

Technological Solution to Dual Career Hiring Challenges

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Abstract

In academia, it is common for professors, especially women, to have spouses that are also academic professionals. When pursuing an academic appointment, these dual career professionals are faced with the challenge of finding a position and also navigating the complexity of career considerations for their spouse. This is also challenging for the universities due to limited resources for faculty hiring and the complexities associated with coordinating accommodations with semi-autonomous schools and academic programs.

The proposed solution recommends the development of a work facility to provide spouses with an environment where they can remotely continue in the previous position. The strategy provides a permanent and/or semi-permanent solution that can be leveraged if a position is not readily available for the candidate's spouse. This concept also establishes the foundation for potential partnerships with other universities that are dealing with the same challenge or even industry.

Background

Within the academic community, the ideal hiring process involves the selection of a single candidate that fits the position description. This candidate would contribute to the University’s vision of discovery, innovation, and student development, while also broadening the diversity of the faculty body. However, within the academic arena the hiring process is typically not ideal and a number of complexities often arise. In non-academic environments, employers often have a number of qualified candidates to choose from and are able to use this as leverage to control the hiring process, establishing employees in a general sense as a commodity that can be replaced. However, within the academic arena, employees are recognized as the most value asset that universities have to offer and the industry approach is not conducive to hiring quality candidates. In addition, the hiring process is often a little more complicated due to the smaller pool of suitable candidates that comes with the higher education requirements. Further complicating the hiring process are the various external considerations that are integral to the academic culture including dual careers, diversity, community, and resources.

Dual careers and diversity are two particular factors that represent a significant challenge for the University of Virginia and many universities around the country. As highlighted in the Tournament of Ideas solicitation, the lack of spousal/partner career opportunities was highlighted as the most significant factor in candidate decision-making in an internal research study. While the two factors are distinct, the challenge of dual careers is often exacerbated when considering groups that are underrepresented (women, and underrepresented minorities) in the university community (Figure 1). At the core of the dual career challenge is the lack of suitable solutions and resources to accommodate the hiring of a faculty candidate’s spouse into a faculty position that is appropriate and/or comparable to the position from which they would be leaving. While this challenge is often viewed as the burden of the perspective faculty candidate and corresponding program, it is evident that the challenge is one that is pervasive throughout the university and affects our ability to attract top faculty. As an academic institution that promotes

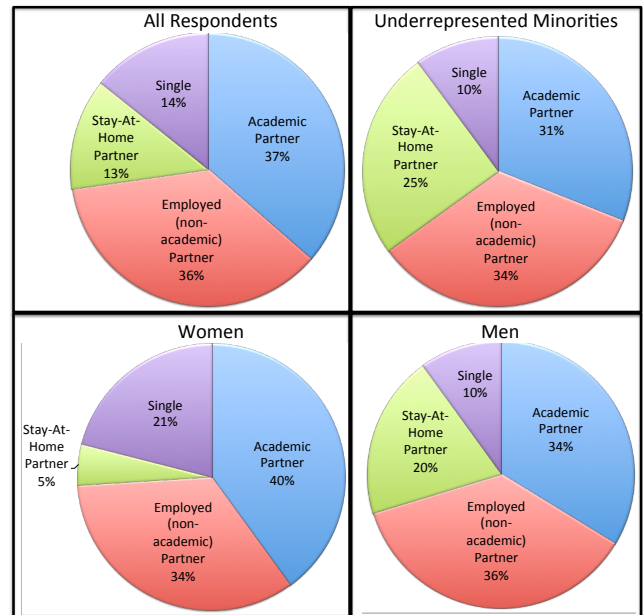


Figure 1 – Relationship Status of Faculty Hires [1]

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the pursuit of knowledge and continued education, UVa must do its part and be prudent in addressing this challenge if we plan to remain a leader in the academic world we are promoting.

Challenge to Address

The challenge that exists with the hiring of many faculty members is the necessity to accommodate the career of a candidate's spouse or partner. With many academic professionals, this spouse/partner is often another academician or professional with their own established or developing career path (Figure 1). When the candidate is offered a position within the university, their willingness to accept the position is often linked to the success of their spouse in finding a suitable position. Universities typically attempt to accommodate these academic spouses and partners with comparable positions within the university, but there are a number of factors that impact the success of these efforts. While this approach has provided a number of success stories, it is evident that these additional accommodations have implications on the hosting department's growth, development, resources, and autonomy¹. These departments are often encouraged to evaluate the spouses and partners and consider them for positions within the department, but these candidates may or may not be an ideal fit within the department and in many instances lock departments into a long-term commitment with faculty members that were not vetted through the traditional faculty search process. While programs often attempt to accommodate the needs of the greater university community, this approach is not ideal for any of the parties involved including the candidate, spouse, or host department, illustrating the need for more flexible solutions.

Like many universities, the challenge of dual career employees is not unique to the University of Virginia², but there does not appear to be a universally accepted solution. In fact, many universities are non-committal in their language regarding dual careers, often limiting their support to providing information and orientation to the area, leads to employment with the university and local listings, and career search guidance. This issue is particularly challenging at UVa, which can be classified as somewhat remote relative to major metropolitan areas, making it even more difficult for spouses to find suitable employment due to the lack of options in a smaller community.

Proposed Solution

With the existence of this gap, the University of Virginia has the rather unique opportunity to lead the charge and establish a standard of how dual careers are managed in a university

¹ Simmons, Elizabeth H. "Dual-Career Academics: The Right Start." Editorial. Inside Higher Ed. N.p., 27 July 2012. Web. 08 Oct. 2014.

² http://www.hercjobs.org/dual_career_couples/campuses_with_dual_Career_programs/

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environment. The proposed solution leverages the premise that technology is making the world a much smaller and more intimate place and a local presence is no longer a requirement to perform many jobs [2].

The proposed solution includes the development of a dedicated state-of-the-art remote work facility for dual career employee spouses. The intent of the facility would provide these spouses with a workspace that could be used for permanent or semi-permanent remote employment. This facility could be housed on-grounds if sufficient space were available or at a satellite location similar to the UVa and Fontaine Research Park facilities. This facility could mimic the structure of the Corporate Research Center at Virginia Tech³, but with a dedicated focus on accommodating remote employment activities rather than technology development. To accommodate this effort, the facility would need to be equipped with suitable offices, telecommunications infrastructure, conference rooms, and high quality video conferencing resources (e.g. Cisco WebEx Enabled TelePresence). While the vision of the facility is geared towards dual careers, the framework could be generic to accommodate industry-based careers as well. With this addition, UVa would be able to leverage our corporate partnerships and alumni network to make this concept sustainable.

From a logistics perspective, this solution could be classified as a standard faculty benefit that could be included in the benefits package for all faculty hires. The benefit would include usage of the facility (office space and associated supplies, telephone, internet, etc.) at not cost to the employee or spouse. The spouse would be responsible for negotiating the modified work environment with their employer, but would be offered essential benefits (medical, dental, vision, gym discount) through the University of Virginia, as if they were traditional employees (or spouse unable to get benefits through their own employment). Other benefits such as retirement, life insurance and leaves would remain tied to the employer benefit program. The advantage of offering essential benefits is that spouses would not suffer from out-of-network limitations, eliminating a key disadvantage to remote employment.

While the University of Virginia could likely offer resources like those proposed, for this concept to be effective, there would need to be buy-in from other academic institutions to allow for this type of work environment for a full-time employee. I believe that this support would need to be fostered from within the upper ranks of the universities to develop a shared vision for improving the hiring culture within the academic community. This buy-in would ultimately result in a sharing of the resource burden amongst many partners.

³ <http://www.vtcrc.com/about/>

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References

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2. Tustin, D.H., *Telecommuting academics within an open distance education environment of South Africa: More content, productive, and healthy?* *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, (2014). **15**(3).