“This town ain’t big enough for the both of us”:
Two Engineering Educator Careers, One Department

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ABSTRACT
Demands and stresses on a dual-career couple can be great. When the couple works in the same
department, it starts to become difficult to separate professional and person life. Each dual-career
couple must work out their own arrangements for dealing with communication, confidentiality,
and emotional support. However, each person in the couple must strive from the first day to
maintain a separate professional identity and manage the inevitable conflicts of interest that will
arise when two people work in such close proximity to each other. The authors share some
experiences and advice on dealing with dual careers within the same department.

Prologue
The quintessential western movie ends with the showdown on the deserted, dusty Main Street.
Two gunslingers, a cowboy and a cowgirl, stand nose-to-nose, grimacing with anger and resolve.
The duelers stare down each other with steely eyes and dirt-stained faces. The cowgirl with the
white hat says confidently, “this town ain’t big enough for the both of us”. The cowboy, dressed
in black from head to toe except the shiny silver belt buckle like a serving tray, responds with
“Then, let’s do something about it.”

The gunslingers turn briskly and take ten paces in opposite directions. The lovable, soft-spoken
town physician slowly slinks out of the squeaky swinging saloon doors to officiate the gunfight.
Taking his red handkerchief from his coat pocket, the physician raises the blood red cloth over
his head. The desperados steady their stances, digging their heels into the sandy dirt for traction.
Their right hands dangling by their sides, they wiggle their fingers impatiently. Their left hands
are clinched into tight fists like granite boulders. The physician turns his head away, as if trying
to shield his face from a hot, dry, Santa Ana dust storm. He emphatically swings his arm and
handkerchief down to his side, while straightening his back. The gunslingers move in a fluid
motion toward their holsters, grabbing their trusty Remingtons. In flash of blue steel, guns are
raised from the hip as their triggers pull back and release…

Then, I sit straight up in bed. It’s 5:50AM and I have awoken before the alarm goes off. I had
that dream again. Why do I keep having this stupid dream?

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Introduction

When a household has a member who is an engineering educator, the “home time” will experience some intrusion. When that household has two engineering educators, the family will have to make frequent adjustments and “home time” will be under full-fledged assault. When that household has two engineering educators in the same department, personal time is often overwhelmed by the professional. Make that two “new” engineering educators in the same department. “Help us, Kemo Sabe”. The problem is not that two educators in the same department work more or harder. The problem is that both careers and their associated issues are so intertwined, it is hard to “get away from work”. Two research programs. Two sets of graduate students. Two laboratories. And often one name. “Why are there so many classes taught by Dr. Bruce?” “How can she teach classes in two different areas?” “Why does he get two offices when the other professors only get one?” These are the types of questions one might be asked. Furthermore, engineers are educated in our universities with an under current of competition. It is natural for engineering faculty to feel a sense of competition between them in their careers. How do you deal with those feelings of victory, and worse, defeat when you are married to your “competitor”?

Two engineering educators in the same department can be beneficial. Just as the good guys always send out two scouts to watch the cattle rustlers, two different viewpoints of department goings-on can be helpful in making sense of a chaotic profession. A sympathetic ear and someone who “truly” understands your workplace frustrations can sometimes be the only thing to keep you going. Sometimes, the town that is really just a small dusty Main Street looks pretty good after all.

In this paper, we will elaborate on our trials, tribulations, and triumphs as two engineering educators in the same department. We will share our mechanisms for establishing ground rules with the department head, department staff, other faculty, and students. We offer no “silver bullets”, but are happy to share our experiences, positive and negative, as we try to “ride off into the sunset”.

Maintain separate professional identities

Dual-career couples obviously commensurate and advise each other. Most couples do, dual-career or not. Therefore, it is human nature for people to assume that one person in the couple can speak for both. Do not fall into this trap! Each person should maintain their own and separate professional identity. Do not speak on behalf of your partner. Nothing positive can result.

It is imperative that the dual-career couples set the tone for and create separate professional identities from the very beginning of their appointment. Both members of the couple should treat each other in the same manner as they would any other faculty member. The actions of the dual career couple toward each other and others is usually the way the couple is treated in return. In short, the more a dual-career couple act like a couple, the more often they will be treated like a couple.
Each member of the couple should only speak on their own behalf. You may misconstrue or misspeak, and since you are the other half of the couple, your words will be taken as if spoken by your partner. Of course, a healthy relationship has the couple communicating extensively, so this is sometimes difficult to do in practice. We have found it convenient to attempt to avoid saying the other’s name while at work. If you cannot say your partner’s name, it is difficult for you to represent some comment or thought on their behalf. We might say that we “heard some faculty saying that…” but we try to never say “my husband said…”

Agree that each person is entitled to his or her own opinion on work-related topics. In other words, agree to disagree on some issues. Taking opposing sides of an issue should never be used against the other. Maintain a professional tone during discussions, especially in public. Do not resort to a familiar communication pattern when at work. As an example, we recall the first time that we disagreed on an issue in a faculty meeting. Discussion in the meeting was professional, and the faculty was stating their positions on the issue. One of us spoke up on one side of the argument. The other of us followed with a point supporting the other side. At that point, a hush fell over the meeting. The air was filled with tension and apprehension. The Bruce’s disagreed. What was going to happen next? Let us clarify: cheap shots were not taken, and there was no personal plea for the other to acquiesce. We simply stated our positions like anyone else, and they happened to be different. To put our colleagues at ease, we continued by acknowledging all of the supporting statements on both sides of the discussion but calmly stated our continuing support for our respective opinions. The meeting continued on as usual.

In all workplace activities, the members of a dual-career couple must treat their spouse with the same professional respect and courtesy as any other faculty. Now, after several years, our colleagues think nothing of it when we cast our votes on opposing sides of an issue. A colleague recently gave one of us the greatest compliment that a same-department dual-career couple could want: She said that she “often forgets that we’re married.”

We do not relay messages to each other for students, staff or other faculty. We do not deliver or accept notes and mail packages for each other. We would not do so for any other faculty member. Whenever asked where the other might be found, we reply with “They are in town. That is as precise as I can be. Try calling their office or send email.” In fact, the statement is often the most appropriate. Because of our busy schedules, we rarely know where the other is located at any given point during the day. (Sometimes we will go a week and not see each other at the workplace, even though we have offices in the same building.)

It is understood that public displays of affection are completely inappropriate at the office. We don’t even sit next to each other in meetings. We are not having an argument and allowing it to spill over into the workplace. We simply do not want to be viewed as a single entity. An advantage to this policy is that we can observe the meeting from two different perspectives. It is sometimes amusing to see how our viewpoints cause us to see the same meeting very differently based on our observation of different colleagues and their body language.
Confidentiality

Confidentiality is of utmost importance. Many couples might share everything with one another, while other couples might have confidences with their co-workers that they do not share with their spouse. In either case, if a co-worker asks you to keep something confidential, your philosophy on spousal confidences should be shared with the co-worker. We try not to assume that others know our philosophy on this issue. Honesty is the best policy. In most cases, there is no need for (or desire of) the spouse to know the details of our co-workers’ confidences. So in many cases, we tell the co-worker that we will not share the information with our spouse, and we keep that promise. If it is a situation that could affect the spouse, then we honestly tell the co-worker that we might share the information with our spouse, and we tell them this before they divulge any details. In most cases, people respond with statements like “well I assumed you would tell them”. The main point is to be honest with co-workers who share confidential information, and their trust will be rightfully earned.

Conflicts of Interest

There will be times when conflicts of interest can arise between spouses. If this does occur, it will typically happen during committee and faculty votes. An obvious example is the Tenure and Promotion Committee. What happens if one spouse is on the committee and the other spouse is up for tenure and/or promotion? Most universities will have policies regarding this situation, typically disallowing the spouse from being part of the tenure and/or promotion decision process. However, even if the university does not have a policy regarding this situation, we advise that the spouse recuse themselves from any official committee discussions and decisions. This helps to avoid any distrust by co-workers, against either spouse.

The tenure and promotion issue is a clear-cut case. However, there are many other murkier situations. Consider a case where a spouse is serving on an Awards Committee, which is responsible for nominating fellow faculty members for awards. Do you nominate your spouse? Do you participate in the discussion of their case? In these situations, we have found it best to say as little as possible. In most situations, trying to argue in favor of our spouse tends to only turn others against them. On the contrary, saying very little leaves room for others to feel free to honestly share their opinions. And if it comes to a vote, we abstain. Consider another example, where one spouse is serving on a Graduate Committee, and a student of the other spouse has appealed for readmission into the program after being terminated for poor academic performance. Do we take part in the discussion of the case? Do we vote on the case? In situations where the impact on the spouse is minimal, we tend to treat the case as if there is no conflict of interest.

Define boundaries between home and work lives... and vigilantly guard them.

As a dual career couple working in the same department, we find it exceedingly difficult to keep workplace discussions “at work”. Often, dinner conversation drifts toward the week’s events at the office. It would be easy to say that we should never discuss “work” while at “home”, but that is likely impossible to affect in practice. (In fact, it may be counterproductive. We often find that our two independent views of workplace events are different but provide a well-rounded and informative picture of what actually transpired.) Instead of excluding all work-related issues in the dinner conversation, we have decided to include a few workplace-related topics...
from our home life, our personal rule is a bit softer. Whenever the home conversation becomes work-centered and one of us desires some “work-free” time at home, we can call out “No more work,” and the more restrictive rule above is in effect for the evening.

Over the years, we’ve learned to read each other’s moods to the point that we know whether one of us needs to decompress without the verbal request. Likewise, we can usually tell when the one of us running on about some work stresses needs to talk it through even though the other may want a more peaceful evening at home.

Each dual-career couple we know has worked out some arrangement over the years to determine when to allow work discussion to invade home life. Communication, understanding, and lots of patience are key to making these arrangements work.

**Biographical Information**

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