

Making the Leap, Part 4: Addressing the Two-body Problem

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All of us in the sciences have heard about the "two-body problem," a term often used to describe situations in which both life-partners or spouses are simultaneously seeking equivalent academic positions (i.e., faculty positions). How such couples can go about addressing this issue and gain employment for themselves is worthy of more than a single blog entry. A common variant to this situation is a dual-career couple where the spouse or partner works in an entirely different field. Depending on what the other individual, sometimes referred to as a "trailing spouse" does for their career (I'm personally not a fan of that term as it implies an inequality in the decision making between the employee and their partner), the ability of an institution to facilitate that person's employment varies widely. Frankly, the ability of an institution to facilitate employment for the partner can vary greatly regardless of the partner's field. This is based on the formal or informal resources an institution possesses to assist dual-career couples. In this post, I'll discuss some of the experiences my wife Bridget (she is a pediatric speech and language pathologist who works in a hospital setting) and I had during my faculty recruitment process, and provide some broader insights and guidelines on how to approach this version of the two-body problem, based on subsequent discussions I've had with other faculty and other recruits.

During my interview process, Bridget and I encountered a variety of institutional programs geared toward dual-career couples. On one side of the spectrum was the absence of any defined institutional program for facilitating spousal/partner hires whatsoever. In two of these cases, the faculty members and stakeholders in charge used (or tried to create) informal connections to circulate Bridget's resume to the children's hospital associated with the institution. Importantly, Bridget also did her due diligence; she used her own professional network to circulate her resume among potential employers both inside and outside the institutional umbrella. One of the institutions actively volunteered to fly Bridget out for a week to help facilitate her job interview process. Other institutions have more formal assistance programs. One of the institutions we considered had a defined dual-career couple job placement program, which provided logistical assistance for job placement and interviewing. Other institutions can even go beyond placement programs and provide financial support for the "trailing spouse". The institution where I took my faculty position has a program that facilitates spouse/partner hires at the university by providing up to two years of 'bridging' money to help pay the individual's salary. This program was developed based on the recognition that funding is often a major sticking point in opening a position for the other individual. In this case, the children's hospital was passed Bridget's resume by one of the stakeholders of my hire, and was able to create a position for her because of the funding

from the program. Bridget was flown out to interview and she was hired. This was certainly welcome news; the other institutions' hospitals where we looked were very impressed by her resume but had no funds to create a position for her. However, it is worth noting that Bridget is a truly skilled clinician in an in-demand field looking for a job within the same institutional umbrella. It's not clear how representative her scenario is with respect to employment outcomes through the 'bridging' program. The other institutions that presented offers to me could not find a position for her internally, and on her own she was often unable to find positions outside the university, owing in part to the size of the cities (and therefore the patient population) where the institutions were located.

The bottom line is that spouse/partner hiring is complicated. There is really no uniformity as to what an institution (or you and your partner) can do to facilitate a dual-career hire, or what you can reasonably expect from the institution to do. The situation becomes even more complicated for international couples, since work visas and other regulations may make it close to impossible to find a position for both within a short timeframe. So how do you wrap this into your decision making process, both as an individual and as a couple, as you prepare to make the leap?

Know yourself and know each other. Ultimately, where you go for a faculty position will be a decision made jointly by you and your spouse (if you have children, particularly of school age, obviously additional considerations come into play in choosing a new location for yourselves). It's likely that you have applied or will apply to a broad mix of institutions with varying job prospects for your partner. Knowing and, most importantly, agreeing ahead of time as a couple about values, needs, and expectations with respect to the outcome of the job search process is critical. Is your partner equally dedicated to their career outcome as you are? How much financial and/or career risk are you as a couple willing to take by moving to institutions or areas where your partner may be unemployed or under-employed for a time? Where are the points of compromise and negotiation for you both? What points are non-negotiable? Constraints such as where you both feel comfortable and happy living, in terms of climate, culture, city size and amenities, and, frankly, country, are also extremely important to discuss and agree upon. Indeed, Los Angeles, Boston, Cambridge and Frankfurt are going to be vastly different cities with unique aspects, opportunities and drawbacks that are critical to consider. You and your partner may have very distinct preferences on where to go, some of which will be negotiable and some of which will not. For this reason in my experience it is useful to have the conversation early and revisit it frequently during the interview and recruitment process to ensure you and your partner are on the same page. Bridget and I had mutually decided that we would go where she was able to find a sufficiently challenging position to maintain her career track; we felt this was important for our financial security and, most importantly, our happiness as a couple. We also wanted a city with certain amenities (music, outdoor activities, craft breweries, affordable housing). She was willing to compromise on issues such as salary, and I was willing to try another round of interviews if the environment or employment prospects for her were poor all

around. This was the equation for the two of us; yours may be very different depending on your needs, values and priorities. It's worth acknowledging that time to go through further interviews can itself be a matter of luxury depending on your mentor's (or your) funding and time frame for you to move on; hence taking into account external forces that impact your decision, such as timeframe and whether you have one or more than one offer are also critical.

Know the institution and its environment. If an offer has been made to you by an institution, then the question of your partner's gainful employment and which programs or infrastructure the institution has to facilitate job searches or hiring becomes fair game. Following an offer, I felt at liberty to openly discuss Bridget and her employment needs, with discussions occurring often at the invitation of the faculty member(s) in charge of the hire. Up until the point of an offer, spouses, partners and family status really aren't a good topic of discussion for two reasons: 1) it can be an invitation for potential employers to discriminate against you, either consciously or unconsciously for any number of reasons related to family arrangements; 2) it simply isn't relevant to them yet and could come across as presumptuous by putting the cart before the horse. As far as how to approach the discussion, I found the best approach was to be straightforward and factual, and offer the relevant details of Bridget's career and employment needs. I also used the conversation to find out about what spouse/partner job placement or assistance programs existed at the institution, whether there were certain eligibility requirements for this assistance, and what limitations might exist for the programs in terms of time, degree of help, or funding. Lastly, I used these discussions to investigate as much as I could firsthand about the local job and real estate market (sometimes a second or third visit includes a half day with a local real estate agent or broker to see houses or apartments), to help assemble a picture of the financial and employment prospects for Bridget beyond our own research on the topic together. If and when I was asked for her resume, I furnished a PDF of a resume Bridget had updated for this purpose to my faculty handler(s) via an email, so it could in turn be easily circulated to any relevant parties. Not everyone knew where to send her resume; in this case Bridget was able to supply some ideas ahead of time based on her professional network (in all cases, prior to having an offer letter signed both by me and the institution, we asked that Bridget's job search be kept confidential so it wouldn't go back to her current employer). Indeed, depending on what your partner does for a living, as well as which programs or informal connections are in place, there are always distinct limits to what the institution can do, which brings up an important point:

Define your expectations (for yourselves and the institution). Academic institutions and the people in them are not necessarily miracle workers. If your partner has a career well outside the academic or biomedical sphere, say as a professional dancer, real estate agent or criminal lawyer, there may be very little to nothing anyone from the host institution can do to find your partner an internal position, let alone create one for them. There may be little the institution can do for you as a whole, if it doesn't have a job placement assistance program

for dual-career couples. Even when your partner's career seems relatively 'easy' for a major biomedical research institution to find a spot for (i.e., a clinician if there's an associated hospital, or an art professor at a major university), an absence of money available to fund the position may prevent your partner from being employed there. Offering a new position is expensive, particularly if there wasn't necessarily an immediate need for a new hire in that department or organizational unit. As such, it is very important for you as a couple to define your expectations as to what 'success' will look like and how attainable it is given your partner's career, the local economy, size of city, and ability of the institution to intercede on your behalf. For instance, does your partner have to start in a job with the same pay rate and characteristics right away, or maybe able to settle for some level of 'starting over' at a lower level position? Does it mean moving to a sufficiently sized city so there are job prospects available in a realistic time frame? Does it mean you both need jobs within a short commute, or is it okay for one of you to make a longer commute to another city for work? Perhaps 'success' is being a single-income couple or family for a time. Or perhaps your partner could use the move as an opportunity to take on a new career instead. The key is that when dealing with the institution, these expectations are kept in mind. Don't expect every institution (or any institution) to work a miracle on your behalf. At the same time, if you have set expectations consistent with your comfort level/aspirations as a couple and the institution has the infrastructure to assist, find out how you and/or your faculty handlers can best make use of it, and keep a running dialogue with all parties to assess progress or lack thereof. It's important to keep your expectations reasonable but also not to back off from them. This doesn't mean waving them in the institution's face or using ultimatums ("either my spouse gets a job here or you can forget about the whole thing") but instead engaging in a respectful and honest dialogue to keep the process moving, and accepting that not every institution can assist in the way you may want. Your partner also will have their own legwork to do in looking for positions for themselves, regardless of what the institution may or may not do to help. Additional resources, such as alumni or professional groups you and your partner are associated with, may also be of some use. Ultimately, it will be a joint decision between you and your partner, and perhaps other family members, on where you land; it is important to know from the beginning what you collectively want out of this big career change, and to understand that your needs and expectations as a couple for careers and quality of life can be just as important as where you can do the best science. In the next post, we'll get down into the finer points of negotiating your faculty startup package.

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