

Solving the Dual-Career Dilemma: Three Case Studies

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to share personal observations from science and engineering couples seeking suitable employment in academia. Dual-career couples have a number of obstacles to overcome in satisfying their career goals. It is difficult enough to find one tenure-track position and suitable professional employment for the spouse in the immediate geographic area. It is even more difficult to find two tenure-track positions, especially considering negative attitudes sometimes held toward married couples in the same department or college. However, couples with similar disciplines do have somewhat of an advantage - it is often easier to negotiate or coordinate two hires within a department or a college rather than within an entire university. Given the scarcity of women in engineering and science, often a college can add an additional position through a diversity hiring program. For this reason, some universities initiate formal programs for dual-career couples.

Three married couples with degrees in science and engineering share their observations on the obstacles encountered in each couple's search for two tenure-track faculty positions. Each couple discusses the plans they made in searching for two positions, the short term plans they made in case the search was unsuccessful, and how they plan to deal with the long term possibility that two positions may not be obtainable. Each case study ends with a set of suggestions for others in similar situations.

I. Introduction

It should be apparent to most universities that recruitment and retention of good faculty members requires flexibility and understanding. Regardless of whether a university emphasizes undergraduate education, graduate education, or research, having the best people should be the primary goal. In order to achieve this goal, sometimes extraordinary measures are needed that go beyond the conventional hiring practices. While previous studies have reported statistical compilations, the amount of data is so limited that we believe anecdotal evidence remains important.^{1,2} This paper in particular will explore the challenges faced by dual-career couples through the stories of three couples faced with finding academic positions in science/engineering disciplines for each spouse.

The format of the remainder of the paper is the following: each couple will tell their story and then answer a series of questions pertinent to the challenges faced by dual-career couples.³ For the purposes of this paper, we are referring to a dual-career couple as one in which both parties are looking for academic positions.

II. Case Studies

Susan and John:

Susan obtained her Ph.D. in Electrical Engineering in the spring of 1992 and accepted a two-year postdoctoral fellowship at Becton Dickinson Research Center in Research Triangle Park, NC. During this time, John began doctoral study at North Carolina State University. When Susan's postdoctoral fellowship ended, a search for a tenure-track position began. This resulted in an appointment at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, AL as an Assistant Professor in the Electrical Engineering Department. John followed because he could finish his studies at Alabama. They were both successful; Susan establishing a research program in reliability of magnetic thin films while John's research into quantum computing proved dissertation worthy. When John neared the completion of his degree, they began to look at the possibility of obtaining a second tenure-track position. Unfortunately, the Chair of the Computer Science Department felt hiring their own graduate would allow too much emphasis in one research area. Soon after, Susan was granted the NSF Faculty Early CAREER award and an AASERT award from DOD. With these successes in hand, the couple felt confident that they would be able to stay at UA. The best UA could do, however, was to offer John a permanent staff position in Huntsville, AL (150 miles from Tuscaloosa).

Since they both agreed they could and should find two tenure-track positions, their nation wide search commenced with the condition that a new position for Susan would be similar in terms of teaching course load and research expectations. Despite several good prospects, the opportunities did not materialize. It became clear that the couple would probably not find two tenure-track positions at the same school or two nearby schools. The best situation was an offer for a tenure-track position for John from the University of Southern Mississippi, 180 miles from Tuscaloosa. USM was very understanding about the situation and had guaranteed that John would not have course assignments on Fridays so that he could do research in Tuscaloosa those days. John was ready to accept the offer since the couple felt their chances of subsequently finding two positions would be greatly lowered if John were to accept a staff position in the meantime. At the last moment, John received a call from Boise State University and he informed the Dept. Chair of his particular situation. This information was immediately communicated to the Chair of the Electrical Engineering Department who agreed that Susan would make an outstanding addition to his Department. The department was commencing its own search as part of the newly formed College of Engineering. USM was gracious enough to grant an extension to John so that he and Susan could pursue this possibility. After interviewing at BSU, the couple received and accepted job offers there.

The responses to the questions mentioned earlier are given below.

At what point does a couple indicate their special status to a prospective employer?

We feel the appropriate time to alert the search committee is when contacted for an interview. If this information is divulged too early, applications are easily eliminated and if one waits until the interview, it may be too late for administrators to work on this issue. It is certain that giving this information even at first contact will be enough for some universities to end communication and

this was our experience but at the same time it is not productive to pursue a position when clearly another position won't be available.

What are arguments for hiring dual-career couples?

Our experience is that a substantial loyalty exists when a university makes this type of commitment to a couple and it is likely that both will be extremely productive faculty members in this caring, supportive environment. We believe couples will be more likely to stay in this setting and can therefore build strong research, educational, outreach programs depending on the specific interest of the faculty member. It is important for dual-career couples to stress the advantages of hiring them.

If two suitable positions are not possible, who should make the sacrifice?

It is important for the couple to clearly know what it is they want when they begin the search process. We knew that only two tenure-track faculty positions were acceptable. However, if we weren't able to secure two positions, we decided to follow a first come first serve strategy. Since Susan "got there first" with her Ph.D. and tenure-track appointment, she got priority in terms of a single position.

When is it not worthwhile for a couple to pursue two faculty appointments?

We believe every couple should try to pursue what they really want. Realistically though unless both obtain Ph.D.'s from prestigious universities or are in "hot" fields or have had extraordinary career successes, the chances of succeeding seem small.

What kinds of schools should a couple target in their search?

Smaller and/or less well-known schools seem to have more flexibility in putting together an acceptable package for couples. This type of school may be eager to hire very good faculty who might not otherwise apply. In any case, it is not advised to restrict your search in any way other than as pertains to your primary goal. In our case we would have liked to remain in the southeast but now that we are settled in the northwest, we have been quite happy living in this area.

How many couples in similar situations are at your University?

At BSU, we are the only dual tenured/tenure-track couple connected with the College of Engineering out of a total of approximately 30 faculty members.

Laura and Richard:

Laura and Rich met as co-op students at General Motors. They married in 1991 upon completion of their BS degrees in Mechanical Engineering; Rich received his degree from Michigan State, Laura from GMI Engineering & Management Institute. They postponed graduate school for three years while they worked at GM. In 1994 Rich and Laura began graduate studies at Penn State, in Acoustics and Engineering Mechanics, respectively. Laura decided at GMI that she wanted to become a professor. Rich decided while at Penn State that he also wanted to pursue an academic career.

We are currently both looking for tenure-track positions in Mechanical Engineering, or a similar department. We have applied to all relevant faculty openings in Prism and Mechanical Engineering magazines. Also we have gone together to present at many technical conferences, where we have essentially taken turns being the “spouse”. We have made many important contacts at these conferences. We have accepted four joint-interviews. We did not receive job offers from the two joint-interviews that we have already had.

Our first interview was at a small, private engineering specialty school. The department head brought us in separately to minimize the spousal aspect of our interviews. They gave us several reasons for not offering us faculty positions at this time. One of these reasons was that a few professors were concerned about our marital status. In recent years they had two bad experiences with married couples in the department, one couple divorced and another couple left the school.

Our second interview was at a public, Midwest university with a large, nationally ranked engineering program. At a conference we met a university administrator who encouraged us to apply. We traveled together, but interviewed on separate days. That department did not seem to have a problem with our marital status, but hired a person with post-doctoral experience.

Our two upcoming joint-interviews are with a nationally known, Midwest, private university and a top-ten, Southern, public university. Our search is still a work-in-progress and we continue to apply to all relevant openings in the United States. We have also pursued industrial positions, but they are clearly not our first choice.

At what point does a couple indicate their special status to a prospective employer?

After some thought we made the decision not to mention our spouse in our cover letters. We wait until a school contacts us before we mention our spouse’s needs. We feel that if we disclose our situation earlier, we may not be given full consideration. We also feel, though, that it is not fair to the school if we wait any longer than when they first contact us. We do not want to waste their time, their money, or our time if there is no possibility of a spousal hire. Together, we have declined a dozen interview offers due to no spousal hire opportunities or inappropriate opportunities such as non-tenure-track positions.

What are arguments for hiring dual-career couples?

We are each very proud of our spouse and do not feel that a school would be sacrificing anything by hiring them. We find that many people assume our marriage is just like theirs, and many people do not want to work in such close proximity to their spouse. Therefore, we stress to all potential employers that we enjoy working together and, when appropriate, plan to collaborate in both our research and teaching. Dual-career couples are probably more likely to stay at their employing university due to appreciation for the dual hire and difficulty in locating better positions elsewhere.

If two suitable positions are not possible, who should make the sacrifice?

If we do not get suitable tenure-track positions we will both make a sacrifice and take industrial positions while we continue to apply for academic positions. We do not have children now, but

hope to in the future (after tenure). If we do not get two academic positions, we may move our preferred timetable forward and consider starting a family. The one with the best job will continue to work while the other will become a stay-at-home parent during formative years.

When is it not worthwhile for a couple to pursue two faculty appointments?

We refuse to separate logistically and would not accept positions where we did not live together with reasonable commutes. Further, we would not accept positions where one spouse is not a very good fit for the department and has a significant learning curve to overcome. Such a situation could jeopardize the tenure decision for that spouse.

What kinds of schools should a couple target in their search?

We have applied to every relevant opening and have not limited our search to a certain “type” of school. Our interviews have been at schools large and small, lesser known and well-known, public and private.

How many couples in similar situations are at your University?

PSU has 309 faculty members in the College of Engineering with:

- 3 couples where both spouses are tenure-track in the College.
- 7 couples where one spouse is tenure-track in the College and the other is tenure-track outside the College.
- 10 couples where one spouse is tenure-track in the College and the other is otherwise employed by the College.
- 9 couples where one spouse is tenure-track in the College and the other is otherwise employed by the University but outside of the College of Engineering.

Susan and Brian:

Susan V. finished her Ph.D. in Computer Science from the University of Illinois in 1992 and accepted a tenure-track Assistant Professorship at the University of Alabama. Brian was working on a Ph.D. in Physics at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign and also had one more year to complete his M.D. Hence, in 1992-1993, Susan V. and Brian spent the first of several years living apart. In 1993, Brian entered the national match for residency in Radiology. In the Radiology match, candidates provide a ranked list of their top 5 choices and similarly, hospitals give a ranked list of their choices for residents. Candidates are matched with only one hospital, so much of the decision as to where Brian would perform his residency was eliminated. Luckily, Brian matched with the University of Alabama in Birmingham (UAB) hospital, which was only 50 miles from Tuscaloosa.

While Brian completed his 4-year Radiology residency, Susan V. began her career in research and teaching. Susan developed her research area of real-time databases and database security, and she received an NSF Research Initiation Award for her work in real-time databases. Brian also completed his Ph.D. in Physics from the University of Illinois in the area of microscopy. In the summer of 1997, Brian’s residency ended and the dual-career challenges arose again. Brian wanted to pursue an academic career that included research as well as clinical work in Radiology. Had he chosen a clinical career, it would have been easier for him to find

employment in the Tuscaloosa area. Instead, Brian was offered a fellowship in body MRI at the University of Arkansas Medical Sciences. It was ideal for him as his position allowed him the opportunity to do both clinical work and research. Susan V. was scheduled to go up for tenure in the fall of 1997 and did not want to lose the time towards tenure which would have been inevitable at another university. They decided that Susan V. would complete her quest for tenure while Brian accepted the fellowship at Arkansas. Once again, they pursued their careers living in different states.

In the summer of 1998, Brian was offered a tenure-track faculty position as a Radiologist at the University of Arkansas Medical Sciences and Susan V. received tenure and promotion to Associate Professor. They decided to continue to live apart to pursue their separate careers for the 1998-1999 academic term. Although both Susan V. and Brian enjoy their current places of employment, they agree that for them living 350 miles apart is no longer an acceptable solution. They are currently exploring opportunities that would place them in the same location. Both require a tenure-track position. Because of past losses of women faculty in the College of Engineering at the University of Alabama, the University is making every effort to find acceptable employment for Brian. However, such employment would involve only research and not clinical work for Brian. Similarly, they are pursuing opportunities for Susan V. in Arkansas, as well as opportunities at other locations.

At what point does a couple indicate their special status to a prospective employer?

We feel that the appropriate time is at the interview. However, in our cover letters we do mention that both of us are looking to relocate to the same area. Because University hospitals are not typically closely associated with the remainder of the campus, such as the College of Engineering, there is less leverage that either department can exert on the other for faculty positions. Hence, we are not sure any requests for employment for the other spouse can be addressed before the interview. Instead, we feel that questions concerning employment for the other spouse can best be made in person at the interview.

What are arguments for hiring dual-career couples?

The most compelling argument is the greater the chance both couples will remain at that location. We also feel that the camaraderie of working at the same school enhances the productivity of the couple.

If two suitable positions are not possible, who should make the sacrifice?

When couples relocate, historically the woman is typically the one to make the sacrifice. Undoubtedly when couples have children, there are many factors involved that influence the decision for the woman to make the sacrifice. (We do not have any children). Many arguments can be made that the person with the higher earning potential or greater potential for career advancement should not be the one to make the sacrifice. For us, however, it is important for both of us to find satisfaction in our employment, regardless of salary, etc. In other words, the person who will be less satisfied by the compromise should not make the sacrifice.

When is it not worthwhile for a couple to pursue two faculty appointments?

Since to this point neither one of us has been willing to compromise our career requirements it is difficult for us to answer this question, since we obviously find it worthwhile.

What kinds of schools should a couple target in their search?

Research hospitals are typically associated with large universities. However, at this point, we are simply targeting areas where there are positions open for both of us rather than specific kinds of schools. As mentioned before, due to the difference in our areas (hospital vs. engineering) we do not feel a great advantage when we both apply to the same school. Instead, we are willing to apply to different schools as long as they are in the same area.

How many couples in similar situations are at your University?

Alabama has approximately 100 faculty members in the College of Engineering and has 2 couples where both spouses are tenured in the College. There are no other dual tenured/tenure-track couples associated with the College.

III. Conclusions

From the case studies above, it seems apparent that finding two tenure-track positions is a difficult task. All three couples, however, exhibit a strong determination and clear plans to overcome the obstacles. So strong are their desires that one couple is currently living apart, another had made the decision to live apart, and one couple is taking the stance that there will be two tenure-track positions or no positions. It is likely that such determination is necessary since all couples told of less desirable options that were presented to them; it would be easy in the short term to greatly compromise the initial goals and settle for less. In the long term, however, job satisfaction for one spouse in detriment to the other may not be worth opting out of the search at the first available (and sub-optimal) opportunity.

Another important point made by the couples is not to restrict the search geographically, institutionally, or by research area. The time to decide whether the situation maximizes job satisfaction for both spouses is after job offers are received. Furthermore, everybody agrees that institutions should be notified as soon as is reasonable, but no sooner. The definition of reasonable depends on the individual circumstances. No one, though, believes it is in anyone's best interest to withhold that information until offers are received. Finally, we note that the number of dual tenure/tenure-track couples in the Universities represented by the three case studies is rather small. It is not clear that satisfying dual tenure-track seeking couples is a significant problem. It seems that useful information could be better collected from graduate students currently seeking academic employment.

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