
The Two Body Problem Doesn't Have One Answer

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I met my partner in graduate school, so we knew from the beginning of our relationship that we might not graduate at the same time, let alone find two jobs in the same location afterwards. Nevertheless, our relationship gave each of us another person to commiserate with about our research struggles. We were each other's support through classes and presentations, prelims, late nights in the lab, and dissertation writing. Because graduate school can be so mentally and emotionally taxing, it was great to have someone who understood what we were going through. *That's why this article is as much about relationship advice as it is about graduate school advice.*

If you are unfamiliar with the "two-body problem," it simply refers to the complications you face when both you *and your partner* are in academia. You need two PhD-level jobs in the same location. Of course, many couples find themselves in relationships where both people work outside the home. However, academics are even more likely to partner up with another specialized professional, which makes navigating the job market that much more challenging. I'll admit that I don't have the answer worked out yet, but I can give you some insights from my experience.

The first (and, importantly, the only) piece of advice I have for anyone facing a two-body problem is to **stick to a timeline**. Your program likely recommends a timeline for degree completion: work with your PI and committee to make sure you meet scheduled expectations for completing coursework, submitting grants or qualifying exams, preparing proposals, and finally completing your dissertation research and defense. This approach gives you both the best chance of graduating near the same time and hitting the job market together. From there, you have two options:

Option A: The Trailing Spouse

“Trailing” sounds bad, but it does NOT mean that your career matters less. (It might not even mean that you’ll earn less!) Trailing simply means that you are the partner that is more *flexible*. Perhaps your partner is keen to move to a certain part of the country or is dedicated to joining a certain lab for their postdoc. If you are geographically more flexible, you can expand your search for jobs to the region they are considering. If you are more flexible in your career aspirations, you can look for non-academic jobs, too. You don’t necessarily even need two jobs at the same institution - a long commute may be the right compromise to keep you both living relatively close.

Option B: Split (for now)

If you can’t find two jobs together, for whatever reason, it may make sense to take the next-best, but separate, offers. This economic reality of the job market plagues professional couples in ANY field. Seeing as you just spent 5+ years working on an impressive doctoral degree, it is *okay* to prioritize the growth of your young career for now. Trust that in a few years, with a bit more experience under your belts, you will both be much more competitive on the job market and can find two jobs closer together. Just keep in mind that spousal hires are hard to come by - even if you know professors at your institution with partners on campus, remember that they are likely 20+ years your senior and entered the academic job market in a time when postdoc positions were shorter, research funding was relatively more plentiful, and hiring happened more often. You may still end up with a version of Option A even after taking Option B.

Since 2015, I’ve tried a rotating mix of these options. I graduated one year before my fiance did, and I stayed in town, adjuncting at a local community college, until he finished, too. Even though this kept us together temporarily, we split after that: he took a postdoc position in New York, while I took a visiting professor position at a small university back in my home state. During that next year apart, we got married, took a honeymoon (two, actually!) and made plans to move back together; my husband changed subfields and labs, moving to an institution within two hours of my college. We each had much longer commutes, but at least we were living in the same place! Just another year later, his new PI accepted a job offer and moved the whole lab - equipment, animals, and employees - out of state. My husband followed and so again we split for another year. When I turned down the chance at a tenure-track job to pursue something outside academia, I thought we’d be able to move back in together and be done. Instead, I landed a fellowship that puts me in D.C. for the next year or two. Four years out from graduation, and we are *still* struggling to answer the two-body problem. Our approach continues to shift with the demands of our respective jobs, our maturing career goals, and the changing priorities of our relationship. The choices we’ve made would not have worked for everyone, but they’ve worked for us primarily because the choices were made *together*. I was supportive when he switched research areas and supportive when he followed his new lab and moved away from me. He was supportive when I took my visiting position instead of following him to New York and supportive when I opted to pursue this fellowship instead of moving closer. When you

have a two-body problem, solutions must be reached as a pair.

Whichever option you pick (or end up with), my initial advice still holds: **stick to a timeline**. Make time for each other, outside of work. Schedule date nights (if you're living together) or plan regular visits (if you're apart). Check in often to see if the arrangement is working - professionally and personally. Are you still happy with your job? Are you prepared to hit the job market again? Is the relationship too strained? Have family priorities changed? In this situation, it is immensely important to be supportive and understanding. Remember that postdoc positions, part-time underemployment, or living far apart are all temporary. You're in this *together*. Reevaluate often, and be sure to set a deadline to move on to your next career phase, and to move back in together. Good luck!

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