



## Whither Thou Goest Working the "two body problem"

by Susan Fitzpatrick, guest columnist

Currently serving as a Councilor to the AWIS Board, Susan Fitzpatrick is Program Director with the James S. McDonnell Foundation, one of small number of international grantmakers supporting biological and behavioral research. Fitzpatrick has experienced the "two body problem" firsthand, as she and her spouse, a career Coast Guard officer, have endured the personal and financial hardships of a commuter marriage. Fitzpatrick received her BS summa cum laude from St. John's University (1978) and her PhD in Biochemistry and Neurology from Cornell University Medical College (1984). After 5 years in the Department of Molecular Biochemistry and Biophysics at Yale University, Fitzpatrick transitioned her career to non-profit administration.

Sometime near the end of graduate school or postgraduate training—if you are smart, productive, and lucky—it happens. Via letter or telephone call, collegial tip or journal ad, you learn about the perfect academic position. The initial contact and mutual exchange of information goes well, and you are invited to visit the institution. Things are looking good. You're serious. They're serious. There's been talk of salary, start-up funds, and potential collaborations. But lurking in the background is one major issue, critical to the final decision, that you've been reluctant to broach. You have a "significant other." And wherever you go, that person will need a job, too.

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Your significant other could be another academic, an investment banker, performance artist, butcher, banker, or candlestick maker. It doesn't matter. The reality is that meeting the needs of two careers is a key negotiating factor in most academic career decisions. Balancing dual careers particularly

impacts women scientists since general wisdom suggests that women scientists are more likely to be partnered with another professional.<sup>1</sup> How much assistance can or should you expect from an institution when it comes to identifying a position for your partner?

The "two-body problem," as the broad span of issues involved in recruiting dual-career couples is colloquially called, used to be nobody's problem—at least from an institutional point of view. As late as the 1970s, anti-nepotism rules and other institutional regulations made it difficult for both halves of a couple to hold tenure-track positions at the same university. These policies were particularly detrimental to the career aspirations of women academics, who often found themselves accepting unsecured, untenurable positions.<sup>2</sup> Couples made whatever compromises were required to make things work. In general, no one expected or received much institutional assistance for their partner's job search. And if your partner was non-academic, they were really on their own.

<sup>1</sup>Although I do not have an actual reference for this, I took notes about the subject at a AAAS session on women in science. Because it made such an impact on me, I mention it here. I believe that Catalyst may have data indicating women rarely marry men with lower academic achievement or earning potential.

<sup>2</sup>See Margaret Rossiter's work, particularly *Women Scientists in America: Before Affirmative Action 1940-1972*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.



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Talking recently with scientists gives me hope that this rather bleak approach to recruitment is itself becoming history. Although recruits once were advised not to mention their partners in initial interviews, times finally may be changing. In an attempt to find out whether current circumstances are different and to glean advice for those considering a move, I informally polled a small sample of chairs, deans, and faculty about their recent recruiting experiences and their views on the "two-body problem." I included individuals from small and large departments, elite private colleges, large state universities, major research institutions, academic medical centers, and solidly middle-of-the-road schools.

Some responders were new center directors or chairs that are building new programs and almost wholly occupied by filling positions. I offered all responders anonymity in return for unvarnished honesty. The responses are summarized below. In general, the replies are most applicable to untenured

faculty, although much of the advice could be equally relevant to senior recruitments for whom the two-body problem may play an even greater role in their ultimate decision.

The good news is that most departments and institutions do consider the professional needs of a partner as part and parcel of any effective recruitment effort. The responders estimated that the success of 30-80% of their recent recruiting efforts depended upon both halves of a couple agreeing to the move. Several responders stated that virtually all of their recent recruits depended on the opportunities available for significant others. In my sample, all significant others were romantic partners; none of the faculty polled had yet encountered a situation in which the significant other was a child or an elderly parent requiring care. Several responders cautioned that recruits are like snowflakes—no two are alike. The strengths and weaknesses of the candidate and the partner, the particulars regarding the second placement, the needs of the university, available opportunities in the community, and timing all come into play.

What emerged quite consistently was the need for honest communication, realistic expectations, flexibility, and creativity. Interestingly, almost every response included an example of a recruitment that failed because the parties involved were unable to solve the two-body problem. Almost as often, a department pulled off a major recruitment coup because it was able to satisfy everyone involved. The overall sense I get from the poll is that dual-career couples are now an expected part of the landscape. Does this mean it will not impact your chances of landing the ideal position? No.

Some institutions will not be able to accommodate the needs of you and your partner and will be leery of hiring someone they fear will be unhappy. But, on the whole, it didn't seem that recruiters viewed finding an additional job as a categorical negative or positive. It is simply one more element in what has always been a delicate negotiation.

So when your phone rings but you know the decision is not yours to make alone, the information below—taken with the prerequisite grain of salt—might be of help.

**When in the recruitment "dance" should the candidate mention the second body?**

The unanimous answer? Immediately. Or, to quote one responder, "day one, phone call

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one." If older mentors are telling you to wait until you have a secure offer, be aware that things really have changed. It is absolutely essential to inform recruiters early in the process if the success of the recruitment relies upon securing a position for a partner. As one chair put it, "Let us know up-front ... two people interviewed last year did this very professionally in their cover letters. We got them because we solved the two-body problem." Regardless of whether the second position needs to be in the same department, another department in the same institution, a nearby institution, or in the non-academic community, each situation presents unique challenges that require time.

Make certain you send out your partner's curriculum vitae or resume immediately. It is also important that the circumstances be outlined by you. A new center director, filling a large number of positions, explains why. "Sometimes people feel they should keep quiet, as though there were any real secrets. If I learn of a need second hand, I may get the wrong facts, and make decisions or assumptions based on the incorrect data."

**What kinds of help can a candidate expect?**

Large institutions often have more "give" and can usually find another academic position (although not always tenure-track) if both of you have top-notch qualifications. This can be a touchy situation, and couples must set their expectations realistically. Most institutions do very little for non-academic spouses, although a few are developing contacts with community businesses and non-profits, and will at least provide names or introductions. If your partner is not an academic, ask quite bluntly how far the institution is willing to go to provide those critical contacts. Providing a copy of the community phone book is not assistance. Setting up a meeting with the Director of the Corporate

Giving Office (who knows all the CEOs in town) is. You should expect smaller schools and smaller cities to be more limited in their opportunities, so timing becomes even more critical. A few extremely enlightened institutions have established formal policies and offices to deal with dual-recruitment issues—another reason to be up-front about your needs. The system can't work for you if it doesn't know about your situation. Some institutions aggressively work the two-body problem to their advantage, successfully recruiting young stars and building strong programs.

**What are some creative solutions to the two-body problem when both bodies are scientists?**

One center director offered each partner, both of whom worked in the same research area, one-half of the available FTE position with the understanding that they would cover the other 50% of their salaries with research grants. Another institution lured a couple by allowing them to share an endowed professorship. Some institutions are giving couples with young children the opportunity to "job-share" one position. It is important that you have your priorities in order when you consider looking for a new position, and that you are ready to suggest novel job structures if you truly could be happy with those arrangements. Do not propose unorthodox strategies in the hopes that more traditional positions eventually will appear.

Being on the academic job market is a stressful situation any time in your career. You'll find yourself reeling from the heady sense of possibilities and opportunities to a sense that any decision is fraught with career risk and disappointment. Remember, you are not considering a "job"—but an intellectual home. Your fit with the department and the institution must be right on many levels, or you will not succeed. Compromising on yours and your partner's mutual fulfillment is unlikely to be a winning strategy long term. The "two body problem," at least to those I queried, is no longer unusual, unexpected, or insurmountable. Hopefully, the day is coming when the phrase, and all its baggage, will sound anachronistic and unfamiliar. ♦

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