

The Chronicle of Higher Education

Chronicle Careers

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Tuesday, April 22, 2008

'I'm Your Millstone'

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HEADS UPAdvice for
academic
administrators

A dean I know is a staunch advocate of reform in how universities treat spousal hires, especially for senior positions. Her own experience convinced her that academe is far too inflexible about dual-career hires and that, as a result, many institutions inadvertently work against their own best interests.

Before assuming her current position, she had been named a finalist for a deanship at another institution. She had been especially excited about the job because the university was fairly prestigious and sponsored one of the nation's premier doctoral programs in her field. A prominent scholar, she would have brought additional prestige to an already first-rate program.

Her campus interview had gone exceedingly well, and all indications were that she would be offered the position. To her surprise and chagrin, the head of the search committee called one Saturday afternoon to say that, despite her successful campus visit, she would not receive an offer. She didn't get the nod, the committee chair intimated, because the university would have had to bear the added expense of hiring her spouse -- a noted scholar in his own right.

The couple was understandably disappointed. She told me that over dinner that same evening her husband had said ruefully, "I'm very sorry, dear, but I'm afraid I've become your millstone."

The irony is that the dean's husband was not truly a "trailing" spouse if by that term we mean an unequal partner -- someone who, in the worst-case scenarios, is being dragged along like a dead weight. Indeed, he would have been every bit as much of a catch for the institution as the dean. It would have been a rare win-win situation.

Unfortunately for all concerned, the powers-that-be did not recognize the opportunity.

All too often we as administrators fail to make the important distinction between partners who most likely would not have been hired under normal circumstances and, thus, could be a burden on an institution, and those who would be an attractive hire under any circumstances. One is a "trailing" spouse in need of "an accommodation"; the other, for lack of a more elegant phrase, is an integral part of a recruitment package.

An institution takes on a trailing spouse (or partner) with a sense of obligation -- as part of the price it has to pay for the individual it *really* wants. And sometimes it does so with resentment. In contrast, a university takes on (or should) a package of two high-performing professionals with enthusiasm and pride.

That is precisely the kind of language that higher-education publications tend to use in reporting on an institution's "great coup" in attracting a "dynamic duo" from a rival institution. One department is said to have "snatched" two stars from the other, or to have "lured" the couple away. The recipient institution gets credit for wise strategic recruitment while the other is implicitly blamed for its failure to retain the couple.

Clearly, hiring the superstar partner of a superstar is substantially different from negotiating a job offer for someone who could legitimately be called a trailing spouse. The key distinction that should always be at the forefront of such decisions is whether hiring someone's partner genuinely enhances and contributes to the department and its programs in appreciable ways.

Perhaps some departments fall into the trap of automatically classifying all spousal hires as undesirable, out of fear of ending up with an unacceptable or mediocre colleague. We all know of situations in which a university official exerted pressure on a department to accept a spouse or partner that the department felt was not a good fit. No department likes to feel that a colleague was foisted on it, and such situations have left a bad taste in the mouth of many a faculty member regarding spousal hires.

It would be a real mistake, however, to assume that just because some dual-career hires have gone bad (usually because of a lack of faculty participation in the process), all such hires are to be avoided. In effect, some departments have allowed the legitimate concern about undue pressure to blind them to the obvious benefits that could accrue to a department that actively sets out to recruit a high-achieving couple.

That is the case with the dean and her so-called millstone husband: Both are popular and well-respected members of their current institution. Some of the best hires I have made over the years have been dual-career couples who ended up contributing substantially to a department's culture and prestige. In fact, in a few cases, colleagues have commented that the partner was "even more of a catch" or "even more impressive" than the principal hire.

Of course, the effort to appoint a partner needs to be handled with deftness and sensitivity. Above all, the process needs to be open and transparent. While the search may not be as elaborate as a traditional one, the affected department must be afforded the opportunity to vet the candidate's credentials thoroughly.

The department should also have the opportunity to invite the candidate to a campus visit, although in some cases, the candidate may be so well-known that a department will dispense with that ritual. The advantage of a visit is that it helps both the new recruit and the department feel that the process has integrity and legitimacy. The principal objection to the good-old-boy scenario of an administrator pressuring a department to accept a partner is that its faculty members feel voiceless, that their input was neither solicited nor desired.

In determining the trailing spouse's starting salary, the administrator who makes the offer should be cognizant of salary compression and inversion issues with existing faculty members in the department. Many academics are suspicious of the whole notion of spousal hiring in general, so there is no need to add to the tensions by introducing inequities from the start.

Finally, once the partner joins the faculty, the department must treat him or her as a full member of the departmental community, not as an interloper. Some departments have made the serious mistake of treating a spouse or partner not as a fellow colleague but as the "chair's wife" or the "dean's partner" or the institution's "first lady." If recruiting a dynamic package of two high-performing professionals is going to work, then both partners must be accepted as individuals.

My point is that the real millstone is not someone's partner; it is the debilitating fear that a spousal hire will necessarily disadvantage the department. My experience is that it usually is the reverse: A carefully vetted spousal hire can add immeasurably to a department and an institution.

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