Celebrated for her research as a business school grad student, Susan Athey was courted by 24 top universities. Now 27, she's an assistant professor of economics at MIT, rising in a male realm.

Why be in academia, when you could earn far more in the corporate world?

People say, "Oh, that's awful, you have to work this weekend," but I'm looking forward all week to the uninterrupted hours of delving into my research. A lot of times, there's nothing else in the world I'd rather be doing.

When I'm working on a mathematical or conceptual problem in economic theory, there is a sense of creating another world inside my mind. I'm not aware of the world around me. If I have to run an errand, I'll bring my notes, and anything that comes into my life is an unwanted distraction. Another exciting aspect of the job is the chance to teach: It's hard to imagine trading that for money.

So money is important only in theory?

[Laughter.] I'm an economist; I certainly believe that more money is better. In economics, if you become an expert in something, there are corporations interested in your advice and opportunities to cash in on that. But this can be a glamorous job - I've been in France for a month to lecture. I give 15 to 20 seminars in cities around the world every year. One of my colleagues' wives made a comment that being an academic is great: You can work any 14 hours a day you want to. I work all the time.

Do you ever just jump for joy at your success?

No, but I was in an airport recently and picked up a magazine [Working Woman] that had a paragraph about me, and I felt like I was watching somebody else's life in a movie. It makes me different, and it's hard to be different. It makes people question why I'm getting all this attention. I don't know that I deserve it more than anybody else, but I want to take every chance I have to make use of it.

Can you explain the research that made you famous?

I developed methodological, mathematical tools that focus on the nature of risks and uncertainty. These are new tools I've been working on now for four years that
economic theorists will apply in their own research.

**Do they have any practical application?**

My theories can help evaluate potential mergers of companies who compete at auctions to provide their services, such as accounting firms or defense suppliers. I've provided input for some recent mergers.

**Has gender been an obstacle?**

If I'm not wearing a name tag at a conference, people tend to assume I'm not someone important. When it comes out who I am, it's amazing to see how quickly the attitudes change and how much more willing people are to listen to my opinions. At a recent conference, there were about 45 academics, including only three female professors. That's fairly standard for mathematical economics and economic theory. At Stanford [Graduate School of Business], there weren't any kindred women students or any tenured women in economics. I couldn't picture myself as one of the brilliant professors there.

**MIT has been criticized as a men's club itself.**

In graduate school, I asked myself if it was worth it, if the best possible outcome was a job at where I would be one of the only women and I might be pretty lonely. But the economics department has a tradition of rewarding talent and potential, and while it's true that the culture is very aggressive and can be intimidating to a new kid on the block, there are many more computer chips framed on the walls than there are pictures of old, white men. The power and resources are concentrated in the hands of the people doing the most innovative research, no matter how young they are or what they look like or whether they're men or women.

**Were you nerdy in high school?**

No. I partied a lot. I found it hard to be a teenage girl and be real serious about math and school at the same time. I ended up not paying much attention to academics for a couple of years, but I knew that I wanted to achieve a lot in my life, so I decided to graduate early and go to college. [Athey completed high school in three years and entered Duke University at age 16.]

**Have you considered having a family some day?**

Combining family with real success in this career is something only a few women a few years ahead of me have done - proving you can have a baby and get tenured at a top-five school. And only a few men have played equal roles in raising their families and also been very successful. Maybe part of the reason I'm working so hard now is to make a place for myself in the profession that will stand a little bit of backing off when I'm raising my family.

**Does your early success create envy or enemies?**

I'm sure it does, but a lot of the reason I got attention had to do with people's perception of my potential. It's very difficult to be told you have a lot of potential when you're still in the process of achieving things; I'm still learning how good I am and what I can accomplish. I have a job at a top department, and I've been doing well, and that gives me the power to take positions that might not be popular and know that I have the ability to do that without hurting my career. Only achievement gives you power, and only from a position of power can you make changes.