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## THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION *Magazine & Journal Reader*

Thursday, April 20, 2006

### A glance at the spring issue of *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*: "Alphabetical discrimination" in economics

Scholars who are struggling to build an academic career in economics may need only to look at their last name to understand the source of their professional woes. A study by two economists has found that having a surname with a first letter that is earlier in the alphabet is correlated with several measures of success in the field.

The authors -- Liran Einav, an assistant professor of economics at Stanford University, and Leeat Yariv, an associate professor of economics at the California Institute of Technology -- examined faculty data at 35 top-ranked economics programs. They found that "faculty with earlier surname initials are significantly more likely to receive tenure at top-10 economics departments." At top-five programs, a person's probability of receiving tenure increased by 1 percent for each letter closer to the front of the alphabet that the beginning of their surname was.

The authors also found that, the earlier in the alphabet the first letter of their last name was, the more likely it was that economists would become fellows of the Econometric Society, or even receive the Clark Medal or Nobel Prize.

The authors call their findings an example of "alphabetical discrimination," and suggest that the phenomenon stems from the discipline's norm of crediting co-authors of publications alphabetically. They say the practice may be affecting tenure at top programs because "lower-ranked departments put more weight on vitae and publication counts, while top departments care more about visibility and impact. Surname initials may be more important for the latter."

They note that in disciplines like psychology, in which

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co-authors are listed according to their contribution, rather than alphabetically, there is no relationship between last names and tenure.

Ms. Einav (named as the article's first author) and Ms. Yariv (named last) add that the behavior of economists suggests an awareness of alphabetical discrimination. Between 1980 and 2002, they say, economists who had last names that began with letters later in the alphabet were less likely to participate in projects involving co-authors than were those who did not. The authors call for a turn away from the practice in economics of crediting authors alphabetically.

The [article](#), "What's in a Surname? The Effects of Surname Initials on Academic Success," is available to subscribers or for purchase on the journal's Web site.

--Jason M. Breslow

Background articles from *The Chronicle*:

- [Economists Look Inward and Consider the Health of Their Field](#) (1/9/2006)
- [A glance at The Journal of Economic Perspectives: The outlook for economics jobs in academe](#) (8/10/2004)
- [Taking On 'Rational Man': Dissident Economists Fight for a Niche in the Discipline](#) (1/24/2003)
- [Too Many Co-Authors?](#) (4/28/1995)

Opinion:

- [A Command Economy for Economists](#) (8/30/2005)

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