A problem by any other name

For many in the academic community, the term “two-body problem” brings to mind not the physics of two separate but interacting particles, but the calculus of two committed partners seeking careers in the same location. For us, it elicits regrets and visions of what might have been if we had questioned the term’s implication that relationships are uniquely incompatible with academia and had, instead, followed our hearts and each other. Our fear of the two-body problem led us to abandon our academic dreams in pursuit of a stable life as a professional couple, but today we regret that decision. Realizing that stability may not be the touchstone of a satisfying career, we are now rethinking what is important to us and reclaiming our ambitions as a dual academic couple.

After Paul got his Ph.D. in materials science, he considered several postdoc positions. But most last just 2 or 3 years, and he knew that he might need to relocate for a second (or third) temporary position before landing a tenure-track professorship. Would Emily, a lawyer, have to take a new bar exam and rebuild her practice in state after state? She had considered returning to school to study the equality issues that had so excited her as a law student, but this too seemed incompatible with a long-term relationship and especially a family, which we both wanted.

This is how we settled on a new life in Boise, a livable place where we thought we could put down roots. Paul took a job working with corporate inventors and writing patent applications. Emily took one more bar exam and planned to join a local law firm; if all went well, she could start her own in a few years. This is the compromise we made to avoid the two-body problem.

Although we have found a certain amount of satisfaction in our quieter life, we sorely miss dedicating ourselves to work that matters to us in a deeper sense. We have settled down, but our dreams haven’t. Over the past year, we have also come to appreciate how hard it is for partners to stay in one place and maintain two ambitious careers, academic or not. As we have seen at our firms and their clients, corporate jobs come and go as activist investors and a fickle economy yield unpredictable results. And losing a specialized job in all but the most major cities may force a couple to confront the challenges of co-locating once again.

Our decision to forgo an academic future was at least in part due to the term “two-body problem,” which both points to and perpetuates the erroneous but widely held attitude that academics in committed relationships face a uniquely intractable dilemma. Encountering a less negative term might have helped us accept the risks—and see the rewards—of pursuing our academic passions. Rather than reinforcing the idea that long-term relationships are incompatible with academia, a new term should recognize academic partners’ admirable endeavor to maintain both their careers and their commitment to each other. We propose the “two-variable equation.” The partners define the equation that best suits their relationship, career goals, and long-range plans. The aim is not to fix a nagging problem, but to optimize each individual’s potential to flourish.

For our part, over the past year, we have reevaluated our goals and priorities and redefined our two-variable equation. We have realized that intellectual curiosity, a willingness to push boundaries, and a conviction that our work matters are critical to our identities, both individual and shared. The upshot of these epiphanies has been a push to reclaim our career goals: This fall, Emily will begin a Ph.D. program in political science in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where Paul is seeking a postdoc.

We know that the road ahead will not be easy and that we will need to continue optimizing our two-variable equation, but we are excited about taking this step together. Our only certainty at this point is that we will take a passionate path—one we are proud of and would be proud to tell our children about.

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