Two-career couples—attitudes and opportunities

The numbers of two-career couples in the biological sciences are increasing dramatically. This change is due primarily to the female members of couples seeking to maintain their careers, rather than expecting to, or being expected to, take a hiatus or a nonprofessorial position during child-rearing years.

As a member of a two-biologist couple and as a former chair of the department in which both my spouse and I have appointments, I have had experience with the delicacy and immediacy of the issues that arise for two-career couples. The expectation that a woman put her family before her career is by no means completely obliterated.

Although I have not always been successful, during my career I have attempted to provide some resolution, both pragmatically and philosophically, to the issue of two-career couples. (Note that I am treating the particular problems of heterosexual couples with long-term relationships in this discussion; this focus is not to diminish the sometimes similar, sometimes different, problems of same-sex couples.) I cite my experience at Berkeley as a microcosm reflecting both problems and some solutions. To provide opportunities and receive the greatest benefit from two-career couples, attitudes about their effectiveness must become more enlightened, more diverse opportunities must be generated systematically, and both institutions and job seekers must be more flexible about the opportunities that are appropriate.

Attitudes about two-career couples

Perhaps the most important solution to the problems of two-career couples depends on a change in attitude about them: two-career couples should be regarded as an asset, rather than a liability. It is true that problems will still exist, but their resolution would be simpler if the partner were regarded as a bonus because of the teaching that could be done, the research accomplished, the grant funds brought to the institution, and, most important, the vigor that new ideas bring to the enterprise. An institution is enriched by increasing the number of people who can interact over good ideas.

The two-career couple is not a temporary phenomenon; the number is likely to increase in upcoming years. Therefore, universities should stop dealing with each case ad hoc. It is not unreasonable that there be some general guidelines for an institution so there is some equity from one case to the next. This practice need not reduce, but could enhance, flexibility of hiring.

Who needs the opportunities?

Much more attention is being paid today than in the recent past to the need for “spousal opportunity,” as we label it at Berkeley. This situation is ironic, because a major impetus for the new attention is that highly qualified males increasingly are accompanying the excellent women that we currently are hiring. Academia may be unusual in its desire to facilitate the careers of all people who have made the intellectual commitment to a Ph.D. degree, and, hence, the profession, but this commitment seems appropriate to academia’s investment. In addition, universities must recognize that many members of two-career couples are now basing their acceptance of a job offer on some appropriate provision for their partners. If such a provision is absent or tenuous, the offer will be refused after intensive and expensive recruitment.

During my terms as chair of the Department of Zoology and then the Department of Integrative Biology, we had seven searches for prospective faculty members. All seven positions were filled with people selected because of their outstanding qualifications as researchers and teachers. Affirmative action was not a criterion in these hirings (although it certainly was a major factor during the recruitment, because it facilitated our finding all possible qualified women and minority candidates). Three of the positions were filled by women, and in one additional search a woman was our first choice but she decided to go elsewhere.

The two women hired most recently are members of two-career couples; all four persons are biologists, and the male partners seek to continue their research and teaching careers. The spouse of the third woman hired (now a tenured associate professor) is a tenured member of another department at Berkeley, hence his spousal opportunity was assured.

Departments need to consider opportunities for spouses of both the male and female faculty members. My department at Berkeley has 31 active faculty members, now including nine women—29% of the department. Six out of the 22 full professors are women, as is one of six associate professors and two of three assistant professors. Two of the six female full professors are unaffianced. The partners of the other four of the six female full professors have professorial or high-level research appointments, one in the same department and three at other University of California institutions. The three women who are associate and assistant professors are those recently hired; two of their spouses are biologists currently seeking positions and one is tenured in another department.
Of the 22 male professors in the department, three have as partners women who are currently graduate students (one at Berkeley and two elsewhere). The spouse of another male colleague had a nontenure-track position in the general biology course, but she recently resigned it to have more time for research as a nonsalaried postdoctoral fellow. Several other female spouses (mostly of full professors) with masters or doctoral degrees in biology are working variously as paralegals, community college teachers, research associates, elementary school teachers, and real estate agents.

One spouse of an associate professor has a professorship at the University of California–San Francisco. In sum, we have at least one female partner actively seeking an appropriate position, three females who plan to do so in the near future, and two male partners who need the resources to continue their careers.

The limited number of positions

What are the problems faced by such two-career couples and the departments that try to hire one or both partners, and what are their possible solutions? First, institutions operate under a number of constraints. For example, most institutions demand (quite reasonably) that a department project well in advance the new faculty positions it will need. Departments are also limited by the space available for research and offices, teaching commitments, and strictures on nonprofessorial appointments. Few universities are currently in growth phases, due to declining budgets, steady-state recruitment even though enrollments are increasing, and the need to finance new facilities and equipment in an economically difficult time.

For these reasons, departments rarely have the flexibility necessary to offer professorial positions to both members of a two-career couple, when only one recruitment has been authorized. It is sometimes possible to hire both spouses and mortgage a future position, if one exists in the campus plan (at many institutions positions are allocated years before the search begins). When the research and teaching interests of both members of a two-career couple are similar, or even complementary, the situation may become even more difficult, because allocation of full-time positions to both partners would result in an unplanned increase in one area at the cost of filling a position in a different area needed by the department.

One solution to these departmental problems would be for institutions to maintain a set of unallocated positions to be used to hire highly qualified spouses. They could follow the example of the “targets of opportunity” appointments, a category used by some universities to hire outstanding researchers and teachers, especially highly qualified women and minority persons, specializing in areas that have not been targeted in plans. If a proportion of the total positions to be allocated in a given year were unassigned and maintained specifically to provide spousal opportunities, universities would be in a position to take advantage of unanticipated opportunities to hire qualified people.

Alternative positions

As enrollments in biology climb (a recent turnaround of declining enrollments), and faculty positions fail to keep pace, it would seem reasonable for institutions to grant adjunct titles to spouses (and others) interested in teaching. These adjuncts should be paid on a per-course basis, commensurate with the qualifications of the individual and with the work involved, rather than a minimal flat fee.

Many institutions are reluctant to grant adjunct titles, for fear of creating a set of second-class citizens with significant teaching loads but without the rights and responsibilities of a regular professorial appointment. Such titles, when granted, often go to people able to generate salaries on grant money but who wish (or need) a formal affiliation with a department and who are willing to do some teaching and carry some committee or advising responsibilities. This type of adjunct position does not provide a solution to the person who arrives without some means of support.

Principal investigator status might be linked to adjunct titles for those who wish to teach and to continue their research. Principal investigator status represents university permission to attempt to generate funds from extramural agencies, and this permission should be readily granted. Some institutions provide this status almost automatically, but others are reluctant to make it because a commitment of space and facilities must be made. Some universities also fear that, after successful grant-getting, research, teaching, and service, the person might demand a regular position, having performed in an equivalent capacity.

There are several solutions to the problem of space and facilities. Use of facilities could be charged to the grant obtained with principal investigator status. Shared space arrangements could be made. (Are not shared arrangements the way biology is progressing anyway, as costs of equipment increase?) Finally, contact can be increased with other research units on and off campus that might have space and welcome personnel with new ideas.

I consider the universities’ fear of expectations to be an attitudinal problem—on both sides. Administrations should not be reluctant to take on excellent teachers and researchers when they have real need of them. On the other hand, expectations and limitations on space, facilities, and teaching must be spelled out in writing so that both parties understand the conditions of service. It must be understood that performance cannot generate new positions.

The use of co-principal investigator status, with the requirement that a professor be the listed principal investigator whether or not he or she has anything to do with the research, is not an appropriate solution. It institutionalizes second-classness for a qualified researcher.

Departments must have clear standards for the granting of adjunct positions and principal-investigator status. Periodic review is implicit in such situations, and it should be explicit. Time-lines for assignments must be clear, to the benefit of all parties. Unrealistic expectations of individuals, departments, and institutions cannot be met; unrealistic expectations must be identified clearly and the reasons they cannot be met explained. What is realistic must be discussed during recruitments and afterward.

We cannot assume that all partners
are equally competent, and especially that all demands can be met. Formal procedures obviate the problem of not knowing what to do if a partner is not competent or appropriate for a position, especially one in the same department as the person to be hired.

Information networks

A significant aid to two-career couples would be the establishment of a substantive information network within and among institutions. I am considering primarily situations in which both partners are biologists, and the constraints that imposes; some of those constraints are released if the partner is in another field, but a new constraint arises in that usually even less information about opportunities in other fields is available.

The questions the network should answer include: Which departments will recruit for what kinds of positions in the near future? Are departments seeking specialists for short-term teaching or research positions? (Often a short-term position will allow the time needed for a partner to search the area to find an appropriate post.) Are there institutes or organized research units on or off campus that are able to make provision for an able colleague? What are their criteria and expectations?

In cities or regions in which there is more than one college or university, similar information should be made available and exchanged among institutions. If at all possible, industrial and business concerns and city, state, and federal agencies with local offices should be included in the network.

Among other possibilities, universities could form hiring consortia with, for example, biotechnology or environmental impact firms. This activity is occurring already, but an emphasis could be placed on spousal opportunity and even some retraining. A doctoral degree includes training in thinking, even though the technical area of expertise might be different from that of the institute. In fact, institutions likely to be doing substantive hiring of faculty members in the near future would do well to establish a staff person with the responsibility to solicit, collate, and circulate information on local job opportunities.

Innovative planning

More effort to generate programs to establish positions for two-career couples must be made. M. Foster (page 241 this issue) presents a plan that could be implemented with the cooperation of funding agencies, universities, and other institutions; it is an example of the more innovative and directed thinking that should take place. Split (or shared) positions so that the two members of a pair share one salary, and often the same space, are solutions practiced effectively at some institutions (see Lubchenco and Menge page 243 this issue).

Often the acceptance of a job is the result of a compromise; the situation may be the best available for both partners, although not optimal for either. If we are to retain two-career couples, provision for both members must be sustained so that they are not constantly looking for situations that will be better for both members.

Even if the partners are initially satisfied, a new set of problems may arise: one spouse may fail to get tenure or lose grant support or a nonuniversity job; one partner might be perfectly happy and the other wish to leave; one spouse might successfully fly up the promotion ladder while the other stagnates. There are no easy solutions to these problems, but we must at least begin by recognizing them and making them part of our thinking and planning.

Need for flexibility

It is important that two-career couples, as well as the institutions that hire them, be flexible. It may not always be wise, even if it might be possible, for both partners to be in the same department or the same institution. We are locked into expectations that every Ph. D. recipient will be granted a professorship. Partners should make an effort to look for positions in alternative, but appropriate, institutes and agencies.

Effective teaching of biology to the lay public and to political decision makers at all levels is necessary; often this teaching is best done outside the standard classroom. Applied research, or a combination of applied and basic research (as many university researchers are finding), generates excitement, requires the same use of one's skills and intellect, and produces an outcome that can be at least as productive as in the academic community.

In addition, conversation at the dinner table might be enriched by sharing different experiences, and one's circle of acquaintances is likely to be enlarged. If an extended opportunity network is to work, it must have willing recipients.

Conclusions

There are many ways to encourage members of two-career couples to achieve their goals. However, attitudes about the potential contribution and effectiveness of two-career couples must be enlightened, more diverse kinds of opportunities must be generated systematically, rather than on an ad hoc basis, and both institutions and job seekers must be flexible about the kinds of opportunities that are appropriate.

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