

**Improving Faculty Retention:  
A Networking Program for Spouses/Partners Seeking Employment as Administrators  
at the University of Virginia**

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**Abstract**

Because socialization and networking are key factors in finding employment, I propose to set-up a networking program for spouses/partners of new faculty members. This networking program will increase their chances of finding administrative positions at the University. It will also facilitate the social and organizational integration of dual career couples with diverse needs. This program is a cost-effective initiative to improve faculty retention as spousal unemployment is one of the factors influencing faculty members' decision to leave the University.

This proposal addresses the issue of employment for partners/spouses seeking administrative positions at the University of Virginia. It specifically focuses on improving professional networking opportunities for spouses/partners of faculty members who are new to the University.

Research shows that networking-the role of social contacts and personal connections- is a key factor in finding employment (Calvo-Armengol & Jackson, 2004; Krauth, 2004; Topa, 2001). Indeed, networking is an effective way to gain access to informal organizational knowledge, resources and people. Networking often leads to information which may result into employment. Networking takes time and needs to be maintained and developed over the longer term. When partners of new faculty members arrive to the University, they usually do not know other fellow administrators on Grounds. Their approach is first to apply for jobs via the University Human Resources website. Many of the administrative positions listed are only open to current UVa employees, which reduce the pool of employment opportunities and complicate the job search. In addition, unemployment can be isolating and stressful, especially when the job seeker is new to town. By connecting with other fellow administrators, spouses/partners of faculty members can get encouragement, fellowship, and moral support from their peers.

Although the University cannot guarantee spousal hiring, it is in its best interest to offer support services that increase chances of employment for partners of new faculty members. Research shows that spousal unemployment has a negative effect on faculty retention (Burke, 1988; Wolf-Wendel, Twombly, & Rice, 2000). As the Clayman report states, faculty members “whose partners continue to look for academic jobs are likely to be easily recruited away if another institution can offer a partner an appropriate academic position” (Schiebinger, Henderson & Gilmartin, p.24, 2008). One possible solution to address this problem is to offer a networking program to spouses who seek employment as University administrators. This program would be available to spouses/partners of faculty members in their first year of employment. The idea is to pair up newly-hired academic couples with dual-career couples currently employed at the University.

For instance, a mentoring couple could facilitate the introduction of a new job-seeking spouse to administrators across Grounds for informational interviews. This networking program would also be very effective in supporting couples with diverse needs, such as foreign spouses, same-sex and minority partners. For example, an international dual-career couple who may be new to the United States would need support to learn about cultural and institutional norms. Dual-career mentors could provide knowledge and tips about “how to navigate the system”.

This networking program would be relatively easy to implement because it could be embedded in existing successful faculty mentoring programs sponsored by the Institute for Faculty Advancement and the Teaching Resource Center at the University. Leveraging existing university resources to implement this program would save time, money and labor to the University.

### **Program goals**

This networking program will accomplish the following objectives:

- Offer a professional network of contacts to spouses seeking employment as University administrators.
- Increase chances for spouses of new faculty members to find employment at the University.
- Support the professional and social needs of spouses by connecting them with other dual-career couples at the University.
- Facilitate the integration of dual-career couples with diverse needs such as foreign, same-sex and minority couples.
- Improve faculty retention by increasing faculty satisfaction with University's support services to spouses and partners.
- Leverage University resources and reduce program implementation cost by incorporating this networking program into other successful mentoring programs currently offered at UVa.

### **Program structure and timeline**

- April: Call to current UVa faculty and administrators to volunteer in the program. Faculty and administrator mentors would be colleagues with significant professional experience, who are willing to support others in navigating their careers at the University.
- May: Mentors selection and training.
- June-July-August: New faculty members, whose spouses/partners are seeking employment as University administrators, are invited to apply to the networking program.
- September: New faculty members and their spouses are paired-up with dual-career couples who are composed of a faculty member and an administrator. Their first meeting takes place over

lunch at the Garden Room (courtesy of the University). Both mentors and mentees set up an agreement about meeting frequency and location (maybe once-a-month over coffee?).

- October: the University hosts a seminar/presentation with a panel of dual-career couples, for new hires and their spouses to learn about the reality of dual employment at the University. Presenters will share tips about interviewing, the culture of the University etc...
- November: Mentors meet with their mentees.
- December: Contact mentors and mentees to assess the effectiveness of the program
- January-February-March: Mentors meet with their mentees.
- April: Assessment of the program via in-person interviews and online survey.
- May: the UVa office in charge of this program issues a report assessing the effectiveness of this networking initiative.

Thank you for taking the time to read my proposal!

Best regards,

Murielle de Wekker, Ph.D.

## References

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