

LET'S TALK ABOUT



Paying the **PRESIDENT'S** **SPOUSE**

One leader's wife calls for better communication in negotiating the tricky issue of compensation.

ASK A GROUP OF PRESIDENTS' SPOUSES what's on their minds, and they're likely to say "compensation for the partner." As more spouses of academic presidents come to expect compensation or recognition for the various duties they assume in advancing their mate's presidencies, the issue of pay for partners and the waters beneath it remain murky. Paying the president's spouse is a complex matter and a source of controversy not only among trustees (who may be concerned about public fallout) but among partners themselves.

Few people have a complete understanding of the roles presidential spouses fill. We are most visible as smiling co-hosts—at more functions than people realize. But we really earn

our stripes behind the scenes, as ambassadors and troubleshooters, sounding boards and speechwriters, privy councilors and stewards of some very expensive real estate.

The partner's position is not one that lends itself to precise definition or quantification. In the public sector, paying the spouse is especially complex, because job descriptions and annual evaluations may be required. But it is not an easy call in the private sector, either. Never fear! We are not a group that could ever form a union.

Now comes the curve ball: While some of us think we should be paid for what we do, others who contribute in the same ways don't think compensation is appropriate. When pay is

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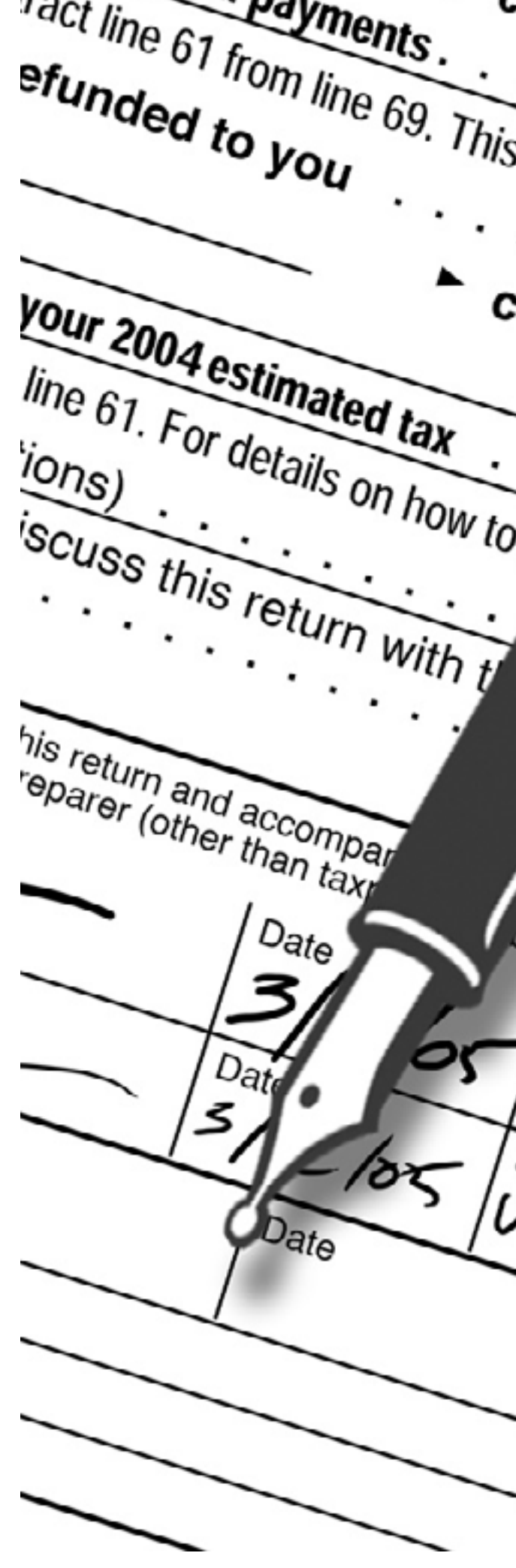
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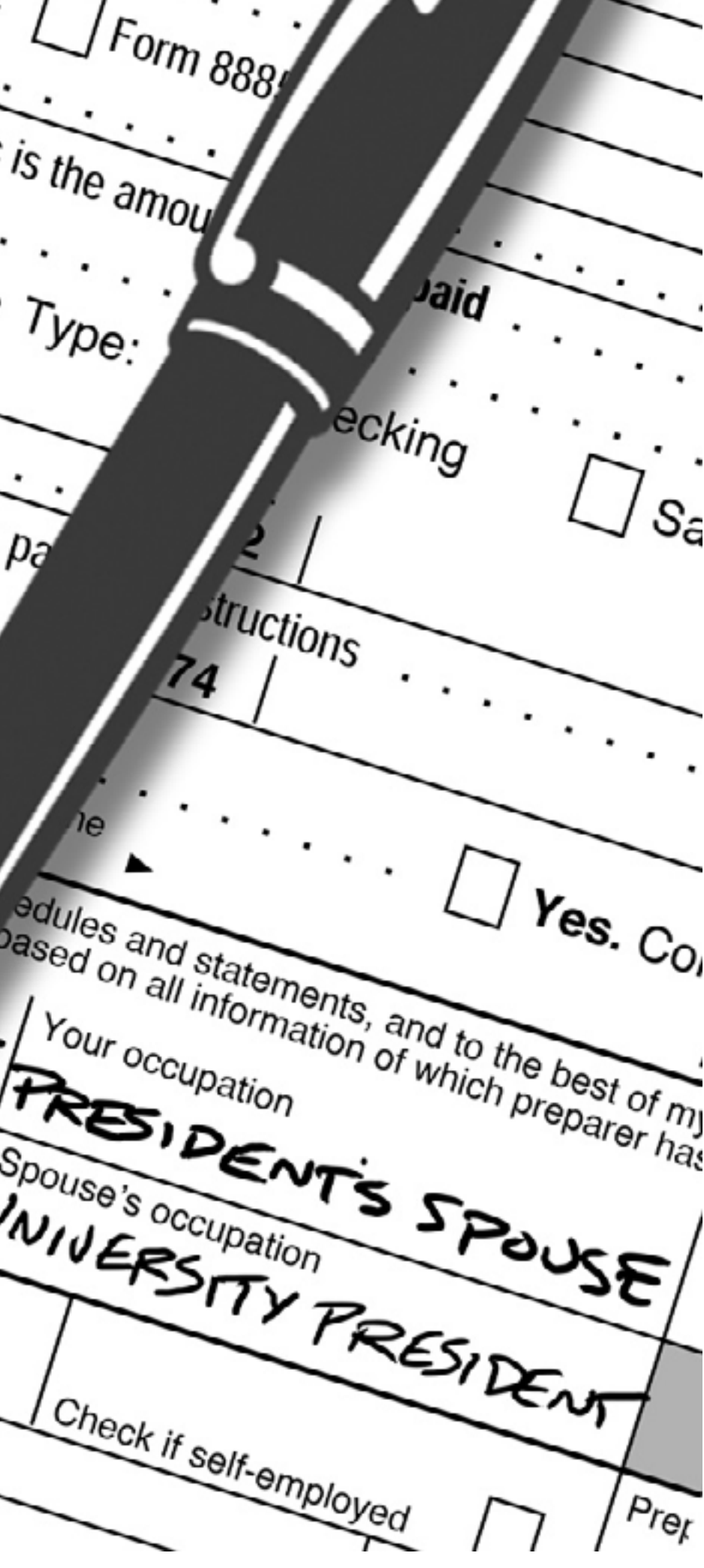
offered, some of us welcome it and some of us accept it with ambivalence. Others, who are just as actively engaged, politely refuse remuneration or flatly reject the idea. And for those of us whose careers preclude active involvement as the spouse, compensation isn't a concern at all.

One reason for the lack of consensus among partners is our differing experiences. Some of us are able to carry on our own careers relatively unaffected by our mate's job. Some of us cut back or even set aside our personal careers. We may do so begrudgingly (when we realize that the heavily scheduled president is unable to contribute to the everyday efforts of caring for a home and family) or willingly (when we find an active spouse role more fulfilling than we anticipated).

When the board hires a married female leader to replace a male president, trustees tend to adjust their expectations surrounding her husband. But they might not think to do so when an individual of the same gender becomes the next president. And even when boards try to avoid carrying forward expectations from one president's partner to the next, the partner (particularly if she is female) may find that alumni, faculty, staff, and community continue to retain the same expectations.

Because few venues exist where partners can share their points of view, it's small wonder that coherent arguments are slow to emerge from this quarter. Information regarding various institutions' negotiations with presidential partners is unavailable to us. We know little about how many partners are being paid, how much, and for what duties. To be sure, each case must be addressed on its merits, and privacy needs to be protected, but finding a way to open up the pay issue for reasoned discussion would help boards, presidents, and spouses alike.





Face-to-Face Conversations. Because of my own experience in the nonprofit sector and the friendships we had with trustees when my husband was a college professor, I may have started out with a better understanding of a board's responsibilities than is typical for the partner of a newly appointed academic leader. Still, in those early days I might easily have overstepped unmarked boundaries, approaching a trustee with a matter, or in a manner, that was inappropriate. Some trustees were my friends, but I was politically unsophisticated and had never thought about how these relationships might differ from my other friendships.

Boards may not intentionally keep a spouse at arm's length, but I suspect that is where most of us find ourselves. This concerns me. The tricky issue of spousal compensation calls for candid, thorough discussion, face-to-face if possible, though at many institutions trustees and partners are unaccustomed to dealing with each other in this way. On business issues we often relate to each other obliquely, through the presidents.

When I reflect on my relationship with the three boards my husband has served, several things occur to me. I have never, with any of these boards, had a direct discussion of what I was expected to do. Each board has indicated I could design my own role, and that's been pretty much the end of it. I have taken the lack of negative feedback to mean that my behavior has been satisfactory. I suspect these boards have seen me as docile, when in fact I am ready to push back when I bump into expectations that compromise my sense of self.

Each of the institutions my husband has led has paid me a modest amount of money, and that's been fine with me. I have accepted the pay as a token of the board's appreciation for my various efforts. Although I have been paid, I have never been evaluated (as far as I know), nor have I ever been asked to give a report to the board.

My dealings with boards have always been polite and respectful, and the trustees'

unstinting devotion to their institution has set a good example for me. Certainly our priorities differ; my concern for my husband's well-being will always come before my concern for the well-being of the college. But I expect trustees understand this. I can recall only one occasion on which I felt a board member saw me as an antagonist, and after we had a chance to get to know each other, we became good friends.

Toward Mutual Understanding. Being the partner is, like being the leader, a way of life. I mean no disrespect when I posit that at most institutions the board has only a vague idea of the contributions the spouse makes. There is huge variation between institutions and between partners in the level and types of involvement. Indeed, a particular person might vary his or her partnering role from time to time or from one place to the next. During my experience on three campuses, my roles varied significantly based on the institution's needs and the opportunities available.

Still, it wouldn't be hard for trustees to gain a better understanding of the roles partners fill or to build stronger relationships. They could start as soon as the leader is appointed. I can imagine it happening in the following way: The board might appoint one of its members to be a special liaison to the partner, with a charge to meet quarterly to discuss topics mutually agreed upon ahead of time. If the spouse is new to the role, the first meeting could be a mini-course on trusteeship. The second meeting might be a consideration of the representational role the leader and partner share. The implications of being a "living logo" of the institution, to use the phrase the sociologist David Riesman coined, are not much discussed. For the spouse they may come as a surprise.

Newcomers sometimes have a lot to learn, and often they are on their own. I believe that boards are ready to support the partners as

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well as the presidents, but they are not reaching out. Experienced spouses may recommend listening hard and saying little. If loss of identity is a problem (and it often is), this advice rubs salt in the wound. We partners could be doing more to help newcomers develop the skills they are going to need.

For different skills are needed—the standard model of the sympathetic and understanding spouse falls way short. It took years for me to learn how to support my husband in a new presidency. I needed to know how institutions work, what makes them thrive, and what makes them wither. Until I could spot which storms would quickly pass over the campus and which might be truly worrisome, I was likely to add to my husband's stress by overreacting. I had to make peace with the need to be more self-sufficient as a wife and a parent, and more guarded in other relationships. I had to resist being pressured into a mold that was uncomfortable.

At first my monetary compensation came as a stipend in monthly payments. It now comes as an honorarium given at the end of each academic year. "Honorarium" implies respect, and it pleases me to accept compensation in this particular form.

Other presidential partners may not see eye to eye with me on the pay issue, but I think we would all agree on this: Building relationships with trustees based on mutual understanding and respect is sure to benefit all our institutions. ♦

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