

## Hilary Hoynes (by Audrey Oas<sup>1</sup>)

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Had she been born 70 years earlier, Hilary Hoynes would have been Jessica Peixotto's ideal colleague.<sup>2</sup> Hoynes's research agenda mirrors that of Peixotto, with work in poverty, inequality, food and nutrition programs, and the impacts of government tax and transfer programs on low income families. But where the women in the Economics Department who studied these topics in the 1920s and 1930s were relocated to the new School of Social Work in 1939, by 2013 Hoynes had found a permanent home in the Economics Department and the Goldman School of Public Policy where she serves as the Haas Distinguished Chair in Economic Disparities.

At 18, Hilary Hoynes had not intended to be an economics major. She discovered her passion for economics while she was an undergraduate at Colby College in Maine. Originally a math major, as her classes became more abstract, Hoynes found herself increasingly drawn to economics which ultimately became her primary major, with an economics/math combined major as a second major.

*I liked how in economics I could see problems, just like in math, problems with solutions. The connection was made there for me and it seemed more satisfying. (Hoynes, interview with the author, p. 1.)*

She is the daughter and granddaughter of economics professors, neither of whom pushed her to study economics. But they both loved economics and teaching. Growing up in Madison, Wisconsin, Hoynes says about her dad Jeff Williamson,

*This is a guy who just lives and breathes economics. He loves it...[he] very clearly role-modeled someone who loved what they were doing, but not in a way that was forced. (Hoynes, interview with the author, p. 2.)*

Hoynes headed to Stanford University for her Ph.D. in Economics. Looking back, she acknowledges her assertiveness as a grad student. She was accepted to Stanford with zero funding, but after the first quarter's classes, Hoynes recognized her ability and demanded funding.

*No one gets into Stanford [today]...without full funding, but at that time, that happened. And interestingly, after the first quarter, ... two people in my program dropped out. ... I had aced my three classes in the fall and I walked into the grad director's office and said, -- I mean, no one told me to do this. I don't know what made me do this, but I walked in and said -- 'Those two*

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.econ.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/Peixotto.pdf>

*guys left and I have no funding and they had full fellowships. Could I get their fellowship?' And I did. And so I actually only had to pay out of pocket for one quarter. I don't know what or why I did that, but I did and it worked out. So it was kind of a strange thing. (Hoynes, interview with the author, p. 4.)*

After graduating in 1992 from Stanford, she had a great job market with lots of offers and accepted an offer to join UC Berkeley's Economics Department as an assistant professor. At the time, Berkeley had the largest number of tenured women of any top department in the country. Yet, it felt like every other woman in the department was doing something different from her. When Hoynes decided to have children, she became acutely aware of this difference.

*...[being a young professional with children] was not a part of your life that you showed anyone. Because to me that somehow risked the view that you somehow weren't serious and weren't in this for the successful trajectory. And that's kind of sad really. It's hard to know how much of that you're putting on yourself versus the environment putting on you. But the long and short of it is: I didn't feel like I had a community that was going through the same thing. (Hoynes, interview with the author, p. 5.)*

A main struggle for women in the academic world is that the tenure clock and the biological clock tend to overlap; therefore, putting pressure on women to feel like they have to choose between their career and starting a family. Although the University of California was one of the first university systems to add years to the tenure clock for both female and male faculty to accommodate the reality of having children, its "progressive" gender-neutral policy did not benefit men and women equally.

*When you have these [gender-neutral] clock extensions for tenure...what happens in the data, is that men continue to work at the same level of productivity and women don't. And then in equilibrium, the standards go up and the men get tenure and the women don't. (Hoynes, interview with the author, p. 6.)*

In contrast to the assertiveness she expressed as a grad student, Hoynes reflects that as an assistant professor

*I never asked for anything. I kinda got what was standard...I obviously had some assertive empowerment, but somehow it didn't translate into that setting. (Hoynes, interview with the author, p. 12.)*

In 2000 Hoynes was denied tenure at Berkeley. She was completely caught off guard by the decision. Looking back at the decision, Hoynes states that

*I think basically one explanation of what happened in my tenure decision is that Berkeley was getting better...and the field that I'm in -- sort of labor and public -- was really rising. You could*

*say that the standards were kind of rising over time. Somehow I sort of got caught in that. (Hoynes, interview with the author, p. 6.)*

However, another crucial aspect of her experience was the lack of mentorship provided by the department.

*I definitely wasn't mentored. My biggest criticism of the department is that no one should ever be surprised when they don't get tenure. I just think that's a failure of the system. I was really surprised. And it was awful. I think, you know, I bear some responsibility for that...there are people who are very solicitous of mentoring. And I wasn't that [person], but I think that there needs to be a department structure that formalizes mentoring. Because otherwise, I think there's just things that can happen that shouldn't happen. (Hoynes, interview with the author, p. 6.)*

In 2014 Hoynes received the Carolyn Shaw Bell award from CSWEP, the American Economic Association's Committee on the Status of Women in the Economics Profession, an award given to an individual who has furthered the status of women in the economics profession. Hoynes was praised especially for her mentoring of others. Hoynes discusses how she believes it's her duty to make up for what the system failed to do for her and to make change in these institutions in order to mitigate what she experienced for future young academics.

*You need to mentor people and you can't wait for them to ask. You need to just do it. You need to be there for people. You need to offer it and see what people need. I think that's the most important thing that I got out of my own experience was feeling very motivated to try to do better institutionally, to help people along. Like we all need mentoring and not everybody knows it. I didn't know it and I didn't know what I didn't know. There was so much I didn't know. I think that really the most important thing for me that's come out of [being denied tenure] in terms of who I am and what I like to do with my time [is] just wanting to do what I can on a retail level. And also think about changing the institutions that I'm part of in order to facilitate a structure for everybody. (Hoynes, interview with the author, p. 7.)*

After she was denied tenure at Berkeley, Hoynes went back on the market and was flooded with offers. Hoynes decided to move to UC Davis where she was a tenured professor. When she returned to Berkeley 13 years later, the Economics Department was in some ways unchanged.

*When I [first] came to Berkeley in 1992, we had the largest number of women of any top department. ... And when I came back to Berkeley in 2013, there were no more women in the Economics Department than there were when I left in 2000. (Hoynes, interview with the author, p. 10.)*

Although Berkeley is a very progressive community, Hoynes believes that this "department has never put hiring women as a priority...It is a place where people are very meritocratic." Hoynes admits that it

wasn't until the last ten years that she realized what type of environment she has been working in all these years.

*I think you arrive at a point where you just kind of have a confidence of where you're at and what you're doing in life and for me that seemed to sort of coincide with the #MeToo movement. It all seemed to sort of happen at this time. And suddenly I really had a sort of awakening about what I was included in, what I was excluded from, and how I had just so internalized that as being the norm that I hadn't even realized what it was. (Hoynes, interview with the author, p. 14.)*

Hoynes is now in a position in which she is motivated to create change in the university and their priorities.

*Folks who are wanting to get insight into women at Berkeley, I would say that we could have done better. And we could do better, if somebody made it a priority. I don't think that's ever happened. I've had some arm twisting to try to get me to be [Economics Department] chair. Perhaps the only thing that makes me excited about the possibility is to try to make some movement with this. (Hoynes, interview with the author, p. 11.)*

Mentoring is also a key focus. Hoynes believes there needs to be much more of women supporting women and speaking out when you see inequities, injustice, and discrimination happening. Hoynes final advice to current female undergraduates is

*You need to find the passion of what it is that you're interested in and take those classes and network with other people. And if being around other women feels good to you, then find those communities. I think it's kind of that simple. Ask for advice. Get advice from people on how you can achieve whatever it is that you want to do next. [It] may be economics, it may not be economics, but ask for help in guiding what steps you should take to get where it is that you want to go. (Hoynes, interview with the author, p. 10.)*

#### **Work Cited**

Hoynes, Hilary. Interview with the author. Berkeley, CA. November 11, 2020. Archived at <https://www.econ.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/Hoynes%20Interview%20Transcript%20Nov%202011%202020.pdf>.