Universities and the Two-Body Problem

Susan Landau

Around the time I was finishing my Ph.D., I received a warmly encouraging letter from a senior faculty member at a major research university, urging me to apply. I did. Nothing happened. What had made my application look so bad? I had my answer a few months later. We met at a conference, and he said, "Sorry, we didn't interview you. We knew you were part of a two-body problem, and we only had one job,"[1].

All my jobhunting since my Ph.D. has been complicated by the fact that I am married to a fellow computer scientist. A job for one is complicated, for two, the predicament exponentiates. Yet the reality is I am far from a singular point in being married to a scientist.

A recent article in Science stated that 69% of married female physicists have scientists as spouses, as do 80% of female mathematicians and 33% of female chemists[2]. Chairs and deans are not discussing an isolated phenomenon when they say, "We wanted to hire [a female scientist], but she was married to [a male scientist], and there wasn't a position for him."

I do not think universities are using this problem in bad faith as a way to avoid hiring women. I think departments, chairs and deans do view each occurrence individually. A recent report from the University of Michigan pointed out that "female faculty seem to benefit from career services even more than men, because women, based on our experience and interviews, often have a spouse or partner in a position equal to or higher than their own. Almost all female faculty recruited by Engineering have a partner with a Ph.D.,"[3].

[1]Discrimination on the basis of marital status is illegal, but that is not the point of this article.

[2]Ann Gibbons, "Key Issue: Two-Career Science Marriage," Science, March 13,1992, pp 1380-1381.

[3]University of Michigan, The Dual Career Project

Imaginitive Solutions

A number of universities and colleges have started making imaginative institutional responses to the two-body problem. Some solutions are internal; some involve networking with schools in the area. Some involve only the relevant department, others are institutionwide. It is instructive to describe the responses, for they show ways to handle what seems to be viewed by many as an insoluble problem.

In limiting my discussion to university responses to dual-career married academic couples, I do not diminish the difficulties faced by other types of dual-career couples. This particular issue affects a disproportionate number of female scientists; it is also an issue universities can act upon. Solving this one aspect of the problem will not solve the whole problem for female scientists, but it will help an important part of a complicated picture.

At the University of Wisconsin at Madison, the Spousal Hire Program is run by the provost's office, which makes available funding for one-third of a full-time equivalent position for up to three years. The spousal hire must meet one or more of the following criteria: 1) the department, as judged by the dean, needs to be expanded, 2) a strong case can be made for continued employment after the initial three years, 3) hiring the spouse will enhance faculty diversity and 4) the spouse has a record of receiving research grants, thus providing a portion of their salary support.

Oregon State University and the University of Nebraska at Lincoln have spousal fellowship programs. The money in both programs is small-a fellowship of $12,000 at Oregon and $15,000 at Nebraska-but it enables the spouse to find employment in the area. The fellow is employed for one year in the appropriate department. At Oregon one-third of the funding comes from the department and two-thirds comes from the provost's office. At Nebraska all the funding comes from the provost's office. This year Nebraska has 14 such fellowships. This investment should be contrasted with the University of Michigan's estimate from its College of Engineering that "the cost per faculty position of recruiting efforts is about $20,000"[4]. That number does not take into account the intangible costs when a top recruit leaves.

Locating Two Jobs

The University of Michigan has been concerned for quite some time with the issue of dual-career couples, because the unhappiness of an underem-

[4]University of Michigan, Ibid.

ployed spouse has a strong effect on faculty retention. At this institution the focus is on dual careers, rather than dual-career academic couples. The Office of the Assistant Vice President for Academic Affairs-Personnel has organized job search workshops for spouses and partners and aided these spouses and partners by arranging interviews and contacts, often before the recruited faculty member has made a decision whether to accept an offer. There is no formal program in place for dual-career academic couples, although in practice, the university has helped several such couples through tenure-track and tenured appointments. The fact that there is a high-level administrator with official concerns for this problem makes it somewhat easier to effect solutions.

For several years, Kenyon College, the College of Wooster, and Dennison College in Ohio have run joint job advertisements, listing all positions available at the three institutions. Complications arise when, for example, the Art Department wants someone, but the Astronomy Department has the other member of the couple as a second or third choice candidate. These complications are exacerbated when the two people apply at different institutions. But the provost at Kenyon has said that the colleges are deeply committed to doing this, and they will work out a solution. This year, Otterbein College is advertising with the three colleges. Bates College, Colby College, and Bowdoin College, all within one hour of each other in Maine, recently began a similar advertising effort.

Negotiating Solutions

A number of arrangements have happened as the result of an energetic chair, an imaginative dean or a thoughtful candidate. The following two arrangements occurred with couples where both members were computer scientists.

Several years ago the Computer Science Department at Iowa State had a first-choice candidate, but she was married and the department had authorization for a single slot. The chair went to the dean and the provost for an additional position; this was agreed to because of the institution's commitment to affirmative action. But funding was tight, and it was not clear when the position would become available. So, the department made an offer in writing to hire the spouse when the next position in the department became available. The department committed to hiring the spouse within three academic years. The chair urged the husband to accept the offer and said he would do all he could to expedite matters. The husband signed a contract

for a position that would begin within three years. He joined the faculty two years later.

Another pair of candidates approached the University of Waterloo. One member of the couple already had a position at the university. The couple suggested that they would be delighted to be appointed to 1.5 positions, three-quarters each. Because fractional load appointments already were part of Waterloo's faculty handbook, that part of the arrangement was easy to implement. The additional half position was much simpler to negotiate than a full position.

The approaches suggested above raise many issues. The most crucial is that they change the criteria by which departments do their hiring. The biology department's hires are affected by computer science; physics' hires by history. Most departments believe that they hire the "best candidate." That is not strictly true.

Many departments look for the best candidate in a certain area, or the best candidate that several areas can agree on, or even the best candidate in an area not planned to be filled that year because the candidate is sufficiently outstanding that a case can be made to the dean. The criteria by which candidates are judged are multi-dimensional. Rarely is one candidate best in all measures. The programs above add another dimension to the picture.

The solutions I mentioned will not work in all cases. They don't answer the question of what to do about the dual-career couple when each member has a very narrow specialization. They certainly don't solve the problem for small, isolated colleges. They don't handle the problem faced by a couple when one person is an academic scientist and the spouse is highly trained, but not an academic. But these suggestions can stimulate deans and chairs into searching for other solutions.

Like many work situations, academia is designed from the point of view of wage earners with perfect flexibility to change jobs several times: graduate school, post doc, assistant professor, tenured position. With rare exceptions, the problem of the two-career academic couple has been viewed as the problem of the individuals involved. That is a narrow view, as this complication affects a majority of female scientists.

Even in these times of stringent budgets, imaginative institutional responses are available. We should get across to our female students – and their husbands – that being a scientist does not mean forswearing other parts of life. Being a scientist may be complicated, and there will be compromises,

but the career is also rich and rewarding. Students do not have to choose between a career as a serious scientist and marriage. It is possible to have both.

When she wrote the article in 1988, Susan Landau was Research Associate Professor of Computer Science, University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Now she is Senior Staff Engineer at Sun Microsystems Inc.