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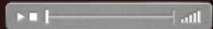
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## The Harvard Crimson

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**'The Couples Problem'****Two-professor pairs face challenges finding employment at the same university.**

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Crimson Staff Writers

Stephanie Jamison and Calvert Watkins share a marriage, a love of languages and academic aspirations.

But for the last year, Professors Jamison and Watkins have not shared a house, a university or, for that matter, even a coast.

She is now a professor of East Asian Languages and Sanskrit at the University of California at Los Angeles. He is the Thomas Professor of Linguistics and Classics here at Harvard.

Jamison and Watkins exemplify a glitch in the academic tenure system known as "The Couples Problem."

As Jamison and Watkins try to maintain academic careers and a family life, all the while separated by thousands of miles, they are far from unusual. Problems like theirs have weighed on couples—and, increasingly, on university administrators—for 30 years.

In part, the problem stems from the simple fact that the tenure system, designed at a time when it was barely thinkable to have two professionals in one family, was not made for couples.

The system was created for the typical 1950s professor—a husband whose career was supported by a stay-at-home wife who often doubled as an overqualified research assistant.

With just one career to consider, such couples could move from city to city as the professor worked his way up the tenure track.

But as women began entering the academy in large numbers in the 1970s, a new factor entered the great tenure race.

For many couples, the challenge doubled from finding one suitable tenure offer to two. And finding two acceptable tenure offers at the same institution—or in the same state, for that matter—is like trying to find two needles in the same haystack.

Three decades later, the problem continues to plague academic couples.

Solutions are tough to come by, and the problem weighs on universities nationwide.

For decades, Harvard has not been on the front lines of solving the couples problem. But recently, the issue came onto the radar screens of Harvard's top administrators at a meeting last summer of the University's deans.

Professors and administrators agree that in order to stay competitive, the University will need to find innovative solutions for this 30-year-old quandary.

**THE OLD DAYS**

For decades, finding employment for spouses was not just a low priority—it was against the rules.

Harvard and peer institutions across the country had official policies against "nepotism"—in effect, against hiring professors' wives—that were not torn down until the 1970s when the federal government stepped in.

These nepotism policies limited the career of Mary Fieser.

At the time of her death in 1997, after more than 40 years of work in Harvard labs and with Harvard students, Fieser was remembered as one of the "outstanding women chemists in the world" by Elias J. Corey, the Emery professor of organic chemistry and the 1990 Nobel Laureate in Chemistry.

"She was a major figure in our department," Corey said, adding that Fieser was "like a mother for generations of graduate and undergraduate students at Harvard."

But Fieser never was a professor at Harvard.

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For her entire career, Fieser, who co-authored the seminal chemistry text of the 1950s and 1960s but never officially obtained a Ph.D., worked as a research assistant for Professor Louis Fieser, her husband and co-author.

She continued writing chemistry texts for decades after her husband died.

Near the end of the Fiesers' careers, the world changed.

Executive orders of 1970 and 1972 meant that the University, like thousands of others schools, businesses and institutions, risked losing its federal contracts if it failed to correct discriminatory employment policies—including its "nepotism policy."

But while tearing down the "nepotism policy" took just months of federal pressure, correcting the tenure system that grew up with the discriminatory policy and erasing its effects on academic culture was not so easy.

While the couples problem has the potential to affect everyone in the academy, it has in the past had a particularly detrimental effect on women—whose careers have traditionally taken a back seat.

Jamison says the institutional bias against academic wives remains.

"There used to be a general feeling that faculty wives are simply some kind of add-on," Jamison says. "It took them a very long time to realize that I was independently an academic."

#### **PATH-BREAKERS**

In the 1970s, a small number of academic couples did manage to balance two careers and marriage. Their stories sound remarkably like Jamison's and Watkins' today.

Saltonstall Professor of History Charles S. Maier '60 and Pauline Maier '60, a professor of history at MIT, were one of the rare two-professor couples of that era.

In the 1970s, Charles Maier taught at Harvard, while his Pauline Maier taught at the University of Massachusetts.

In 1974, Charles Maier's assistant professorship expired and he was not offered a new appointment at Harvard.

He found a position at Duke University, but at that same time, she received a tenure offer from the University of Wisconsin at Madison.

He spent roughly three years commuting between Wisconsin and North Carolina.

He says the traveling took a serious toll on his family, both personally and financially.

It was not until the 1980s that Charles and Pauline Maier were both able to find employment in the Boston area.

Maier says good posts at a university or college are much harder to find than jobs as doctors or lawyers.

"If both members of a couple are academically ambitious and both well qualified, the problem is not just finding jobs, the problem is also finding jobs that both think are fully rewarding," Maier said.

In the 1980s, the problem made divorced couples, who were often freer to pick up and move, better hires for universities.

At Yale in the 1980s and early 1990s, Judith Rodin—then a dean and provost, and now president of the University of Pennsylvania—noticed the trend toward looking for divorced couples.

"That was the time you could move someone," Rodin says. "I thought that was so un-family friendly."

#### **HERE AND NOW**

With no solution in sight, the couples problem is still very much one that troubles academia.

Last year, Harvard lost one of its star professors, philosophy and Afro-American studies professor K. Anthony Appiah, because he couldn't stand the commute anymore.

Appiah had spent seven years commuting nearly daily between Boston and New York, where he lives with his partner.

Though he says he racked up nearly every type of frequent flyer perk possible, the travelling grew to be too much to bear. So when Princeton came knocking on his door last year, he

jumped at the offer to relocate.

"I realized that I was very worn down by the past seven years," Appiah says.

Though a long-distance relationship is tough on any couple, raising children with a partner who lives across state lines is a particularly difficult task.

Harvard History Professor Susan G. Pedersen '81-'82, who stepped down last year from her position as dean of undergraduate education, has two young children—and a husband whose academic career brought him to New York.

Her husband, Thomas Ertman, was a professor for nine years in Harvard's government department, but when he was not offered tenure, he accepted a tenured spot in New York University's sociology department.

For the year, he is back at Harvard as a visiting professor in the Social Studies program.

The family continues to reside in Cambridge, and Ertman keeps an apartment in New York.

When he worked at NYU, Ertman would stay in Cambridge through Monday night to have dinner with the children, but then he'd jet back to New York, where he would spend the rest of the week.

Though Pedersen's family, like many others where both parents are professors, survived those long-distance years, she says the lifestyle took its toll.

"I can't recommend this way of life," she says.

And Harvard's tenure system—whereby junior faculty spend several years at Harvard before the University decides, notoriously rarely, to tenure them—is tough on a young family, Pedersen says.

"Right now, it's hard for junior Faculty to sit it out at Harvard with both people in very uncertain jobs," Pedersen says.

#### **OUTSIDE THESE HALLOWED WALLS**

The couples problem isn't unique to Harvard. Outside Cambridge, universities nationwide have instituted measures to confront the couples problem, with limited success.

Solving the problem will take creativity, say administrators at several major institutions.

"One of the things I had fun doing as the Yale provost was looking for academic couples," Rodin says. "We challenged the faculty at that time to think about couples that were really exemplar couples, and we created extra slots—sometimes for the man, sometimes for the woman—and we brought four or five such couples."

Universities should "encourage all their professors to marry airline pilots," jokes Hanna H. Gray, president emerita of the University of Chicago and a member of the Harvard Corporation, the University's highest governing body.

But as long as professors meet their spouses in grad student seminars—as Gray met her husband—and not while flying the friendly skies, something must be done, professors and administrators agree.

Some schools attempt to accommodate two-professor couples with official policies that allow them to make new positions for the spouses of scholars they are recruiting, called "spousal lines."

In some regions, schools work together to set up official networks, so that if one institution is hiring a member of an academic couple, the other schools will be notified and asked to consider hiring the spouse of that individual.

The University of Pennsylvania has set up such a network for all the schools in the Philadelphia area.

"The institutions all benefited from this," says Mary Patterson McPherson, president emerita of Bryn Mawr College.

"Some collaboration and leadership is hugely important," McPherson says. "You can't do it all by yourself—a single institution can't do all that."

#### **HARVARD'S UNIQUE PLACE**

Harvard does not endorse the spousal lines policy.

One reason for this stance is that even assuming both members of the couple are of the highest credentials, using spousal lines can set a dangerous precedent.

"To actually create positions for spouses and to make that an official policy is tricky, because then everyone that's hired will expect that for his or her spouse," Diebold Professor of Indo-European Linguistics and Philology Jay Jasanoff says.

Harvard is unique for the extreme selectivity of who is offered tenure.

The institution will not appoint a spouse if there's any chance that there is someone more qualified in that field who would be better for the job.

It is extremely difficult at Harvard to ask a department to offer an appointment to a scholar it doesn't particularly want or need—no matter how qualified that person may be.

"At some institutions, a dean or president can be strong enough to lean on a department to hire the spouse, but you can't do that here," Charles Maier says.

At Harvard, all tenure recommendations ultimately come from the departments. Harvard has not set up an official network in the Boston area to deal with the issue.

But, in an unofficial capacity, the University seeks to work with other schools in the Boston area to find suitable employment for academic spouses.

"We're very lucky in that there are so many institutions in the Boston area," says Associate Dean for Faculty Development Laura Gordon Fisher.

But professors and administrators say Harvard's elite position might make other universities hesitant to take Harvard's leftovers.

"How do you politely say, We want Mrs. X, but Mr. X isn't quite as good, so you should take her," Maier asks.

**THE ROAD AHEAD**

Professors and administrators seem to agree that Harvard's continued inability to deal with the two couples problem has hurt the University in its quest to recruit the world's top minds.

"I happen to know of several of cases where Harvard has missed making a first-rate appointment for that reason," Jasanoff says. "Most people who have dealt with Harvard have some sense that Harvard could try a little harder on this score, but of course it's part of being "number one" that you don't have to try that hard."

Winthrop Professor of History Stephan Thernstrom says he agrees—although Harvard's loss might be good for the country overall.

"It doubtless is not bad for American society if academic talent is spread around a little," Thernstrom says.

But administrators say the problem is on Harvard's radar screen.

At a meeting of Harvard's deans last summer, the University's top administrators batted around possible solutions to the problem. While they did not arrive at any concrete solutions, University Provost Steven E. Hyman says the administrators recognize the importance of the decades-old problem.

"One of the things that we shared is an attempt to really help each other when we're trying to recruit two people at once to the University," Hyman says.

Hyman cites the example of the University pursuing a chemist and a historian.

"If the chemistry department doesn't have a slot and lab space, there's not much that can be done within Harvard," Hyman says. "Conversely, when there is a space at the University...then I think the deans are going to be aware of the need to be helpful to each other."

Hyman says the deans also discussed what the University can do to help spouses find jobs at other universities in the area.

"We need to do more of that," Hyman says.

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