

Dual-Careers in Higher Ed - Part One

(Of Progress and Coping Strategies)

by Charles DuBois



Author: Charles DuBois

Charles C. DuBois is a freelance writer who recently retired after nearly 25 years as a communications professional with Penn State and Pennsylvania state government, and 15 years as a newsman.

While the emerging signs are encouraging for dual-career academics, there is still thorny terrain to be traversed. Institutions are responding to the value these couples represent and partners in academe are finding a more welcoming recruiting environment.

Still, there's progress to be made and talks across the negotiating table must be thought through and deliberate -- dollars, academic reputations, careers, and family ties depend on it. These issues can be particularly difficult for faculty couples compared with their counterparts in administration.

It's been called the "next great challenge facing universities." But, while the challenge still exists, there are ways to cope.

A Stanford University study released in 2008 said that couples hiring among academics has increased from 3 percent in the 1970s to 13 percent in the 2000s.

"A small, but significant number," said [Londa Schiebinger](#), lead author and director of Stanford's [Clayman Institute](#) for Gender Research from which a team surveyed 30,000 faculty members and examined the hiring practices of 13 leading American research universities.

The finding that an increasing number of universities have now rolled out policies and procedures on couples hiring confirms Schlesinger's belief that there is a "better institutional response."

Couples in higher education represent a "rich resource," she stressed, and the study bears her out. According to [Dual Career Couples: What Universities Need to Know](#) (pdf), 36 percent of faculty members have academic partners and an equal number have partners who are

professionals. Beyond sheer numbers, couples hiring is seen as a way to improve academic excellence, gender and ethnic diversity, and faculty retention.

"Faculty are voting with their feet," Schiebinger said of this last point. "They are going to universities where they are hiring dual-career couples."

Universities and colleges are not only moving away from case-by-case, ad hoc practices when it comes to couples, they are offering service and support through specialized dual-career offices and Web portals. Geographically isolated universities actually make couples hiring a human resources strategy. Others in more populated regions are banding together with nearby institutions to help with couples placement.

"...(U)niversities are far more accommodating in my view and more accommodating than they used to be," said Professor [Jack Carroll](#) who, with his wife, Professor [Mary Beth Rosson](#), was hired by Penn State's College of Information Sciences and Technology.

"People in my generation who were in dual academic career families when they were young were doing things like weekly commutes from Cornell to Washington, Washington to Boston, Atlanta to Washington -- just to remember three cases," he went on.

"That's a draining way to live, but in those days the concept of 'spousal hire' had not been invented."

[Joan Murrin](#), director of the [Dual Career Network](#) at the University of Iowa, has been an observer of the scene since 1994. Back when Murrin first benchmarked her fledgling operation with others, she could only find four or five colleges providing any aid for dual-career couples.

Now, she's an active part of the multi-institution exchange called the Higher Education Dual Career Network ([HEDCN](#)), which held its sixth conference at Virginia Tech in June. Nearly 50 universities with dual-career programs are listed on the HEDCN Web site. Clearly an advocate, Murrin said she has helped foster programs both in the U.S. and Canada, and soon will continue that work in Germany.

But, while there are these positive signs for dual-career couples, progress is not universal and recent tightening of budgetary belts has brought on its own difficulties.

University of Kansas researcher [Lisa Wolf-Wendel](#) noted while 85 to 95 percent of institutions say they're willing to try dual-career hiring, job-seeking couples are hesitant.

Lead author of the 2004 book, [The Two-Body Problem: Dual-Career-Couple Hiring in Higher Education](#), she said there's a real tension when the two sides approach one another. While an institution wants to know of a partner situation early in the hiring process, for applicants "there's a fear of wanting to ask."

"I don't know how to resolve that tension," said Wolf Wendel, a professor of educational leadership and policy studies. "I think it's a legitimate concern."

The impact is felt most by those early in their careers. Those with an established reputation and funding from an organization like the National Science Foundation can make a stronger case for getting hired as a couple.

Wolf Wendel's advice is careful timing in raising the subject of partner hiring.

"I'd be conservative and wait till you have an offer," she said.

Stanford's Schiebinger agreed that timing is always the issue when faculty couples enter the job market. Both partners should have their credentials in order before the search begins, she recommended, and an effort should be made to seek out colleges and universities friendly to couples hiring -- usually evidenced by well-established policies or the existence of an active dual-careers office.

And, she added, before the first-hire partner signs on the dotted line, it is particularly important to successfully complete negotiations for the second partner.

Joan Murrin of Iowa comes quickly to the point in her advice for dual-career couples:

"Be patient in your job search," she counseled. "Be persistent and be flexible."

According to Murrin, having a Plan B is particularly important for couples. Partners sometimes need to be creative and willing to rethink what they do.

"If you can't get a job (teaching) music theory, what are your transferable skills, especially in this economy?" she said.

More info

On June 16, 2009, the Clayman Institute brought academics and administrators together for a conference at Stanford--Dual-Career Academic Couples: Strategies and Opportunities -- during which a new [portal](#) with resources for dual-career couples was rolled out.

Follow this [link](#) to more information offered by HigherEdJobs.com. A Web search quickly reveals numerous other resources, including one at a site called ["On the Cutting Edge: Professional Development for Geosciences Faculty"](#).