

Raising the Partner Issue

An important question for couple hiring is when first to raise the issue of a partner's employment needs. A partner complicates the already complex choreography required to hire or be hired. How can institutions and couples best inform each other about partners and expectations?

The Dilemma:

***Candidates** may think that they benefit by raising the issue as late as possible*

***Universities** need to find out about potential partner issues as early in the process as possible.*

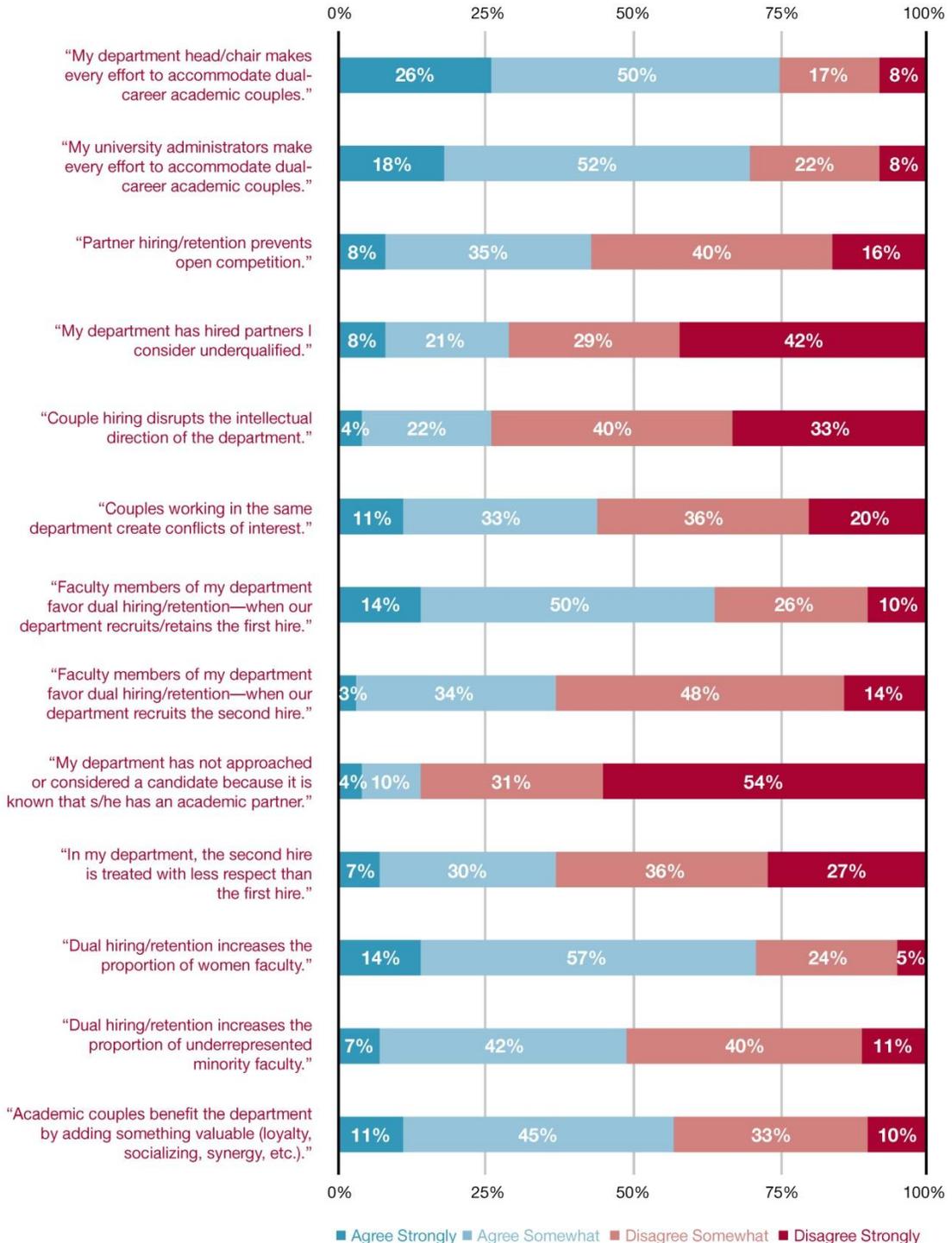
Concern: Raising the Partner Issue = Lost Opportunity

When to raise the issue is of real concern to applicants. If there are two equally impressive candidates for a job and one may not take the job without some accommodation for a partner, departments may opt—perhaps without fully realizing it—for the unencumbered candidate. In fact, 14 percent of our survey respondents agree that their department has not approached or considered a candidate because it is known that he or she has an academic partner (Figure 23).

This finding is borne out in respondent comments in which several faculty noted that candidates are sometimes taken out of the running for a position because they have known partners and the search committee presumes that these partners are unmovable. The issue is compounded by small fields and departments where, as one faculty commented, search committees already know “whether candidates have spouses who require academic jobs.”

Faculty Perceptions

FIGURE 23: FACULTY PERCEPTIONS OF DUAL-CAREER ACADEMIC COUPLE HIRING*



* Percentages do not add to 100 due to rounding.

What Candidates Need to Know

Popular Advice

Candidates, especially those fresh out of graduate school, attempt to learn the “rules.” And the pages of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, graduate advisors, blogs, and similar sources are rife with advice. The current “word on the street” is that candidates should wait for an offer before mentioning that they have a partner, out of fear that this might spell “trouble”—raise a red flag—to a search committee.

Each Institute is Different – Investigate Practices

Candidates should investigate dual-career hiring practices at institutions to which they apply because university cultures and procedures differ greatly. Where the culture encourages partner hiring, candidates may benefit by raising the issue early in the process. Many universities, especially large ones, make every effort to hire academic partners. Other universities, as we learned in interviews with university administrators, rarely or never hire academic partners at the junior level—some because they do not readily tenure their own junior faculty and hence do not invest in them in this way, others because they are in metropolitan areas where they rely on other institutions for partner employment opportunities.



What Universities Need

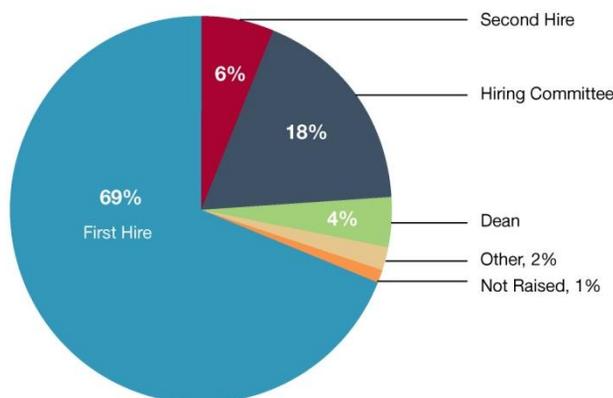
Earlier is Better

From the point of view of the university, the sooner an institution finds out about a candidate's needs, the sooner it can coordinate efforts to consider a partner hire. This may be less pressing at the senior level where appointments can take years to come to fruition, but it is especially urgent at the junior level, where, looking at our survey data, many couple hires occur. Newly minted Ph.D.s are often pressed to accept a position within three to four weeks. The time is, indeed, short for a university to vet a partner, especially if the position for that partner would not be in the same department or college as the original candidate. Administrators plead that the sooner they learn about a partner, the more leverage they have to negotiate a solution, especially if the partner is a strong candidate.

Uncovering Candidate Needs Can Be Tricky

Learning about candidates' needs in this regard can be tricky (Figure 24). Search committees tend to steer clear of partner-status questions to avoid perceptions of discrimination in hiring. Asking about marital or partnering status can lead to lawsuits based on discrimination. The rationale is that search committee members may discriminate by consciously or unconsciously succumbing to traditional gender stereotypes about work and family or the difficulty of dual-career hires. In the past, it was all too often assumed that women "follow their husbands" or, if married, leave to have children. Although it is common practice in Europe, for example, to list birth date and marital status on a professional curriculum vitae, in the United States it has become important that these private matters be kept private.

FIGURE 24: THE FIRST HIRE MOST OFTEN RAISES THE ISSUE OF A PARTNER HIRE†



† See Appendix D for methods notes.

Creating a Couple-Friendly Approach

How can universities encourage candidates to divulge information that might count against them?

Universities who use partner hiring as an advantage to attract and retain high-quality faculty can signal “friendliness” to the issue in job announcements, recruitment materials, and university websites. Some universities, for example, advertise that they are “responsive to the needs of dual-career couples” (referring here to candidates with either academic or non-academic partners). Other universities include a brochure highlighting their support for dual-career couples in materials sent to all candidates. This may put candidates at ease and encourage them to raise partner issues earlier in the process.

Some search committees, when they have narrowed the list to a few top candidates, lay out the process for partner hiring in a generic way, indicating what they need to know and when, in order to make the process work for both the candidate and the institution. Search committees in this instance provide information; they do not ask prohibited questions. Other universities ask search committees to inform all interviewing candidates of possibilities and procedures for partner placement—thus placing the onus on the institution rather than the candidate to bring up the issue. One university invites all interviewees to have a confidential meeting with its dual-career program officer; this officer can spell out possibilities and, importantly, the officer does not report back to the search committee about the candidate’s situation.



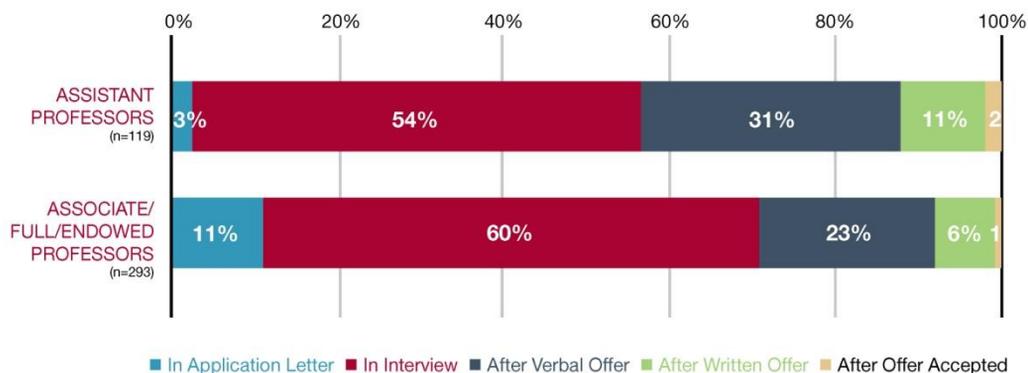
It is important that universities communicate carefully and regularly with faculty and search committees about how best to handle raising partner issues on their campus. All faculty need to know the policies and procedures, whatever those might be.

Survey Results

When to Raise the Issue?

Our survey opens a window onto current recruiting practices, showing that dual-hire candidates most often raise partner issues during interviews (57%). A number of candidates also raise the issue after a verbal offer (25%), a few in the letter of application (9%), and a few after a written offer (8%). Not surprisingly, timing differs by rank (Figure 25). Senior candidates are often being actively recruited by institutions and may feel more confident about discussing partner needs earlier in the hiring process.

FIGURE 25: WHEN IS PARTNER ISSUE RAISED? BY RANK OF FIRST HIRE**



Senior candidates have more leeway than junior candidates to raise a partner issue earlier in the process.

* Percentages do not add to 100 due to rounding.
‡ See Appendix D for methods notes.

Wait for Both Offers

Once the issue is raised and negotiated, the process may work best when each partner has a written offer in hand before a “first hire” accepts an offer. One savvy assistant professor remarked, “Many junior faculty naïvely accept the initial offer before the accompanying offer is suitably negotiated, which results in a poor accompanying offer.” He recommended that faculty—junior and senior—wait to accept an offer until both partners can simultaneously sign contracts. The process can take a long time, but he judged that it is “worth it in the end.” Another professor noted that candidates must apply pressure in order to achieve what both candidates want professionally.

Not All Negotiations Go Well

When promises are inferred and not put in writing, considerable misunderstanding can arise. One humanities professor commented that “during the recruitment process the dean and relevant departments were very positive and helpful [about a position for her partner], but since I have signed my contract and begun the job, my partner has been rather left in the dark about his own position and has still not received a contract.”

Others noted that promises made verbally, such as possible tenure-line appointments becoming available in the next few years, rarely come to fruition. Even if no promises are made, faculty often feel “misled” by possibilities discussed during the initial recruitment process. This fouls the air and makes for ill feelings. More than one-quarter (27%) of dual hires who rated their hiring experiences negatively thought they did not receive what they were promised during negotiations. Our faculty survey respondents and administrator interviews suggest that both the university and potential faculty benefit when the details are clear and in writing before either partner (first or second hire) accepts a contract.



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