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Navigating academia as a dual-career couple

Toni Feder

Myriad solutions emerge in the stressful process of balancing professional ambition and personal happiness.


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(Background texture adapted from iStock.com/enjoynz.)

Jenna Smith and Ragnar Stroberg, a physicist pair, moved around a lot before settling in 2022 at the University of Notre Dame, where she is on renewable contracts as a teaching professor and he is on the tenure track. "There were jobs we turned down that were we single, we might have taken," Smith says. For one of their moves, she left a tenured position. "Each decision has been holistic. What was the job? How would it advance your career? Where is it?" she says. "It was never one person outweighing the other."

The stress that comes with applying for faculty positions is magnified for job seekers dealing with dual-career situations. How do two academics go about finding positions that allow them to live together? When is being a commuter couple the solution? When is it time to call it quits in academia? Should partners prioritize their individual professional ambitions? What sacrifices do partners make to balance their personal and professional lives?

Fields and subfields, career stages, job desires, and location preferences all factor into navigating the two-body problem. Even at institutions that have policies and offices to help find a job for a candidate's partner—sometimes called the trailing spouse—solutions are sought case by case. A university may be able to create a position for the primary candidate's partner. Some institutions create an incentive for the partner's department by pooling the partner's salary from their department, the primary candidate's department, and the school, either for a few years or indefinitely. One partner may make do with a less-than-optimal position. People decline offers because their partner remains empty-handed.

Dual-career couples are ubiquitous in academia, but information about their numbers and circumstances is nebulous, says Jennifer O'Neill, a program manager at the Higher Education Recruitment Consortium, a nonprofit membership association. "There is a real lack of data." (See *PT*'s July 1999 article "The dual-career-couple problem," by Laurie McNeil and Marc Sher. They report the results of a 1998 survey and discuss various solutions.) One data point comes from Alicia Simon, who says that in any given year, she and her colleagues with the dual-career services center at the University of Michigan assist up to 300 dual-career recruitment and retention cases across the campus and medical school.

For this story, I interviewed at least one partner from 28 dual-career couples. Most of them were in North America. The people I spoke with had nearly all found satisfactory solutions—which may not be representative. An oft-repeated sentiment was, "We were lucky."

Trailing and trailblazing

For most of the 20th century, the woman in a dual-career physics couple often settled for a second-rate position: Her husband would get a professorship, and she might be offered an adjunct or teaching position. That's what happened in 1930, for example, to future Nobel laureate Maria Goeppert Mayer, whose husband became a professor at Johns Hopkins University while she taught graduate students and had access to an office in the physics department. (To read more about her experiences, see *PT*'s 2018 story "The second woman to win the physics Nobel.")

Similarly, theoretical physicist Cécile DeWitt-Morette held a series of non-tenure-track positions over many years before she and her husband, Bryce DeWitt, moved to the University of Texas at Austin for two tenured posts. It was 1972, and she was 49 years old. Even then, he had a full position in the physics department, whereas hers was only half-time. She was, DeWitt writes, "shunted into the astronomy rather than the physics department, perhaps because of last-minute fears of nepotism." (He tells DeWitt-Morette's story in the 2006 collection *Out of the Shadows: Contributions of Twentieth-Century Women to Physics*, edited by Nina Byers and Gary Williams.) DeWitt-Morette moved to the physics department in 1983, and, in 1987, her position was made full-time.

As recently as the 1990s, the sentiment that a university could pay the second person less, or offer them a lesser position, and they would still come remained prevalent in universities, according to several academics.

Departments used to have to be "carrotted and sticked" to try to find a position for a candidate's partner, says Dan Jaffe, an astronomy professor at the University of Texas at Austin and president of the Giant Magellan Telescope. That's changed, he says, noting that at his university, "the flip happened 20 or 25 years ago." Now many departments see advantages to dual hires,

he says, and universities that have the means to create extra jobs have a competitive advantage in attracting the best people.

The couple gets stability that allows each partner to focus on their careers, Jaffe says. “They do better since they are not always on the job market.” And because couples have a harder time moving than do individuals, the university “gets a power couple that cares about the work environment,” says Shanti Deemyad. She and her husband, Saveez Saffarian, joined the physics and astronomy faculty at the University of Utah in 2010.

When should you tell?

Many dual-career couples wrestle with when to tell university hiring committees that they need two jobs. Some spell it out in their cover letters, others bring it up at the first interview, and some wait until they have an offer. When both partners are in the same small subfield, their situation may be known without them saying anything.

The thinking is that saying something early gives a university more time to seek solutions but that it could work against applicants by biasing, even subconsciously, members of the hiring committee. By contrast, once a candidate has an offer, they may have leverage for negotiating a second position.

Jessica Bickel and Thijs Heus met as postdocs in Germany. During job interviews, she removed her engagement ring to avoid biasing hiring committees. Once she had offers, she asked for help finding possible jobs in the area for him. “Most of our decision-making was based on that,” she says, “and less on salary or startup funds.” In 2014, they joined Cleveland State University, she on the tenure track and he as a lecturer. Two years later, Heus’s position was transitioned to tenure track, bolstered by his research output, for which he didn’t have to build up a lab. “We were lucky because of the types of science we do,”



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says Bickel, an experimental nanoscientist. “I had to get a lab up and running, but his work in atmospheric physics is computational. This outcome would not have been possible if the roles had been reversed.”

Naoko Kurahashi Neilson, a high-energy astrophysicist, says she told hiring committees during interviews that she was part of a package. “We didn’t want to create a trailing spouse. We didn’t want the second person to be on soft money,” she says. Since 2014, she and her husband, Russell Neilson, have been physics professors at Drexel University in Philadelphia.

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>
> —**Jenna Smith**, University of Notre Dame

Amy Lytle and Etienne Gagnon wrote in their cover letters that they were applying together, going against advice they had received from well-meaning colleagues. “We decided to have all the cards on the table,” Gagnon says. In 2010, the pair joined the faculty at Franklin & Marshall College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. They shared a job, with one salary and one startup package, and supplemented their income with extra teaching. They built separate research programs in their ultrafast optics lab. Four years in, they began applying elsewhere because they wanted two positions. After they were tenured, they got a second position at Franklin & Marshall. With two jobs, says Gagnon, the college was “more likely to keep us.”

Nathan Schine and Rachel Schine met as undergraduates. “There were spreadsheets,” he says of their searches for graduate school, postdoctoral positions, and faculty jobs. He is an

experimental physicist who works on quantum systems; her field is near-Eastern studies and Arabic literature. After she landed a spot as a PhD student at the University of Chicago, Nathan called the professor who became his PhD adviser and said that if they made him an offer he would come. The pair later got postdocs in Boulder, Colorado, but, he says, if the co-located postdocs hadn't worked out, "this would have been a step where we both left academia." He also kept in mind, he says, that "as long as Rachel gets an academic post somewhere, I can go into industry." In 2022, they both joined the University of Maryland as tenure-track assistant professors. At each step, he says, leveraging multiple offers worked in their favor.

For LGBTQ+ scientists, navigating a joint job search comes with additional challenges, says Yao-Yuan Mao, an astrophysicist at the University of Utah who negotiated jobs for himself and his partner there. As a job candidate, requesting the university's help finding a job for one's partner can require coming out as LGBTQ+. That can lead to awkward conversations. For example, says Mao, correcting the misgendering of a partner is "especially tricky when you are trying to negotiate a job offer."

Plan B

Alexandre Deur and his wife, Xiaochao Zheng, both in experimental nuclear and particle physics, never satisfactorily solved their two-body problem. Deur started working at Thomas Jefferson National Accelerator Facility in Newport News, Virginia, in 2004, a few years before Zheng went on the job market. She joined the faculty at the University of Virginia in 2006. "I drive the 150 miles to be there on weekends," says Deur. "We thought it would be fine, until we became parents. She was by herself with the children, which was difficult."

Looking back, Deur says they should have gone to Ohio University, which extended an offer to him when it wooed Zheng. At the time, Deur felt it was a step backward for him, and he was confident that Zheng would find something close to Jefferson Lab. Over the years, Deur and Zheng tried to find jobs that would bring them closer together. Eventually, they decided they "would bite the bullet and see each other only on weekends," says Deur. "That's how we have been living for the past 20 years."

When Eun-Ah Kim got an offer to join the physics faculty at Cornell University in 2008, the university found a tenure-track physics professorship for her husband, Michael Lawler, at Binghamton University, which is about an hour's commute away. Cornell contributed to his salary for the first few years and sweetened the deal by offering him an adjunct position, which meant he could mentor students at Cornell and had office space there.

Physics duo Caolionn O'Connell and Sam Waldman "opted for Plan B for both of us," says O'Connell. She had been at the Pentagon working in defense analysis, and he had been at MIT involved with the Laser Interferometer Gravitational-Wave Observatory. They were unable to find something for Waldman in the Washington, DC, area or for O'Connell near the University of Chicago, where Waldman had an offer to join the physics faculty. "We had been long-distance for five years," O'Connell says. "I wanted to have babies."

They quit their jobs in 2012 and moved to California, where they were well connected from their time at Stanford University as graduate students and Caltech as postdocs. O'Connell is now at the Aerospace Corp, where she still works in national security.

"My big move was going from academia to the Department of Defense after my postdoc," O'Connell says. "It was a huge cultural shift." Part of the motivation, she adds, was to have flexibility as a dual-career couple. After abandoning his plans to stay in academia, Waldman worked at SpaceX for a couple of years and then launched a startup, Neutralino Space Ventures, that modifies computers and imagers for the space environment. "The uncertainty in the commercial sector is greater than in academia," he says, "but the flip side of stepping off the cliff into uncertainty is that the commercial sector is much larger." (See *PT*'s 31 July interview with Waldman for the series "What can physicists do?")

Andre Frankenthal and Beatrice Ramm met in 2021 as postdocs at Princeton University. After applying for jobs on both sides of the Atlantic with the hope of being together, they declined positions at a midwestern university in part because they worried that their careers would be limited by the school's emphasis on teaching.

Frankenthal, a high-energy physicist, joined the faculty at the University of California, Irvine,

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>
> —**Nathan Schine**, University of Maryland

in 2025. Despite efforts, the university didn't come up with a tenure-track position for Ramm, who works at the intersection of biophysics and biochemistry. She took a competitive, term-limited post as a group leader at the Friedrich Miescher Laboratory of the Max Planck Society in Tübingen, Germany. Ramm and Frankenthal see each other when he is at CERN for his experiments. She plans to try again in a few years to find a job in Southern California. For now, they are each focusing on their careers. "We can compromise later," he says.

Compromises

Many dual-career couples, like Deur and Zheng, endure unpleasant commutes and time apart. In focusing on obtaining two positions, partners may negotiate less for salary and startup money. They may delay having children. If they live apart, they may get flak from their home institution for leaving town frequently to visit each other. And when they do become parents, one is like a single parent while the other rarely sees their children.

Aspiring academics tend to be limited geographically, and the challenge is amplified when two jobs are sought. Often, dual-career couples get more help in finding a second job from smaller universities that are eager to snag two excellent scientists and from universities in remote locations than from those in metropolitan areas, where the partner presumably has more options both inside and outside of academia. Some dual-career couples report that in prioritizing staying together, they narrowed their choices to less prestigious schools. And some partners compromised by choosing a university that was not the best match for their specific fields.

Kurahashi Neilson, for example, notes that in choosing to co-locate with her husband, she passed up faculty opportunities at more research-focused institutions. The decision to put her family first also flattened the arc of her career: "I hit a glass ceiling in terms of visible leadership." Managing big grants or a center "would be the next natural step for me," she says, but her current institution doesn't have the administrative support to coordinate such activities.

Close quarters

Partners who work in the same department say they mostly see advantages. The minor irritants include that colleagues often assume that if one partner has been informed about something, the other one has too. And sometimes other faculty members assume partners vote as a bloc. Some departments bar members of couples from serving as chair, and it's common to avoid putting both partners on the same departmental committee.

Yajie Yuan and Alex Chen study black holes and neutron stars at Washington University in St Louis. "Alex is good at developing codes, and I am more theoretically oriented," says Yuan. "Being in the same department allows us to work well together." Still, she notes, "when we go up for tenure, we will have to be distinct and make our own cases." Yuan and Chen also strategize about competing for funding: Who should apply for which grants and awards? And when?

Where being in the same department gets awkward—and sometimes awful—is when a couple splits up. A physicist who requested anonymity described how things became tense in her department after she and her husband separated. She had him removed from a student's committee, and she avoids faculty meetings. She can't leave the university, she says, because she and her ex share custody of their children.

"Tenure-track material"

It can sometimes be tough for the partner who is interviewed as part of a university's efforts to create conditions attractive to the primary candidate. For example, I encountered cases where

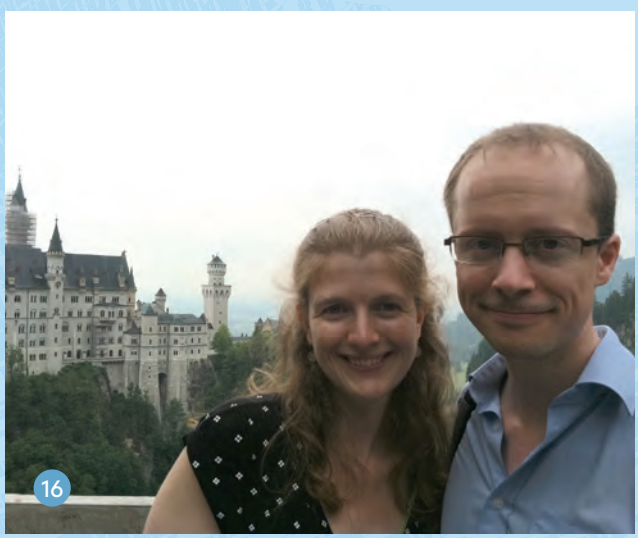
men felt insecure about positions that were created for them after their wives had offers from physics departments. Those couples requested anonymity because of their raw feelings on the topic; one of the women said the sensitivity abated once they both had tenure.

But the University of Texas's Jaffe, who has served on university-wide tenure committees, says that if someone is not "tenure-track material," they won't be offered a tenure-track position. "Departments are not going to waste 30 years of salary on someone we don't think will cut it," he says. What's more, he adds, by the time faculty come up for tenure, "it is often impossible to tell who was hired as the trailing spouse."

When things don't work as desired for dual-career job seekers, says the University of Michigan's Simon, "it may have nothing to do with the quality of the candidate. It may have to do with fit. There are other factors. It's important to have realistic expectations." PT







Photos show a sampling of physicists who have successfully navigated the job market to find two jobs (mostly) in academia. Unless otherwise noted, photos are courtesy of the subjects. **1** Amy Lytle and Etienne Gagnon. (Photo by Deb Grove, Franklin & Marshall College.) **2** Jessica Bickel and Thijs Heus. **3** Andre Frankenthal and Beatrice Ramm. **4** Gregory Topasna and Daniela Topasna. **5** Sam Waldman and Caolionn O'Connell. **6** Michael Lawler and Eun-Ah Kim. **7** Alex Chen and Yajie Yuan with their son. **8** Daniel Hussey and Julia Scherschligt. (Photo by Abel Santander, https://www.AndeanWalker.com.) **9** Xiaochao Zheng, Alexandre Deur, and two of their children. (Photo by A. M. Deur-Joly.) **10** Yumi Ijiri and Stephen FitzGerald. (Photo by David FitzGerald.) **11** Saveez Saffarian and Shanti Deemyad. **12** Rachel Hyneman and Callum Jones. (Photo courtesy of Maya Papaya Pictures, https://mayapapayapictures.com.) **13** Naoko Kurahashi Neilson and Russell Neilson. **14** Gail Zasowski and Daniel Wik. **15** Yao-Yuan Mao. (Photo courtesy of the University of Utah.) **16** Lara Anderson and James Gray.

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