

Work/Life Balance for Dual Career Faculty Couples

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Abstract

Dual career faculty couples face a unique set of challenges within the academic world. While these couples face the same challenges as all dual career couples, faculty couples have to also combine these normal stresses with special challenges of working as a faculty member. The first challenge is the original job search and finding two positions. The next challenge is to both make it through the tenure and promotion process. The third challenge is to have advancement opportunities. Along the way, the couple has to work together to develop a work/life balance plan to provide an environment for each person within the pair to thrive toward his/her career goals and personal goals. Besides balancing the day-to-day activities of a functioning household, couples must agree on timing for or if they will start a family and advancement opportunities for each.

This paper and presentation will discuss our experiences over the last fifteen years related to work/life balance for a dual career engineering faculty couple. We will discuss the various phases of our careers and different “give and take” situations at those times. We will also discuss the tools and advice that have been extremely helpful to us as we work to maintain a healthy balance between our work and personal lives. Tips for couples from graduate students to faculty will be provided.

Introduction

Having one faculty member in the family is very challenging. However, having two faculty members in the family makes life even more interesting. Today’s work environment involves more and more dual career couples where both partners work full-time. Additionally many faculty meet their significant others during school creating an environment with more dual career couples than in the past. Dual career couples have a different set of challenges than couples that are single-income or one-income dominant. References [1-12] address some of these dual career challenges. Dual career faculty also have the challenge of the tenure process and advancing in a system that is often less flexible than many industrial jobs. Sometimes the dual career situation is complicated because universities are located in remote areas that lack other career opportunities outside of the university.

The key for dual career couples is to establish a system to help them balance their career and personal activities. For each couple the dynamics are going to be a little different depending on your personal situation, for example -- university location, career aspirations, your age, kids/no kids, aging relatives, and hobbies. As our career and family have changed and grown, we have gone through different phases and have recently started a new phase as Kirk became the Dean of Engineering at MSU in January of 2005. These new roles will provide a new opportunity for us to learn to balance. In this paper we outline some of our personal tips as well as summarize lessons learned and advice over the last fifteen years as dual career engineering faculty.

First we would like to provide a little background on ourselves to help you understand our experience base. We met while we were undergraduates, Kirk a junior, and Noel, a freshman. Since that time we have finished two PhDs, had two children, and worked at four different universities, including administrative advancements at two of the universities. We have two children, Timothy (14) and Andrew (10).

Tip #1: Know thyself and your partner

For real estate the three keys are location, location, location. For dual career couples, the three keys are communications, communications, and communications! A key for success of each individual and the dual career couple is frequent and open communications about personal and professional goals for individuals and your family unit. It is critical that each member of the couple be up front with his/her professional and personal goals. These goals will grow with the couple but it is imperative that couples review these periodically especially before considering advancement opportunities.

Sometimes when one partner is finishing up his/her PhD, the other partner might take on more responsibilities especially for personal activities. Once you both start your faculty positions, you need to discuss a transition where the partners share the responsibilities. It is best to discuss sharing personal tasks early on and to try to match tasks with interests.

Tip #2: Be Organized

One of the most important things for us is to be organized with both our professional and personal lives. Time management is key when both spouses work full time and especially trying to balance tenure track and promotion activities of faculty. The couple should consider attending a time management seminar and start using a PDA (personal data assistant) or planner system. The calendar should include both personal and professional activities. Recently as Kirk has become an administrator, we have worked it out that we both have access to each other's Microsoft Outlook calendars so we can check dates before making commitments. Additionally at the beginning of each semester we spend one to two hours coordinating all our trips and after hours commitments. We try to coordinate it so that both of us are not out of town at the same time. However, sometimes events, such as the annual ASEE meeting or ABET visits, require both of us to be out of town. By planning ahead we can either ask a family member to visit to watch the boys or have an in-house babysitter for these trips (more details on this below).

Tip #3: Time Versus Money

Often as undergraduate and graduate students, family budgets are tight meaning that couples do many things themselves, such as housecleaning, house maintenance, tax preparation and meal preparation. Then the couple takes on the challenge of tenure-track positions and tries to balance all these do-it-yourself home activities with the new job and all its requirements. There are not enough hours in the day to do both. One thing to consider is how much your time is worth. What is your average hourly wage? A faculty member making \$60,000 on nine-months gets approximately \$40/hour. Cleaning the house for four hours is worth \$160. Hiring someone at

\$10/hour to clean the house gives you four extra hours to do other things, either personal or professional. Some tasks to consider hiring out include housecleaning, dry cleaning/laundry, yard work, house repairs and maintenance, and tax preparation. If you enjoy these activities do them. If you don't then you should pay someone else to do them and use that time for something that can forward your personal or professional goals.

Another time versus money opportunity is eating out. Eating at home requires preparation and clean up. Eating out costs more money but gives you more time. Especially in busy times, such as the end of the semester, we tend to eat out more often. Eating at home works well for us if we do a weekly dinner list. We purchase food for the week and this reduces having to figure out what we'll have for dinner. Another trick has been using a slow cooker. Preparing the meal the night before, it is ready when both of you get home too tired to cook.

One more time versus money trick is to use timesaving activities in your everyday life. You can consider bringing purchased items to potluck parties. For gifts we often use on-line shopping which can include gift-wrapping and shipping directly to the recipient. You can also consider using electronic gift certificates or electronic greeting cards. For children's parties, you can schedule the party at a bowling alley, recreation center or park where you can minimize set-up and clean up. For party favors and gift bags, you can order these on-line from various companies that provide all the matching accessories including napkins, plates, decorations and gift boxes for attendees.

Tip #4: Issues related to Children

One key issue with communications is to discuss the couples' individual goals relating to children. If a couple decides to have children, there is no perfect time to have them. There have been several articles [13-15] about women faculty and children including trying to have children during the summer to minimize the impact on their academic year activities. Children take energy and impact both partners' personal and professional activities. Acknowledging this before you have children will make you happier after you have them.

With the couple working full-time, a critical element is to find a good daycare and babysitters. If you feel comfortable with your daycare, you will feel less guilt and stress. However, reliable daycare is usually more expensive. Finding a reliable babysitter is key for after-hour events. If you pay them very well then they will be available when you need them in the future.

As your children grow up, their needs change. For pre-school children, they need lots of attention and care during the workday. School-aged children have homework and get more involved in activities such as sports, scouts and other extracurricular activities. In some urban areas, daycares provide after-school care and even transportation for activities. We have always lived in small college towns with limited after-school care. When our younger son started school and extracurricular activities, we learned that after-school care was not providing all our needs. When our sons were in 1st and 5th grades, we hired a college student to act as a nanny. She picked up the boys after school, worked with them on their homework, took them to after-school activities and dressed them for after-dinner activities. Additionally the nanny grew into an "extra spouse", helping around the house. She loads the dishwasher, washes clothes, goes grocery

shopping and runs errands. The nanny can also fix a meal once a week to help with the dinner preparation. Because she is with the boys 15 hours a week, she has become a “second-mom/big sister”. The nanny also stays overnight if we both have to be out of town. This has worked out extremely well for the last four years. We wish we had started it sooner.

You are working full-time and have after-school care or a nanny. How do you get quality time with your family? You can find ways to get involved with their activities. As a start, you can find activities that have a finite time commitment such as field trips or short-term projects. You may want to combine volunteering in your child’s activities with K-12 outreach such as tutoring math and science in the classroom or doing classroom demonstrations related to your discipline. You may also volunteer to coach a team or be a scout leader with your child. Sometimes you can also combine work and family. Bring your children to school activities when appropriate. College students love visiting with children and your children learn to interact with young adults and even international students. Another hint is to try to schedule their extracurricular activities after school so your evenings are free for family time.

Your faculty career could be as long as 40 years. Your children are around 18 years or so each. Enjoy the children along the way. Plan at least one family vacation every year for you to get away from work and them to get away from their activities. Several articles [16-17] have highlighted that a healthy family life actually helps with your work life. A recent USA Today article [18] discussed how quality family time was a key for test scores and behavior issues. One rule that we made when the boys were small is that we would make sure we were only out a maximum of two nights in any one week. With this in mind, sometimes only one of us might attend an evening event instead of both of us to make sure we had some quality time with the boys.

Tip #5: Time for you

One key for dual career couples, especially with children, is to make sure you take some time for yourself individually and as a couple. Exercise is a stress reliever so you should try to figure out a way to get some exercise. We walk from 5:30-6:00 am each morning together which gives us some exercise as well as time to talk (once we wake up). Also make sure you spend time together as a couple. Take an evening a month to go out to dinner and a movie. You may also consider a weekend away. Each summer, one set of grandparents takes the boys for one or two weeks. This gives us a great opportunity to have some quality couple time and the boys get spoiled. You may also consider having your spouse tag along with you to a technical meeting. This helps you meet each other’s colleagues so you know names and faces when you discuss your work.

Tip #6: Miscellaneous Tips and Advice

Tenure, promotion and advancement for dual career academic couples are challenging. Optimizing for the couple sometimes means sub-optimal situations for one or even both of the partners. Flexibility is a major factor for both personal and professional satisfaction. Both partners need to be flexible in looking into traditional as well as non-traditional paths of advancement. Additionally it helps if each partner in the couple has several paths for

advancement. Some couples even alternate who is the leading spouse and who is the trailing spouse. Open communications are very important.

Along with flexibility, couples should look to find ways for professional development opportunities locally that help you expand your career without moving yourself or the family. These can be full-time or part-time, such as an administrative internship. Administrators are looking for opportunities to help faculty grow and develop. Consider asking the department head, dean or another administrator to create a position in an area of interest. Noel was very interested in doing faculty development activities. In the summer of 2003, she proposed to the Dean of Engineering that she have a 25% release to do faculty development activities. This gave her an excellent opportunity to develop a program in faculty development for the College of Engineering, which helped the new faculty in the college and helped Noel develop her administrative skills. After one and a half year, Noel has just returned to full-time teaching and research due to increased research responsibilities and Kirk being the new Dean. However, the “administrative co-op” was a great experience for her. So work as a couple to find opportunities for each other to advance your skills in unique and non-traditional ways.

Mentors are also a key for dual career couples. The first type of mentors is other dual career couples. Seek out other couples and see what types of things work and don’t work for them. Once you establish a relationship with these couples you can bounce ideas and opportunities off of them and see their perspectives. The second set of mentors are colleagues ahead of you in your desired professional path. ASEE provides a great platform for this. If you are interested in administration, talk with department heads and deans and learn about the process. If you are interested in Associate Dean positions, talk with some of these folks. If you are interested in teaching or research endowed chairs, meet some current endowed chairs and learn the paths they took. These mentors have been there and been successful so they have excellent perspectives and advice.

Summary

Engineering faculty positions are challenging places to balance work and personal activities. Dual career faculty couples have the additional challenge of balancing two faculty careers and personal activities. This paper has outlined some advice and tips on things that have helped us in the fifteen years of our faculty careers. Each couple has a unique situation and will need to find things that work best for them. Balancing is not easy. But being a faculty member isn’t easy either and we are all managing that. Like an engineering solution, we must design a way to reduce our stress and enable us to thrive in both personal and professional activities. Good luck!

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