

Study shows dual-career academic couple hires on the rise

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(PhysOrg.com) -- He has a fancy-sounding title, but Robert Weisberg gives himself a blunt job description when explaining what he does as "special assistant to the provost for faculty recruitment and retention."

"I'm a broker and a scrounger," Weisberg, a law professor, said of his non-academic duties at Stanford.

A study released today by Stanford's Clayman Institute for Gender Research shows a growing number of faculty job candidates have partners who are also professors. The findings resonate with Weisberg, whose skills as a facilitator, schmoozer and career matchmaker for academic couples are in demand.

"I'll hear from a dean or a department chair trying to hire a target candidate saying the only way that person will take the job is if their husband or wife can get a job," Weisberg said.

He'll try to find room on campus for candidates' partners by making sure their resumes are in the right hands and getting a close look. He hunts for non-tenure teaching jobs at Stanford's institutes and centers, and calls his Silicon Valley connections to see if anyone is hiring. Once in a while, it comes down to locating laboratory space for a partner to do research.

"Sometimes I get a flat-out 'no,' and sometimes I can find a way in for the other person," Weisberg said. "But I can't tell anyone who to hire. My success rate is hard to measure, and it isn't as high as I'd like."

Hiring dual-career academic couples is one of the biggest challenges facing higher education, said Londa Schiebinger, a history of science professor and director of the Clayman Institute. It is not only a tool to recruit top academic talent; it is also a way to attract and retain top women and minority faculty

members, she said.

"Elite universities need to beware," Schiebinger said. "They can't rely on their status alone if they don't pay attention to this issue. Faculty today are voting with their feet."

According to the Clayman study of 9,000 professors at 13 leading U.S. research universities, 88 percent of those who negotiated a dual hire at their current institution said they would have refused the job had their partner been unable to get a position there. And about 20 percent said they or their partner would have taken a job at a less prestigious school to improve the couple's overall employment prospects.

The study found that academic-couple hiring increased from 3 percent in the 1970s to 13 percent between 2000 and 2006, the year the survey was conducted. Thirty-six percent of full-time faculty who participated in the survey have academic partners. Another 36 percent have partners with non-academic jobs, meaning nearly three-quarters of the respondents have partners whose employment opportunities probably need consideration.

Women are more likely than men to have academic partners, and women in academic couples said their partner's job status and opportunities are as important as their own, according to the findings. Women also said the No. 1 reason they refused a job offer was because their academic partners were not offered appropriate employment at the new location.

The study shows that 53 percent of female "first hires"—those hired before their mates—who get full professorships were with men of equal academic standing. Only 19 percent of male "first hires" who landed senior faculty spots had partners of the same academic rank.

The study does not identify the respondents or the schools they work for.

Schiebinger said the numbers mean schools have to change the way they woo candidates.

"Recruiters need to understand how personal and professional lives are linked in new ways given the diversity of the new generation of academics," she said. "You can't take practices that were developed to fit an earlier demographic and expect them to work for newcomers."

For Anthony Antonio and Christine Min Wotipka, the decision to teach at Stanford came down to the university's ability to find jobs for both of them in 2006. Antonio already had a tenured job at the School of Education but had taken a leave of absence to teach at the University of Minnesota, where Wotipka had a faculty spot.

Minnesota offered both of them the promise of tenure. But it was far from a perfect fit for the married couple, who said their teaching schedules kept them from spending as much time as they wanted with their two young children. Still, the decision to return to Stanford hinged on more than Antonio's tenured job there.

"When Stanford asked what my issues were in coming back, the top concern was getting a job for Christine," he said. "She'd have to give up a tenure-track position in Minnesota if we came back."

While Stanford could not offer Wotipka a tenure-track job, the school was able to hire her as an assistant professor and director of the master's program in international comparative education.

"I had a sick feeling writing my termination letter at Minnesota," Wotipka said. "It would've been my dream job. But in thinking of us as a family, this made the most sense. Stanford has so many benefits that I'm happy being here."

While the Clayman Institute study notes that more universities are paying attention to dual-career issues, only five of the 13 that participated in the survey have written policies on how to address the topic when it comes up.

At 12 of the universities surveyed, between 65 and 90 percent of faculty marked "I don't know" when asked if their school had a written policy.

Stanford does not have a written policy but encourages departments to be flexible when it comes to hiring partners.

"I ask people to be receptive when it comes to partner hiring," Weisberg said. "It's a virtue to think of how hiring the couple is good for the overall university, not just individual departments."

The Clayman study encourages universities to adopt written protocols or guidelines for dealing with dual-career hires, and recommends that schools improve communication about the issue and budget money to help make the hires happen, when appropriate.

The study also addresses a potential pitfall of dual-career hiring: that the practice encourages universities to hire an under-qualified candidate or show favoritism to a job candidate just because his or her partner has "star quality" the university is unwilling to lose.

Forty-three percent of the survey respondents worry that couple hiring jeopardizes open competition. And some respondents said they have been treated like "trailing spouses" since they were hired along with a partner.

"Some colleagues see me first as someone's wife," one professor said in responding to the survey. Another respondent said his institution regularly treats secondary hires as second-class citizens.

But the study, which measured journal and book publications by secondary full-time faculty hires, concludes the productivity levels of those professors are not significantly different from those of their peers.

For those who are concerned that dual-career hiring gives people an unfair advantage, Weisberg goes back to his lousy track record of getting partners academic jobs on campus.

"At most, you can say there's an earlier or more

generous look at someone's file," he said. "But there's almost nothing that a department would gain by picking a less qualified person. And the difficulty we have in getting a couple hired ensures there is no pernicious effect."

Provided by Stanford University

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