Two Body Solutions: Strategies for the Dual-Career Job Search

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Dr. Jacquelyn K. Nagel is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Engineering at James Madison University. She has eight years of diversified engineering design experience, both in academia and industry, and has experienced engineering design in a range of contexts, including product design, bio-inspired design, electrical and control system design, manufacturing system design, and design for the factory floor. Dr. Nagel earned her Ph.D. in mechanical engineering from Oregon State University and her M.S. and B.S. in manufacturing engineering and electrical engineering, respectively, from the Missouri University of Science and Technology. Dr. Nagel’s long-term goal is to drive engineering innovation by applying her multidisciplinary engineering expertise to instrumentation and manufacturing challenges.

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Dr. Amber Genau is an assistant professor in the Materials Science and Engineering Department at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. She received her BS and MS from Iowa State University and PhD from Northwestern University, all in materials engineering. Before coming to UAB, Dr. Genau spent two years as a guest scientist at the German Aerospace Center in Cologne, Germany, working on metal solidification and exploring Europe. Over the eleven years of their marriage, she and her husband have lived, separately or together, in seven different apartments and five different cities. They are pleased to finally be settled in a house and in a city where they are both gainfully employed.

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Abstract
This paper focuses on the dual-career job search with an eye toward iteratively finding the right fit as a job-seeking couple in engineering education. A review of trends for dual-career couples and dual-career hiring policies underscores the prevalence of dual-earner families. Strategies and resources are outlined for couples with one or more members in academia. The experiences of several faculty members who have succeeded at the challenge of fulfilling their commitments to their partners while realizing their aspirations of teaching engineering at the college or university level are presented. The paper elaborates strategies that dual-career couples can use in their search including: focusing the geographic search region, exploring options beyond the tenure-track, engaging university dual-career policies, being flexible, prospecting via targeted email, presenting the couple as a package deal, and balancing career with family responsibilities.

The National Context for the Dual-Career Job Search

Dual-career couples are increasingly common in the workforce in the United States. This trend is applicable to engineering in general, academia in general, and by extension to STEM academics in particular. Recent reports demonstrate these trends and their impact on the STEM academic job seekers and their partners.

Within engineering, the Society of Petroleum Engineers (SPE) Talent Council surveyed membership in May 2011 and found that about half of all petroleum engineers were part of a dual-career pair. In a December 2011 follow-up survey of members aged 45 and younger, they found that 76% of the respondents were part of a dual-career couple, including 90% of the women and 70% of the men. This survey also found that the women respondents were more likely to earn between 40% and 60% of the total household income and were more likely to be part of a dual-career couple at a younger age compared to male counterparts. The SPE study also finds that relocation is a major issue for dual-career couples, and cites low levels of employer assistance for finding a job for their partner (13% of women and 17% of men said their employer did this well). Clearly, the dual-career job search is something that impacts most young engineering professionals, and it is crucial that job seekers take advantage of every available strategy to find the right fit for their family.

A 2008 report for the Michelle R. Clayman Institute for Gender Research at Stanford summarized trends in academic couples and university hiring practices. They find that 72% of academics (all disciplines) at four-year institutions have employed partners, and in fact 36% of academics have academic partners. This proportion of dual-academic partners has remained
steady since 1989, but a greater fraction of universities are doing dual-career hiring now. Of the 9,000 full-time faculty surveyed in 2006 for the Clayman Institute study, 10% were hired as part of a dual hire, with 93% of those working at the same university. The study authors cite excellence, diversity, and quality of life issues as key motivations for universities to institute progressive dual-career hiring policies for today’s faculty job seekers, but acknowledge that policies are typically secretive, controversial, and inconsistent among various universities.3

The study authors also highlight the diversity issues inherent in dual-career policies. Among their survey respondents, a greater proportion of women were part of dual academic couples (40% versus 34%), and women are more likely to consider their partner’s employment possibilities when considering an academic offer. In fact, “the number-one reason women refused an outside offer was because their academic partners were not offered appropriate employment at the new location.” Rates of endogamy, or partnering within one’s own or a closely-related discipline are high in the sciences, especially among women. Within engineering, 64% of women engineers in academic couples are partnered with another engineer, compared to 25% of men engineers.3

In 1996, a team from Michigan Technological University and the University of Missouri-Rolla surveyed couples where both partners were in tenure track faculty positions.4 Respondents noted a number of challenges to finding simultaneous opportunities in academia, such as a lack of communications or cooperation between departments and a loss of interest in candidates who revealed too early in the hiring process that they had a “two body” problem. Dual-career couples also pose recruitment and retention challenges for universities: in 44% of the couples surveyed, one partner had left a tenured or tenure-track position in order to resolve a dual-career issue, while 59% of respondents reported that they would not accept a tenure-track offer at an institution that did not offer at least a temporary position for their spouse. Hiring dual-career couples presents logistical challenges, particularly when partners have very similar degrees and/or research areas, but making the effort to pursue these couples can also benefit the institution. For instance, administrators surveyed in this study noted that dual-career hiring seemed to foster efforts to increase the diversity of their faculty. These administrators also reported that hiring dual-career couples could “add stability to the faculty [since] two faculty members are less likely to work out the details of transferring universities” and that dual-career couples who were satisfied with their opportunities at their current institution were less likely to relocate. A later study by Wilson reiterates the finding that academic couples working at the same institution are happier and experience less stress than partners who are working apart.5

In 2003, Schulz et al. offered practical suggestions for both dual-career couples and the institutions that hire them.6 This advice was based on the authors’ prior work in dual-career hiring in engineering5,7 and suggests that couples be strategic in revealing their “dual career” status: it is often helpful to wait until the institution has invited you to an interview or otherwise
expressed significant interest, but not to wait too long, as it often takes significant time to coordinate dual-hires--especially if multiple departments are involved. The authors also emphasize the importance of getting offer details in writing, particularly for the “trailing” spouse, rather than relying on institution’s assurances that they will work everything out after the leading spouse arrives on campus. Once both partners are employed, the authors emphasize the importance of ongoing communications within the couple to strategize about how and when to pursue advancement, how to balance the professional and personal goals of both partners, and how to juggle family and household responsibilities.

Dual-career couples in the sciences have similar challenges, as outlined in a 2000 report by McNeil and Sher. The authors comment on the challenges of finding appropriate career opportunities for dual-career couples, particularly when a female spouse is a physicist: 79% of married women in this field have a spouse whose degree is also in the sciences, while just 18% of married male physicists have spouses with science degrees. A significant challenge for dual-career couples is finding employment opportunities that are not only appropriate for each spouse’s current experience and goals, but also provide opportunities for future advancement. Couples that are at different points in their career paths may find that there are numerous opportunities for early-career scientists, with fewer options for the spouse who is further along in his or her career. Often the “leading spouse” in the couple is the person with the strongest job prospects or the more esoteric research interests (which can limit the “fit” to specific institutions), and the “trailing” spouse may end up unemployed or underemployed.

While “trailing spouses” are traditionally female, recent efforts to increase the numbers of women in the professoriate have encouraged institutions to formalize dual-career hiring programs and more actively assist couples in finding appropriate employment for both partners. Many of these programs have grown from efforts sponsored by the National Science Foundation’s ADVANCE program (http://www.nsf.gov/crssprgm/advance/), which seeks to increase the participation and advancement of women in the sciences and engineering. ADVANCE projects have resulted in a variety of dual-career hiring programs at institutions such as Virginia Tech (http://www.portal.advance.vt.edu/index.php/tags/dual-career), the University of Nebraska (http://advance.unl.edu/), Rutgers (http://sciencewomen.rutgers.edu/Dual-Career_Initiative), and Michigan State University (http://worklife.msu.edu/dual-career).

Strategies and Stories from Couples Who Have Recently Found Their Two-Body Solutions

This paper is intended as a companion piece to a panel discussion on dual-career job search at the June 2015 American Society for Engineering Education conference. The rest of the paper outlines specific strategies that worked for the authors and other contributors in finding solutions for their dual-career families, provides brief descriptions of some additional resources for couples facing this challenge, and then describes the stories of the co-authors/contributors and
their partners. It is the co-authors’ intention that these strategies, references, and stories will serve as guidelines and inspiration for current job seekers in creatively finding or creating the right solution for their families.

**Strategies that worked for us:**

**Focusing the geographic region of the search**
Considering all possible positions in all possible places felt too overwhelming for us, so we instead decided on a few cities to target for each round of our searches. Important considerations in this discussion included the types of universities, colleges, and industries in each location; proximity to family; cultural diversity; and arts opportunities in the area. (Your criteria could be very different from ours.) We used these criteria to narrow our set of cities to about 5-10 in the United States and abroad, and then we applied to jobs only in those cities. -Shannon and Jim

**Prospecting by sending unsolicited emails to department chairs**
When one half of our pair had a job offer in hand and the other was still searching, we went beyond applying to posted job opportunities to “prospect” by sending emails to relevant department chairs in the region. These prospecting emails indicated that we were considering a relocation due to one partner’s job offer, laid out the searching partner’s expertise and interests, asked about any potential opportunities within the department, and included a full CV. -Shannon and Jim

**Presenting ourselves as a package deal**
When exploring potential graduate school departments in the summer prior to our PhD applications, we visited as a pair. Because our disciplines are closely related, it felt natural that we both participated in meetings with individual faculty members and groups of graduate students in both departments. After we were admitted to our top choice school, we learned that there was communication between the faculty representatives from the two departments regarding our admission. -Shannon and Jim

**Being Flexible**
We evaluated the breadth of opportunity for the spouse who did not have a job offer in the geographic location being considered. Considering opportunity and career interest, we made a choice of where to move after graduate school. Robert joined a university faculty while Jacquelyn worked from home and took an adjunct faculty position prior to becoming a faculty member at the same university the following year. -Robert and Jacquelyn

We ended up “trading off” opportunities early in our careers, and each followed the other at different times. Susan followed Manuel out of state for a post-doctoral position, and consulted from home while caring for our first child. Then Susan accepted an advising position at their
preferred university, and Manuel moved with her and found a research position. Within a few years, both had moved into administrative roles at the university, and Manuel recently accepted a research and development role at a company in a nearby town. We discuss our career pathways and future aspirations fairly regularly, and make strategic decisions about where to focus our efforts in the short- and longer-term as we try to balance our professional goals with our family’s needs. -Susan and Manuel

Engaging University Dual-Career Policies
Although both of us are not faculty members, we still benefitted from formal and informal connections within the university and community. The university that made an offer has a medical school and hospital, and her department chair was instrumental in getting Joe an interview for a chaplaincy position at the university hospital. -Amber and Joe

We found that few places actually had dual-career policies, but we did find a willingness of faculty and staff to share connections. Because of these connections, Jacquelyn was able to work with another faculty at the University on an active grant, parlay that work toward an adjunct position, and then be hired on as tenure track faculty. -Robert and Jacquelyn

Long-distance Commuting
After finishing graduate school, Joe accompanied Amber to Germany where she had a postdoc position, even though he had no job prospects there. After a year, he returned to Chicago for a year-long residency position. During that year, we saw each other three times, and communicated regularly by email, phone and Skype. This arrangement worked for us because we were both busy with work we liked, the time of separation was fixed (one year), and we both had strong communities of friends around us. -Amber and Joe

In graduate school we spent several years living in different towns in the same state; it was a relatively short drive, but still required effort and communications to maintain the relationship while both of us were trying to complete our PhDs. We moved together across the country twice, following jobs for one spouse and then the other, and recently Manuel accepted a position in industry that includes a 3 hour commute. With four young children (ages 18 months to 8 years), we plan in advance for meals, transportation and kids’ activities; hire help for household chores; and rely on our broad network of local family and friends for backup care. -Susan and Manuel

We made the choice to maintain separate apartments in separate cities for three years purely for career reasons. Overall, the decisions worked out but we would probably not recommend such a long length of time if other solutions can be found. That being said, we know several couples who spend large amounts of time apart for much longer durations or under harder circumstances (i.e. military couples). -Michelle and Adam
Exploring Options Beyond the Tenure-Track
We ended up in the situation where each spouse had a job offer, but in different geographic locations that were too far apart to support commuting. A decision was made based on fit and long term career goals and we moved to for the spouse that was accepted for an academic job. The spouse that did not have a job in the geographic area explored non-academic and academic positions. Through research connections a one-year contract engineer position was offered to the spouse without a job. -Robert and Jacquelyn

Focusing on Larger, Metropolitan Areas
Even if both spouses do not initially have job offers in one place, settling in a large, metropolitan area makes it more likely that positions will come along in time. Large cities also make it easier in the future for one or both partners to change positions without moving the entire family. Amber turned down several faculty positions because they were in small towns where the employment opportunities for Joe were very slim. In the end, when we had to choose between a job offer for Amber in a large city and a job offer for Joe in a small, rural town, we moved to the city, even though Joe didn’t immediate have a job offer there. In less than a year, Joe had a very good job. Two years later, Joe started his dream job. -Amber and Joe

Being Patient
Last year, Amber’s department was asked to consider the application of someone whose spouse had just been hired by the physics department. Under the university’s dual-career policies, the physics department would pay a portion of the engineering spouse’s salary for the first three years. However, Amber’s department’s finances were not in a position to support this person, so we declined the hire. Six months later, an unexpected retirement opened a position in Amber’s department and the spouse was hired. -Amber

Graduating at the same time allowed for presentation as a package deal. This had its benefits and negatives, though. Presenting as a package deal was a delicate dance, and we definitely think we presented ourselves as a package deal too soon in the process on our first interviews. Bringing up the dual-career needs immediately upon receiving an offer may be a good time. -Robert & Jacquelyn

Being Realistic
Despite the best efforts, it is very rare for two people to both find the perfect position in the same place at the same time. When both partners have spent many years in school and are eager to pursue careers about which they are passionate, either one agreeing to be the trailing spouse can be extremely difficult. Communication is key, and needs to begin before job offers are on the table. Together and separately, the partners needs to assess their commitment to a specific career, career track flexibility, earning potential, childcare and other family responsibilities, the ability to leave and return to a particular career, and other factors, including how tied up their
work is with sense of self. Partners should consider under what circumstances, and at what points in their career, if any, they would be willing to be a trailing spouse, and be honest and open about these feelings. We found a professional counselor to be helpful sorting through these issues.  

_Amber and Joe_

**Take Advantage of Any Connection**

It is true that taking advantage of connections and maintaining relationships with people in your field is very important. When it comes to finding jobs for two Ph.D. graduates in the same geographical area, it can be crucial. Obviously, talking with the people you already know about existing or future job opportunities where they work can be an important part of the job search process. However, strive to find a connection, even if small, with someone at any prospective employer. Though that connection might be directly through a former advisor or colleague, do not limit a connection to being direct. Perhaps you went to a talk at a conference given by a postdoc at a prospective lab. Engage them and find a link with your department of interest. If you didn’t actually cross paths with a person, find their latest published paper or patent to find a point of connection. All of the employment opportunities that have arisen for us came from some level of a previous connection. The least significant connection with a previous supervisor was simply growing up in neighboring cities.  

_Chris and Jon_

Networking has been essential for our career opportunities since graduate school. Each of the positions we have found resulted from personal connections - our research advisers or supervisors introduced us to a hiring manager, or a contact heard that we were looking for opportunities and called with an offer. We have also benefitted from strong mentors who reached out to colleagues and made a specific effort to find or create good opportunities for both of us in the same location.  

_Susan and Manuel_

**Our stories:**

_Shannon and Jim’s Story:_

Finding the right combination of positions has been something of a semi-continuous, multi-round, iterative process, beginning with graduate school (“Round Zero”), then finding our first post-PhD jobs (“Round One”), and finally landing in our current positions (“Round Two”).

We partnered early in our careers, and married in the summer between completing our undergraduate degrees and beginning our PhD studies. This means that finding the right home for our PhD work was our “Round Zero” for a dual-career search. We considered programs that had strengths in our areas (chemical engineering especially including environmental catalysis and biofilms, and material science and engineering). We narrowed the list down to about five and then visited some programs in the summer before our senior undergraduate year. We visited
those programs together, attending faculty and student meetings and lab tours as a pair. When we both were accepted to our mutual first choice university, we committed without delay.

The search process to find our first post-PhD positions was intense. We did narrow down our search parameters to focus on about ten cities in three countries, and we applied broadly for faculty, staff scientist, and post-doctoral positions in those cities. Part of the challenge for us in this round was managing interviews and asynchronous offers. We both ended up turning down offers in cities where the other was not getting interview interest. Jim had a strong offer for a post-doctoral position in a metro area where Shannon was on two faculty short lists, so we focused on that region and ended up settling on the East Coast for a few years, but with a long commute. Shannon commuted about four hours each day and Jim commuted about two hours each day.

The second round of searching was even more asynchronous. Shannon was a few years into a tenure-track position when Jim started to be recruited for several staff scientist positions around the country. In the mean time, Jim searched for opportunities near Shannon’s faculty position, but ultimately did not find a good fit. Jim received two strong offers in the Bay Area, so Shannon began to search, apply, and prospect for faculty jobs in the area. Ultimately, we decided that the Bay Area would be a good location for our family to settle because of the depth and breadth of jobs in Shannon’s and Jim’s technical areas there. Jim was able to defer his start date until April, and Shannon completed the academic year and joined Jim in the Bay Area in May. Shannon received an offer to begin work as a lecturer in June, working right down the street from Jim. It has been a good solution for our family, and was worth the risk involved in the process.

Robert and Jacquelyn’s Story:
We met in graduate school. Jacquelyn joined the same research lab that Robert was a part of went she started her Ph.D. and shared the same research advisor, Dr. Stone. Dr. McAdams, an affiliate of the lab, thought by hiring Jacquelyn he could keep Robert. When the lab moved from MST to OSU we followed and were known as “the couple” in the graduate school. We married once in Oregon and Jacquelyn changed her name. Upon graduation we both had job offers, but in different parts of the country. Robert had an offer from James Madison University in Harrisonburg, VA, while Jacquelyn had an offer from Intel Corporation in Hillsboro, OR. We evaluated the employment options for the spouse in each location and decided there were more opportunities in Virginia for Jacquelyn than opportunities for Robert in Oregon. We moved to Virginia for Robert’s job and Jacquelyn worked from home for a year before getting hired on at JMU. In all cases the dual hiring negotiation failed.

Michelle and Adam’s Story:
Like many others, Michelle and Adam’s career trajectory also involved navigating dual career hurdles at several points along the way. While they met during undergraduate, they were not the same year and Adam completed his B.S. two years before Michelle. Fortunately, he ended up completing a one year M.S. at the same institution giving only a one year difference in starting a PhD program. As Adam was investigating graduate schools, whether or not there would be graduate school options for Michelle in the same city became an important consideration. Fortunately he ended up landing in a city with two universities and Michelle was admitted the next year to the same university Adam was attending.

Michelle and Adam defended their PhDs within a month of each other. As postdocs, they ended up in different time zones and about 1,000 miles apart. Michelle had an academic postdoc while Adam took a post-doctoral position in industry. Being in two major urban areas allowed them to more easily and cheaply fly between the two locations. This long distance situation lasted three years until the completion of Michelle’s postdoc.

Towards the end of her postdoc, Michelle began the search for a faculty job while Adam had been hired on by his company as a research scientist (rather than postdoc). Together, they made the decision that Michelle would apply to any interesting positions no matter the geographical location and Adam would identify potential positions in locations that looked promising as the faculty hiring cycle progressed. In the end, Michelle was offered and accepted a tenure track position at a university fairly near Adam’s current job and he was able to negotiate telecommuting several days per week thus making his 1.5-2 hour (each way) commute manageable.

Between her postdoc and starting her faculty position, Michelle was offered the chance to participate in a fellowship in the U.S. government for one year. As this opportunity would be highly beneficial for directing her future research goals, Michelle and Adam made the decision to move to the Washington, D.C. area for one year. During that year, Adam commuted from D.C. to his office most weeks, typically leaving Tuesday morning and returning Thursday night. This arrangement was only manageable because it was for a one year, pre-defined time period.

**Amber and Joe’s Story:**

We met as undergraduates on a study abroad program. After the program ended, we dated long distance for 1.5 years before Joe graduated and moved to the town where Amber was finishing her BS and MS. We got married, and Joe worked odd jobs for another year and a half until Amber finished. When considering graduate schools, we hung a large US map in our apartment and used two different colors of pushpins to mark cities with potential programs for each of us. We used the map to narrow down the cities where we both applied, and then both visited the final two options. Luckily, we agreed that Chicago was the best choice for both of us, although it required long commutes to our respective campuses.
Again, Joe graduated from seminary a year before Amber did, and had to wait while Amber finished her PhD. Amber applied for, and was offered, several faculty positions, but turned them down to pursue a postdoc in Europe. Joe followed Amber for a year, although there were no job prospects for Joe there. During the second year of Amber’s postdoc, Joe returned to Chicago for a year-long hospital chaplain residency program. Although the long distance arrangement was confusing to many people back home, we found that a large number of people within the expat community in Germany had similar stories of extended periods of separation.

As Amber’s postdoc was ending, we both applied for any job we found promising. After a lead showed promise, the other partner began to search for job possibilities in that area. In the end, Amber had a tenure-track faculty offer in a large metropolitan area. Although Joe is not an academic, the department chair helped to arrange an interview for Joe within the larger university medical system. Unfortunately, Joe was not hired for that position. Meanwhile, Joe applied for and was offered his dream job in a small, rural community on the other side of the country. Amber had an offer to do a second postdoc at a school an hour away. It was an excruciatingly difficult decision. In the end, Amber took the faculty position, because the long-term prospects for both of us were better in a larger city. After about nine months, Joe found an excellent chaplaincy job at another hospital. Two years later, Joe was finally able to start the job he had always wanted, as the pastor of a church.

**Chris and Jon’s Story:**

Chris and Jon met during Chris’s final year and Jon’s first year of their common Ph.D. program at Northwestern University in Chicago. This meant that employment location challenges started early when Chris defended his Ph.D. dissertation and needed to find a job a year into their relationship. The two subsequent years involved a rewarding postdoctoral position at Sandia National Laboratories in Albuquerque, NM and a staff scientist position at Honeywell Aerospace in Morristown, NJ. Of course both of these positions meant living long distance with visits occurring every 3 or 4 weeks. Though this did lead to Chris’s gold status on American Airlines, after two years of long distance, it was time to find a way to live in the same city. With nearly two years still remaining in Jon’s Ph.D. program, Chris plotted ways to get back to Chicago. Conveniently, his advisor was able to help him out and hire him as a research assistant. This not only gave Chris the opportunity to be back in the same city with Jon, it allowed him to concentrate his career back in the academic world.

With Jon’s defense date approaching, Chris began pursuing job opportunities. Using a connection that he had made when he sent an unsolicited email for a postdoc position to a professor at Stony Brook University, Chris was able to ultimately get a tenure-track faculty position. This lead to Chris and Jon’s first two-body job search with Jon finding opportunities on Long Island, NY. Ultimately, it was his advisor’s connection with a staff scientist at Brookhaven National Laboratory that let to a postdoctoral position for Jon.
As the end of Jon’s three-year postdoc position approached and with Chris having a successful first few years as a tenure track faculty, they needed to decide their next step. Jon had many opportunities for jobs including at Brookhaven and in a few other cities. Although Chris knew that academia was where he wanted to be, his passion has always been more on the teaching side. One of Jon’s job prospects that was very interesting to him was in Philadelphia. Though this job was not directly related to his field of study, it was an opportunity to use his skill set in a different area. When he contacted a graduate student colleague of both Jon and Chris about life in Philadelphia, that connection proved to be invaluable. He noted his department had a job posting for a teaching faculty member. This was Chris’s dream job. In the end, Chris left his tenure track position for a non-tenure track teaching faculty position and Jon left his research career for a career in software, which has been an underlying passion of his. Patience and flexibility ultimately led to rewarding careers for them both.

**Resources for dual-career couples:**

http://www.hercjobs.org/jobseeker_tools/dual_career_resources/

The Higher Education Recruitment Consortium has a wealth of resources for dual-career job seekers, including a dual job search function that can help you identify opportunities within commuting distance.

http://www.higheredjobs.com/search/DualCareer.cfm

HigherEdJobs.com has a dual-career job search function that allows users to specify a maximum distance between jobs, specify a search region, and provide keywords for each partner’s jobs. You can sign up to receive regular emails on new positions fitting your search criteria.

https://academicaffairs.ucsd.edu/aps/partneropp/dual-career.html

The University of California San Diego has a good list of links to articles related to academic dual-career couples, including some specific to those in scientific fields and same-sex couples.

Many states have specific sites for all their state colleges and universities (not including the flagship and land grant institutions). These can be great for finding lecturer and adjunct positions that may not be as widely advertised. Some examples are Minnesota: http://www.mnscu.edu, and Connecticut: http://www.ct.edu.

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