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Column: Ask Marta



Dear Marta,

My significant other and I are both academics nearing the end of our graduate education. We would ultimately like to both have careers in academia, but not at the cost of being separated for an extended period of time. Ideally we would like to both be hired in the same city, as this would be the most obvious solution. What strategies would you recommend during the job-search process in order to optimize the possibility that both of us will be hired in the same general vicinity?

Joined at the Brain

Dear *Joined*,

I hope that the brain isn't the only placed you are joined! Yours is more common a problem than you might think. Just how common is not easy to determine because it is often against (some) law or inappropriate to ask whether someone is married and to whom in a job setting. It is common enough however, to have a label -- the two body problem. And, according to a National Survey, among professors who are married, 35% of the males and 40% of the females reported spouses also in academia. in 1989-1990. These sorts of statistics seem to be especially striking for physicists: nearly 45% of married women physicists have husbands in the same field (while only 6% of married men physicists have a physicist spouse; see link to an article below). So, the good news is that you are not alone; there are many people in the same boat, (and thus there are resources) for finding out how various people have dealt with this problem (or more accurately this set of problems) -- for though you've only asked about strategies for optimizing the job search process, a whole host of problems may accompany being hired by the same university, or same department or even same subgroup within a department. I don't mean to discourage you! But I don't want you to be naive either. Naturally each situation is unique. Nonetheless, I highly recommend that you look at what has been written on the topic and whenever possible make contact with others who have been in this boat; this is the best way to learn of options and solutions.

Despite my natural tendency to analyze the question in detail and provide an answer to even the questions you did not ask, I'll do my best to stay on target.

Some advice is obvious: (1) know yourself and your spouse and be honest about your goals and your ego; (2) be ready to be flexible and creative; (3) be ready to

compromise; (3) look for jobs in big cities or areas where there are a number of universities.

Generally, I would recommend that you NOT mention the two-body situation in your application letter. First get a job offer by putting your best foot forward - same as you would whether or not you are joined at the brain. Only, then raise whatever issues are important for you to actually take the offer including some position for your partner, Only on rare occasions, and certainly more often after you are both well-known, is it cost effective to mention that there are two of you who need positions. Why make the prospect of hiring you seem difficult even before it has been decided that you are the very person that fits a department's needs? The same holds even if both of you are applying simultaneously to two different departments in the same institution. First, convince them that you are what they cannot do without. Only then negotiate! The search committee (or department) will do their best to get as much information about everything they deem relevant to whether or not you are worth hiring and what it would take to hire you as they can; you, however, should provide only what they need to know at the time along with a strong sense that under the right conditions you can be had. Just what the right conditions are is something that you provide and negotiate along the way.

Of course, if both of you are applying to the same department then the two-body problem will be patent from the outset. What to do? This is one place where points (1-3) above are worth bringing to mind. They are obviously not a solution but they may impact how readily you reach the right one for you and your partner, and your eventual employer. If you can find jobs in different departments or programs that is probably the least stressful both for your relationship with your partner and with the department. In this regard, note that at least in large universities there are other types of academic and research positions besides the canonical tenure-track academic job, which one or both of you may wish to consider for either the short-term or the long-term. That said, if you both think that your dream jobs are in the same department and each of you wants to go for it, by all means do so! Exactly what advice I would give here depends on who you are and what you do and how different the two of you are in your interests, skills, and whether you work together always or never. Obviously these issues must be clarified. If the two of you work in what seems superficially similar areas although you are quite distinct make that very clear in your applications -- in terms of your research interests, and the courses each of you could or would like to teach. The tendency will be for people to see the similarities, so it is up to you to bring the distinctions to the fore. In fact, if this is the case, you should start sculpting your appearances to that end now.

The hardest decision, naturally, will come if one of you is offered a job and the other is not, whatever the reason -- though the reason matters. Universities are becoming more and more accepting of the fact that this is a serious issue to which they shouldn't just turn a cold shoulder. Some universities have spousal hire programs in place; while not a panacea, they may help you both get your foot in the door. Once in, my advice is to do good -- in all the realms possible. Then, while I personally believe that no one is (literally) indispensable, many people (including someone like me) may feel that one or both of you are, and thus will do their best to make sure that the administration does whatever it takes to keep you - et voila, you both have jobs! Undoubtedly this will take some time, so be patient! Being proactive and persevering is often effective and even admired at times, but it's a fine line to pushy and that's a characteristic than nobody envies. I spent more than 10 years in a soft money position (not because of a two-body problem) and there was much to be said for it. So, while a tenure-track job has its pluses don't make it the holy grail! Enjoy your work, enjoy your relationship, be true to yourself, and remember what they say about the best laid plans.

One body or two
me or you
or some semblance
of oneness in two frames
now playing parallel job games
first you follow me
then i follow you
or some alternative
rue de academe
where each partner
gets to fulfill his or her
corporeal, intellectual and

spiritual dream
via some perfect scheme unknown
but sown of mutual love and respect.
My advice: Be daring but circumspect!

A few web sites with relevant information follows (including the even more complicated multiple body problem -- and I don't mean a menage a trois!).

Love and the two body problem

Resources for academic couples

When office mates are roommates

Academic Couples Problems and Promises - Edited by Marianne A. Ferber and Jane W. Loeb

Women Scientists in America: Before Affirmative Action, 1940-1972 - Margaret W. Rossiter, Johns Hopkins University Press 1995.

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In this section of *Cognitive Science Online*, UCSD Professor Marta Kutas answers questions from our readers. If you have any questions you'd like to ask Marta, please **contact the editors**. While personal questions relating to life in academia or graduate school may be appropriate, please keep in mind that this column mainly serves to provide advice and guidance on professional matters such as teaching and academic issues. Also keep in mind that this is an *advice* column and neither Dr. Kutas nor the journal will assume any responsibility regarding the consequences of following or disregarding the advice provided. Take advice responsibly!