



Life & Career

Solving the Two-Body Problem

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The abundance of dual-career academic couples has led to the opportunistic growth of certain institutions by taking advantage of paired excellence.

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Our story is evidence that the two-body problem can be solved. We ended up with two tenure-track positions in the Botany Department at the University of Toronto. This feat was the result of several stars coming into alignment--and also a lot of luck. We were both good matches for the department, which happened to be progressive and resourceful; we both had strong CVs; and we were both well prepared for our interviews. So, it is possible! Through our experience, and the experiences of other couples we know, we've assembled some advice for dual-career couples in the process of applying for academic jobs, where the goal is two tenure-track positions.

If you are in related fields, one general piece of advice is that you should both apply for each position you are interested in (even if one of you better suits the position). It is vital that the department has seen both files so that once the department finds out about the two-body situation it has already had the opportunity to review both individuals.

There are several options for when to raise the two-body issue when you are considering applying for a position. At the application stage, 1) send a joint cover letter and indicate that you are an academic couple with an interest in two positions; 2) send independent cover

letters and spell out the situation with your desired outcome; or 3) send independent cover letters and don't mention the two-body issue. If you choose option 3, then you have to decide whether to open up the discussion during your interview or once you have a written job offer. It is important to remember that there are pros and cons to raising the issue at each of these stages, and we'll outline these below.

The Cover-Letter Stage

The tradeoff at the cover-letter stage involves giving the university time to think about the issue and act on it, at the risk of scaring off the committee. In other words, universities need time to come up with additional positions and resources. In some cases, the more time you give them, the more likely they are able to come up with a suitable offer. On the other hand, many search committees will try to avoid the two-body problem in spoken or unspoken ways. Although most committees are, for legal purposes, supposed to be ignorant of and blind to the marital status of applicants, we are aware of cases in which search chairs openly call applicants and ask if there is a spousal issue before preparing a shortlist. As insidious as these tactics are, you have little recourse but to deal with them.

Thus, if you don't want to risk losing an interview offer because the university doesn't want to deal with the two-body situation, it is probably wise to send independent cover letters (which is what we did). Although giving the university enough time to work on something can be beneficial, we found that indicating your intentions at this early stage is, for the most part, meaningless. The committee has not looked at your application or those of any of the other candidates, so all it can do is potentially bias them. Also, applying independently gives the committee a chance to evaluate each person on his or her own merits.

There's one caveat here, though: If you are looking for a shared/split position, then the cover letter is probably a good vehicle for letting the committee know, because getting "two-for-one" may play in your favour. Generally, we found that search committee chairs did not know what to do with information about a candidate's having an academic spouse. The department chair is the right person to talk with, and in our experience, she or he dealt with it very professionally. In cases in which we talked with chairs early on in the search, they often stated that they would not inform the search committee before the shortlist was produced.

The Job Interview

After one partner gets a call from the search committee, you have two options: Bring up your spousal issue then (on the phone, again preferably with the department chair, not the search committee chair) or later at the interview. If you are in a pretty good position (that is, you have other offers or both have very strong CVs and don't want to waste your own or the committee's time), you should bring it up during a phone conversation. If you do so, you will typically get one of several types of responses (surprisingly, nobody will flinch) ranging from "We have a bad history with this and probably cannot do anything for you" to "Let's wait and see how the interviews go" or even "This is a real possibility, let's work on it."

It is imperative that they have your spouse's full application package at this stage. Try to be open and honest without making yourself vulnerable. Tell them you are not interested in playing games or playing universities against each other. When prompted further, say that

what you are looking for is a situation in which you and your spouse are in productive academic positions. There is nothing to negotiate at this stage because you are simply one of four or five people on a shortlist.

The committee may, at this point, invite one or both of you to visit, together or separately. If you both get invitations, holding separate interviews is generally better, because it avoids the possibility that one spouse might fall in the shadow of the other. If they are serious about one of you or you are serious about them, it is time to suggest that they invite your spouse out for a seminar in the following weeks. This will serve as an informal interview for your spouse, although the committee probably will not call it that. The university will pay for the costs associated with the visit, and the committee meets your spouse and has all of the cards handy when they make the decision. It is critical that the department has seen and evaluated both of you.

If you are not in a particularly strong position or you simply would rather not bring it up on the phone, you may want to wait until the real interview. In that case, it is wise to spill the beans only to the department chair. This will let you deliver the news to the chair at the same time that you are wowing him or her with your experience and expertise. It is inevitable that people will ask you about your personal life during your visit to the university. Although it may not be legal to do so, it happened to us in almost all of our interviews. You are within your rights to refuse to answer (it's really none of their business), but this is hard to do in social circumstances (such as when they take you out for lunch or dinner). Ultimately, you must do whatever makes you feel most comfortable. It is OK to tell them about your personal life, and it probably won't hurt you. (You will be talking openly to the department chair regardless.)

The Offer

Once you have an offer, this is the last stage at which you should bring up the two-body issue. Bring it up now, because if you accept an offer without negotiating the spousal issue, it will be very difficult to make any headway on this afterward. You hold all the cards at this point and should try to negotiate as much as possible. The university cannot withdraw the offer.

In some cases, the main thing to negotiate is the creation of two positions, and there won't be much room left in the negotiations for anything else. On the other hand, if the university is investing in two people they really want (and need), the department will treat you as two independent hires, and you can negotiate for typical things such as start-up funds, laboratory space, teaching load, salary, and so on. This was one of the biggest surprises to us, that the department was open to further negotiations after they offered us two positions. What this really reflects is the type of department that most of us want to be a part of, where the individual faculty members are valued irrespective of their personal affiliations. From our perspective, this nurtures a productive faculty.

Fortunately, dealing with the two-body situation was a positive experience for us. It has allowed us to continue to interact closely on a professional basis. Many academic couples have a more challenging experience, but patience, persistence, and being productive are critical to finding the right dual-career opportunity. When one partner already has a faculty

position at a university, moving to another university so that both partners can have faculty positions is often very difficult. Thus, it may be worth accepting positions that are not quite ideal at first with the hopes of moving to another set of positions in a few years.

The abundance of dual-career academic couples has led to the opportunistic growth of certain institutions by their taking advantage of paired excellence. The fact that many other institutions choose not to follow suit reflects, in our opinion, their limited commitment to their faculty, which will ultimately show in the decreased productivity of that faculty.

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