negative. Not surprisingly, many chairs are skeptical about academic couples. The folklore surrounding spousal hiring underscores its difficulty:

- The prime candidate who got away when a partner in need of a job materialized out of nowhere.
- The English department forced to take the undercredentialed partner of a star physics researcher.
- The nasty divorce of a couple in the same department that divides the department.
- Couples whose home life interferes with their work life.

When hiring is a positive. The above situations are not inevitable. Chairs can view partner hiring as an exciting opportunity because as more couples view their relationship as a primary consideration in their job choice, supportive departments become inviting places for distinguished faculty.

- Universities that are sympathetic to couple arrangements have an edge: A department below the top tier may be able to hire two top-tier faculty because the couple is willing to come as a package. And given the spousal hiring climate, if both partners have good jobs, chairs will have less challenge retaining them.
- A department can more easily hire a "star" when it considers what position the partner might best fill. While the partner may not be the best on merit alone, he or she may still make a strong, positive contribution.
- Couples often improve networking in and among departments: A faculty member meets one member of a faculty couple and ends up working on a grant with the other partner.
- Ferber and Loeb's 1997 study found that women with academic partners are more productive than single women faculty or women married to nonacademics. A couple may be more productive than two unmarried individuals as they have a shared stake in the institution.

HOW TO HIRE COUPLES

Although most couples view two jobs with lifetime tenure as their ideal, chairs can put together other kinds of job combinations that make a couple “package” enticing: a shared line, an alternate-year line, a tenure line combined with a visiting professorship or instructorship with the potential for long-term renewal, research and soft money positions, administrative positions with teaching opportunities, etc.

Such jobs are nearly impossible for a department chair to broker alone, however. The institutions that have been most successful at generating opportunities for couples share four characteristics:

- 1) A university-wide administrative support mechanism, such as a dual-career office, that devotes personnel and time to addressing the issue.
- 2) An imaginative group of deans and higher administrators who are willing to respond creatively and flexibly to hiring (while honoring department autonomy).
- 3) A climate of cross-discipline cooperation among departments and units that exists because of such administrative support.
- 4) Financial incentives for departments willing to hire partners, including full or partial funding of lines from extra departmental sources.

AFTER THE HIRE: MANAGING COUPLES IN A DEPARTMENT

Since dual careers are here to stay, a chair’s real work managing couples only begins with the hiring. The major personal issues of many faculty members’ lives—pregnancy, childbirth, child care, family emergencies, major illnesses, divorces, and elder care—are all more complicated when two people are involved. Since chairs not only oversee two individuals, but also, on occasion, “the relationship,” it is important for them to have open, ongoing discussions with a couple about departmental expectations.

For example, in a department where everyone is expected to attend faculty meetings, a couple’s habit of one partner acting as proxy for the other can lead to strong resentment. While the couple may have seemingly legitimate reasons for their practice (e.g., to save on child care expenses), a chair can communicate with them how the relationship violates department custom.

related errands. We are able to give each other research and teaching advice. . . . Each of us understands exactly what the other goes through every day." This couple perceives the integration of personal and work lives as a way of being more productive.

The knowledgeable chair knows where every member of a couple falls along this continuum and responds to each of them as professionals accordingly.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A chair should always strive to treat partners as individuals: in evaluating them, distributing resources, assigning office space, giving recognition for work well done, and so forth.

Never assume that partners who sleep together, vote together. Academics are a notoriously independent lot. A chair cannot assume that bedroom loyalties overshadow a faculty member's inclination to think and act individually. On the other hand, never assume that couples who sleep together but claim they don't vote together aren't either fudging the truth or deceiving themselves. It is not the chair's job not to make such lack of objectivity an issue, but rather to comprehend it as a management reality.

An old department chair's joke holds that the fastest way to assure broad distribution of news is to tell several key faculty that the information you're about to give them is confidential. Never assume that private information given to one partner will be withheld from the other; assume that what is known by one is known by the other. Human nature being what it is, the more delicate or troublesome the issue—grievances, tenure and promotion—the more likely this is to be true.

Finally, always assume, in the absence of evidence otherwise, that couples who share a department or university strive to strike a professional balance between the spheres of home and work.

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