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Study of Couples in Academe Finds Least Stress When Both Spouses Work at Same College

By ROBIN WILSON

Academic couples who work at the same university are happier and report less stress in balancing their jobs and their family lives than do dual-earner couples in which one spouse works at a university and the other works at a different institution or outside academe.

The finding is among the results of a new study of 276 couples completed by scholars at Cornell University's Careers Institute, which is supported by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. The study is called "Intimate Academics: Co-Working Couples in Two American Universities."

Nationwide, about 40 percent of male faculty members and 35 percent of female faculty members are married to other academics. As those proportions have grown in the last decade, accommodating couples has become a chief concern in university hiring. Cornell's study is one of the first to explore the phenomenon, and to document the benefits to couples of working at the same institution.

"There are a fair amount of formal and informal policies at universities to adjust their employment to accommodate spouses," says Stephen Sweet, associate director of the Careers Institute, "but there is almost no research on the subject."

The 276 couples were identified for study because at least one spouse worked for one of two universities in upstate New York, which the study does not name. Over all, 17 percent of the individuals in the study were married to someone else who worked at the same university. Of those couples, about half -- 23 -- were pairs in which each spouse was a professor or academic administrator.

The study found that men whose wives worked at the same university spent six more hours per week working than men whose wives worked elsewhere. But the men whose wives worked at the same university reported greater family success and less "negative spillover" of stress from home to work.

Women with advanced degrees whose husbands worked at the same university reported being more satisfied with their marriage and family life than other married women in the study. And women with school-age children whose spouses worked at the same university reported working fewer hours than other women and reported greater success in balancing work and family obligations.

Another key finding was that couples who worked at the same university were more likely than others to place an equal priority on both partners' careers and less likely to favor the husband's over the wife's.

"Our study isn't intended to say that academic environments are entirely suited to work and family life," says Mr. Sweet, who completed the study with Phyllis Moen, director of the institute. "But co-working relationships help to buffer some of the work and family strains."

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