

When to reveal the two-body problem?

Q: When to reveal the two-body problem?

A: It depends.

Cynthia J. Jameson, University of Illinois at Chicago

Disclaimer: This is a distilled summary of advice based on reading survey-based research articles on the subject and looking over many web postings based on personal experiences of academics with two-body problems solved or otherwise not solved. Some useful sources are listed below. I have personal experience of a two-body problem of type IA(ii).

In 2006, the Clayman Institute for Gender Research at Stanford University carried out a survey of five private institutions and eight public institutions and published a report in 2008 *Dual-Career Academic Couples: What Universities Need to Know*.¹ Their findings include: women are more likely than men to have academic partners; over a third of faculty in the institutions surveyed are partnered with another academic; ten percent had been recruited as part of a dual hire; 93% of dual hires work at the same institution; 88% of faculty who had successfully negotiated a dual hire at their current institution indicated that the first hire would have turned down their job offer had his or her partner not also found appropriate employment. They also found that 83% of women scientists in academic couples are partnered with another scientist, compared to 54% of men. In early 1998, Laurie McNeil and Marc Sher (both in Physics) conducted a Web-based survey on this problem. They asked about the experiences of physicist (and other scientist) couples in finding employment for both partners in the same location, and about solutions that had proved successful. The website Dual Science Career Couples² is one of the products of this survey. It contains the full 60-page report on the survey,³ as well as a large number of links which will be relevant for dual-career-couples. On the other hand, Wolf-Wendel, Twombly, and Rice conducted a survey of how (policies and practices) academic institutions assist dual-career couples in finding employment for accompanying partners, published in part as an article,⁴ and also as the book *The Two-Body Problem: Dual-Career-Couple Hiring Practices in Higher Education*.⁵ This is worthwhile reading, just to learn about what may be possible, keeping in mind that the best accommodation, two tenure-track positions in the same institutions, is rare. A 2003 article on meeting the needs of dual career couples in academia is more general, more from the point of view of human-resources offices, not necessarily STEM, but may be useful for those with partners in other areas.⁶

When to reveal the two-body problem? One couple's thoughtful advice may be found in ScienceCareers,⁷ and indeed there are many such anecdotes out there. However, each couple's case is unique. The strategically correct answer will depend on many factors, probably the most important of which is how strong the candidates are. It will depend on whether (I) both strongly wish to be in tenure-track positions in research universities, or (II) one body is more flexible, can take other types of opportunities. Under (I) it depends on whether the second body is (A) in the same research area/department, or (B) not. The Stanford survey found that respondents in the survey consider a second hire's area of specialization important to partner hiring decisions 87 percent of the time.¹ If they really want to hire you, the strategies that can be adopted by the hiring institution in case II are quite different from those in case IA or case IB. Also, the strategically correct answer will depend on whether the institution is located in

(i) a single-academy smallish town with no other academic institution within commuting distance or (ii) in a multi-academy metropolitan area with other types of job opportunities too. A possible strategy for the hiring institution is to leave the solution of the problem to the couple. A better strategy for the hiring institution, if the candidate is a strong match, is to adopt a pro-active attitude about assisting the couple solve their two-body problem. As indicated below, sometimes this situation should be viewed by the institution as a two-body opportunity. [You do not want to reveal your two-body problem too early because, as often happens you may find out later that "Sorry, we didn't interview you. We knew you were part of a two-body problem, and we only had one job."](#) ⁸ The survey conducted by the Stanford group found that "14 percent of our survey respondents agree that their department has not approached or considered a candidate because it is known that he or she has an academic partner. This finding is borne out in respondent comments in which several faculty noted that candidates are sometimes taken out of the running for a position because they have known partners and the search committee presumes that these partners are unmovable. The issue is compounded by small fields and departments where, as one faculty commented, search committees already know "whether candidates have spouses who require academic jobs." ¹ The best advice I can give is to [investigate the partner accommodation policies at institutions to which you apply because university cultures and procedures differ greatly. Often the policies are openly available on the web. \(See partial list of spousal hiring policies compiled by historians.org.](#) ⁹) In those cases where the culture encourages partner hiring, you may benefit by raising the issue early in the process, especially if your partner is a strong candidate. As was found by the Stanford survey, "Many universities, especially large ones, make every effort to hire academic partners. Other universities rarely or never hire academic partners at the junior level—some because they do not readily tenure their own junior faculty and hence do not invest in them in this way, others because they are in metropolitan areas where they rely on other institutions for partner employment opportunities."¹ When to raise the two-body issue? The Stanford survey revealed that for Assistant Professor hires, out of 119 cases, the partner issue was raised 3% of the time in the application letter, 54% in the interview, 31% after a verbal offer, 11% after written offer, and 2% after offer is accepted. ¹

IA(i): This is probably the least flexible situation. Either the hiring department will hire both of you within the same department or else you both have to look elsewhere. For this case, it is probably wise for [both to send in applications at the same time with the cover letter stating that the other person is also applying.](#) In this case, the written offers are negotiated simultaneously. One good point about this situation is that research institutions in small university towns far from metropolitan areas are very aware of this disadvantage and they may have been working on solutions for some time. It is a distinct advantage for a department to hire a couple in that it is much harder for the couple to move later on, when one or the other of the pair has become very visible and marketable. The competition has to offer two jobs in order to get them.

IA(ii): This is somewhat more flexible. There may be a possibility for the other body to find a job in a comparable academic institution within the same geographical area. Many IA couples [choose to send applications preferentially to those geographical areas which are advertising two academic jobs in the same hiring season.](#) This is too limiting a strategy, however; there is a possibility that next year a second opening may occur. Nevertheless, [both should apply for the same job, without necessarily announcing the relationship at the outset.](#) At the same time, [investigate the spousal accommodation](#)

policies of the institution so as to determine your best strategy. When one of the pair is invited to a campus interview, it may become apparent that it is a [very good match](#), in which case [it may be wise to let the hiring department know about the trailing spouse](#). This gives the department a chance to strengthen their offer by finding a job for the trailing partner. On the other hand, if it is not strongly apparent that an offer is likely to be received, perhaps one should [wait until the first verbal overture/offer is made to let them know about the trailing spouse](#). When both partners are strong candidates, again, it is a distinct advantage for a department to hire a couple in that it is much harder for the couple to move later on, when one or the other of the pair have become very visible and marketable. [Once you have an offer, this is the last stage at which you should bring up the two-body situation](#). If you accept an offer without negotiating the spousal issue, it will be very difficult to get the institution to do something about it. Also, once the issue is raised and negotiated, it is best to [wait until the partner has a written offer in hand](#) before a “first hire” accepts an offer.

IB(i): For this case, it is probably wise to [let the hiring department know as soon as you are invited to a campus interview](#), and provide an application package or at least a CV of the trailing spouse, since it is a single-university geographical area. Success depends on the department of your partner’s sub-discipline being receptive to overtures (with incentives) from your hiring department. When both departments are in the same college, your department may enlist the help of the dean. When the departments are in different colleges, then, typically, incentives need to come from the provost. The difficulty is in convincing the other department that this is a special opportunity to hire someone at a time when they are not otherwise permitted to conduct a search. One possibility is for the primary hiring department, the primary hiring college, and the provost to share the funding of the incentive package to the department receiving the trailing partner. At UIC the Provost’s spousal accommodation policy is a 1/3 1/3 1/3 arrangement. For three years the partner’s salary will be split equally between the Provost’s Office, the department making the primary hire, and the department hiring the partner. At the end of three years, the department that hired the partner will assume 100% responsibility for the partner’s salary. ¹⁰ Consult the partial list of institutions with web-published spousal accommodation policies. ⁹ Once the issue is raised and negotiated, it is best to [wait until the partner has a written offer in hand](#) before a “first hire” accepts an offer.

IB(ii): This is a more flexible situation than the above. The first strategy for the couple is to [look independently for jobs in the geographical area and hope that both get interviews/offers](#). When one of the pair is invited to a campus interview, it may become apparent that it is a [very good match](#), in which case it may be wise to [let the hiring department know about the trailing spouse](#). This gives the department a chance to strengthen their offer by finding a job for the trailing partner. On the other hand, if it is not strongly apparent that an offer is likely to be received, perhaps one should [wait until the first verbal overture/offer is made to let them know about the trailing spouse](#). The hiring institution’s first strategy is to look elsewhere in the area. GC-HERC is an excellent way to find other academic opportunities in the Greater Chicago area,¹¹ and there are other regional HERC (Higher Education Recruitment Consortium).¹² The institution’s next strategy is to try to accommodate the partner within the same university, as in IB(i). Consult the partial list of institutions with web-published spousal accommodation policies. ⁹ If the institution is one of those with web-published policies, you will be better informed as to your own strategy. Remember, that even when there is

a policy in place, it is usually not applied in every case. The stronger both candidates are, the more likely the accommodation will be successfully managed by the institution.

IIA or IIB: This situation is more flexible than above and [both partners should look independently for jobs in their desired geographical areas and hope that both get interviews/offers within commuting distance of each other.](#) The one who is passionate about being in a tenure-track faculty position in a research intensive university should ideally get the first interview, since he/she has a more constrained situation. Again, investigate the accommodation policies of the institution in order to make an informed decision about when to reveal your situation. A strategy that has been successful is to [wait until the campus interview before revealing the job needs of the partner.](#) It may become apparent that there is [a very good match with the institution,](#) in which case it may be wise to [let the hiring department know about the trailing spouse during the interview.](#) [The Stanford survey found that 54% in 119 cases of Assistant Professor hires the 2-body issue was raised during the interview.] This gives the department a chance to strengthen their offer by finding a job for the trailing partner. On the other hand, if it is not strongly apparent that an offer will be received, perhaps one should [wait until the first verbal overture/offer is made to let the hiring department know about the trailing spouse.](#) Because the trailing spouse is more flexible, the solutions are the same whether both partners are in the same sub-field or not. When pressed, many universities will create for the trailing spouse a research assistant professor position for a few probationary years, at the end of which time the position could revert to a tenure-track position or else or become an entirely soft-money position. There are usually teaching-only positions or lectureships available in most departments. This solution is easiest for a department to arrange in case IIA. Nevertheless, deans of colleges and provosts are usually willing to help arrange a position in another department, providing incentives as needed. All such incentives may be viewed as part of the start-up funds needed to get the desired candidate to sign up. Here, too, the strategies are about the same for (i) or (ii) situations, with institutions of type (i) having to bear the burden of coming up with creative solutions from within, but they are used to it. In case IIB(ii), the hiring department is more likely to choose to leave the solution of the problem to the couple, since the partner is flexible and in a subject area outside of their field. GC-HERC is a great resource for the trailing spouse to find other opportunities in the Greater Chicago area; Fermilab, Argonne National lab and academic institutions large and small provide job listings.¹¹ Some universities employ a professional (either in-house or purchase professional services outside the university) who is able to connect directly with job opportunities including the industrial and business sector. The latter is especially useful when the partner is not an academic. Consult the Stanford article for examples of institutional strategies.¹

Sources:

¹ Dual-Career Academic Couples: What Universities Need to Know, L. Schiebinger, A. Henderson, S. Gilmartin, (Stanford: Clayman Institute, 2008): http://gender.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/DualCareerFinal_0.pdf

² Dual-Science-Career-Couples: <http://physics.wm.edu/dualcareer.html>

³ *Report On The Dual-Career-Couple Survey*: <http://www.physics.wm.edu/~sher/survey.pdf>

⁴ Dual-Career Couples: Keeping Them Together, L. E. Wolf-Wendel, S. Twombly and S. Rice, *The Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 71, No. 3 (May - Jun., 2000), pp. 291-321
Ohio State University Press:
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2649292>

⁵ The Two-Body Problem: Dual-Career-Couple Hiring Practices in-Higher Education, L. Wolf-Wendel, S. B. Twombly, and S. Rice, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003 Baltimore.

⁶ Meeting the Needs of Dual Career Couples in Academia, M. Fleig-Palmer, J. Murrin, D. K. Palmer, and C. Rathert, 2003 CUPA-HR Journal, Vol. 54, No.3, pp. 12-15:
https://www.hercjobs.org/career_advice/Dual-Careers/dual_career_resources/DualCareerCUPAArticle.pdf

⁷ Solving the Two-Body Problem, A. Agrawal and J, Thaler:
<http://www.sciencemaq.org/careers/2003/03/solving-two-body-problem>

⁸ Universities and the Two-Body Problem, Susan Landau (Computer Science):
https://privacyink.org/pdf/two_body_sigact.pdf

⁹ Spousal hiring policies various universities, a list of URLs:
https://www.historians.org/Documents/Spousal_Hiring_Policies.doc

¹⁰ Partner Accommodation Policy at UIC:
http://oaadocs.uic.edu/Partner_Accommodation_Policy_Final1.pdf

¹¹ The Greater Chicago Midwest Higher Education Recruitment Consortium:
https://www.hercjobs.org/greater_chicago_midwest/

the dual career section of HERC has many links to articles and university dual-career pages:
https://www.hercjobs.org/career_advice/Dual-Careers/index.html

¹² The National HERC links to job announcements at academic institutions throughout the US:
https://www.hercjobs.org/about_herc/index.html