American Economic Association

1995 Committee on the Status of Women in the Economics Profession

NEWSLETTER

Fall Issue October 1995

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MOVING FROM GOVERNMENT TO ACADEMIA

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One type of career transition that may become more attractive in the near future is shifting out of government and into higher education. I made such a change a decade ago, and this essay looks back on how the process unfolded for me.

I had held a series of positions as analyst and manager in the Executive Office of the President during three sharply contrasting Administrations, those of Presidents Ford, Carter and Reagan. The key challenge for my intended transition was that, while much of my government work was on issues academics find respectable, I lacked a record of publications in refereed journals. The incentive structure, long hours and managerial duties in my government work had not been conducive to published research.

Once I had decided that college teaching would be the best next step on my career path, my transition had two stages--a four-year search for a suitable tenure-track position, followed by a three-year process of achieving tenure. At the outset, I expected that the setting I should seek was the type with which I had most familiarity--a small, undergraduate, liberal arts college. I had attended and thrived in such a college as a student, and I had fond memories of my first post-doctoral job teaching for several years in this kind of institution. But my initial search for a liberal arts setting was deflected by indications, among other things, that I would encounter a severe salary jolt at those schools willing to take a gamble on an academically-rusty ex-bureaucrat.

I spent the first two years of my transition teaching graduate students in a public policy program at a large university. This visiting appointment proved to be an excellent experience and a natural bridge back into academia. While my government work had moved me some distance from the pedagogy of Principles I, it suited me ideally to working with students entering public service themselves, while I brushed up on library and chalkboard techniques. I also sought out a variety of public policy consulting assignments in addition to my teaching, which increased my visibility and produced marketable evidence of my scholarship.

In the third and fourth years of the transition, I coupled job search with consulting and visiting teaching appointments, including one which gave me a welcome opportunity to renew my undergraduate teaching skills. I gradually acquired a realistic sense of my own strengths and interests, recognizing that applied policy research and small class-size teaching were where I had a comparative advantage.

During this period, I continued to scan Job Openings for Economists, responding to notices that looked promising. It was this process that connected me with what proved to be my permanent teaching position in a large, technical institution with an undergraduate, small class-size setting. A routine letter of inquiry started a series of discussions leading to my appointment in a newly endowed chair, set up with specifications that I could not have better tailored to my own experience and aspirations. The emphasis of this institution is on quality teaching and the kind of applied work I most enjoy. An initial three-year trial appointment ensued during which my earlier research initiatives came to fruition, and my classrooms benefited from my government policy work. The academic calendar permits me to participate on an on-going basis in a variety of government projects, and my university incentive structure rewards such involvement. As a result, tenure followed smoothly, as did renewal in the chair.

My transition took considerably longer than I had expected, and I had misgivings at numerous points along the way. Yet this did have one important advantage. Being forced to explore alternatives at a rather slow pace exposed me to a wide array of options and enabled me to sample some of them with care. In my own case, it proved crucial to spend time defining a vision of a career path that I would find satisfying while staying receptive to the quite unexpected opportunities that kept arising. Many of these opportunities resulted from active networking, and my success in identifying and responding to them owed much to a highly supportive family and loyal friends. The net result is an academic job that is a far better fit for me than any I could have anticipated at the outset.

AND THE TWO SHALL BE AS ONE: Job Sharing in an Academic Department

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It is quite common these days for both members of a married couple to have the same level of professional training. Often they will both be trained in the same field. But for academic couples, there is a simple rule of thumb: if you have the same level of training, in the same field of study, then don't expect to have the same zip code. In other words, if you fall in love with another Ph.D., don't expect to whisper sweet nothings to him without the help of Sprint or MCI. A modern alternative to the long-distance marriage, however, is the sharing of one academic position. Or maybe the sharing of one-point-something academic positions. For example, the authors of this article each represent between .7 and 1.0 associate professors at Grinnell College, with an annual mean of .9, and a standard deviation of about .1. (This is not something we try to explain at cocktail parties.) Our joint contract stipulates that we teach no fewer than seven courses between us per year, and up to ten (full-time) if we and the college mutually agree. In this essay we consider the advantages and disadvantages of this kind of arrangement.

Not every college or university is ready to embrace the shared academic contract. In fact, it will only happen for one of two reasons:

1) An angel of the Lord appears to the dean and demands he implement a shared contract policy; or

2) The school has trouble recruiting women.

Often both things have to happen. A place like Grinnell, where we teach, has a strong incentive to resort to shared contracts because it is a small college, in a town of 8000, deep in the heart of Iowa. Rural Iowa. A female professor here may have trouble finding her husband a job better than the one Henry Fonda had in The Grapes of Wrath. If the husband is in the same academic field, a shared contract may be an attractive option.

There are goods things and bad things about shared contracts, of course. Obviously, a couple sharing a job earns less money than if both spouses had full-time jobs at separate institutions. As economists, we can't dismiss this as a trivial disadvantage. But the earnings differential may be smaller than you think. Even if you share a single full-time job, you can usually pick up extra courses to teach. In any given year, there is nearly always someone in your department on leave. When we were recruited, our department was actively seeking a job-sharing couple to create some flexibility in leave replacement. Moreover, don't forget that there is complementary slackness between your budget and time constraints. If you earn less money it's because you have less teaching to do. For two assistant professors who want to establish research records, the extra time is a major advantage. For example, the lower time requirements of the shared contract will certainly make it much easier for you to have children. (Actually we couldn' t decide whether that's an advantage or a disadvantage of a shared contract, so let's just call it a "feature.") And finally, consider another terrific aspect of splitting a single job: you and your spouse will spend more time together every day than almost any couple you know. A lot more time. (Well, here again, better just call that a feature.)

All right then, let's suppose you and your spouse have abandoned the dream of twin endowed chairs at Stanford and are willing to try a shared position. You have found an institution that is open-minded, progressive, and in tune with cutting-edge innovations in personnel management. Or, at least, one that's out in the sticks. What should you negotiate in your shared contract? First, of course, find out how tenure and promotion requirements will be handled by your institution. Work this out up front. One position-sharing couple we know was told by their chair that he expected twice as much research from each of them because each would be only doing only half as much teaching. WRONG! [Loud Buzzer]. The point of a shared contract is not for the college to get four times as much research for the same salary. Technically, for a single paycheck, the college should expect that you'll each do half as much teaching, half as much research, and spend a lot more time watching Days of Our Lives. In fact, of course, you'll do more than that. The school will get more research and service than they would from a full-time professor, and that redounds to the greater glory of both the college and the couple. All well and good. But don't give them the right to demand it of you.

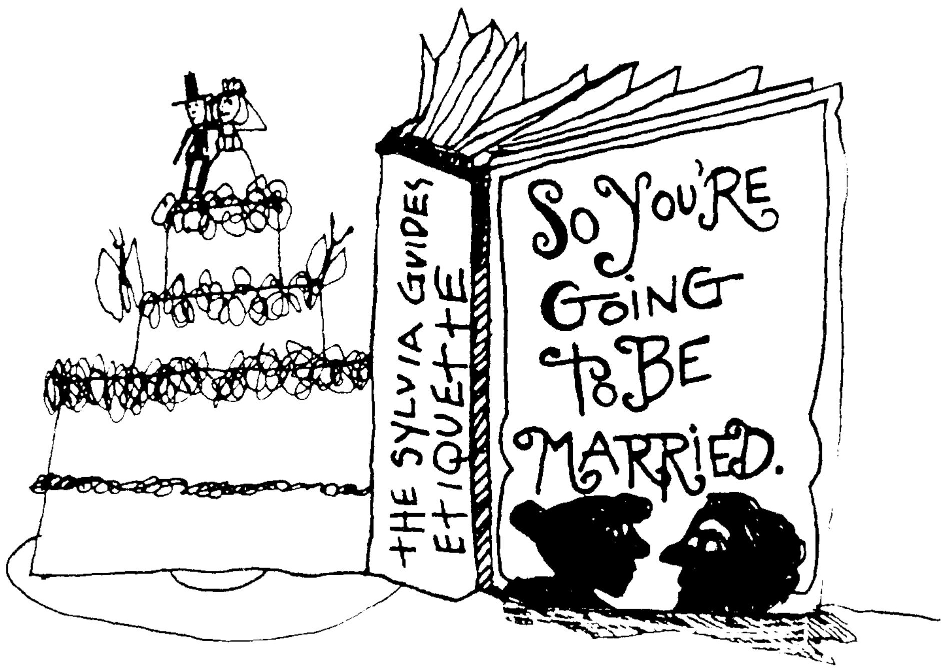
Along the same lines, how much college service will you do? At Grinnell, we typically each do as much student advising and serve on as many committees as full-time faculty members. We know a couple at Kenyon College, however, who have a similar shared contract, but apparently more brains, because they negotiated the right to limit their committee work.

Speaking of teaching, research and service, how will yours be evaluated: will they treat you as a couple or two individuals? For promotion and tenure Grinnell reviews each partner in the shared contract separately. In this respect the shared contract is not much different than two positions. But for the joint position there is an additional question of timing. One school of thought holds that two half-timers should get twice as many years to produce a tenurable portfolio as full-time faculty. Our friends at Kenyon, for example, were offered seven to ten years, at their own option. Usually, however, the institution is not opposed to your coming up in the regular time frame. The final important issue regarding tenure is what happens if only one of you gets it. Do both partners have to hit the road, or may one of you assume a full-time position? We have heard of at least one case where neither is permitted to stay.

Salary issues can be a little complicated, especially when raises are based on merit. Until recently, Grinnell insisted that we be paid identical salaries, prorated by the number of courses we taught. As it happened, one year Powell ranked 5 on the five-point merit scale, while Montgomery ranked only 3. So they averaged and gave us both a rank-4 raise. As a result, Montgomery became professionally jealous of Powell and Powell began to think of Montgomery as a drag on her career. Recent reforms made it possible for a couple at Grinnell to opt for separate salaries. For us, financially, that should be very worthwhile since those divorce attorneys cost a fortune.

There are lots of other details to work out with a shared contract, some of them things you might not think of. Benefits can be an issue, of course, such as whether you both get full life insurance, and whether you each get full research support, including travel to professional meetings. (At Grinnell, "yes" to all of the above.) Also, you need to determine how sabbatical pay is handled: is it based on one full-time teaching load, or on the amount of teaching you have both actually done. (At Grinnell, it's the latter, averaged over the previous six years.) If you eventually get divorced, may one of you automatically assume full duties? And how about parental leave and early retirement? These are all things to pay attention to.

For many young academic couples a shared contract is an idea worth considering, at least as a starting point for two careers. It may be very attractive when compared with having one partner languish in temporary positions so that the two of you can maintain one household. If one of you already works at an institution that doesn't have this arrangement, you might try suggesting it. If you do, be prepared for your dean to make a really funny face. (It may be worth mentioning it just to see that.) Anyone who would like a copy of Grinnell's contract arrangement can write to the authors at Dept. of Economics, Grinnell College, Grinnell IA, 50112. Our E-mail addresses are Powelli@ac.grin.edu and Montgome@ac.grin.edu



ACADEMIC POSITIONS FOR HEALTH ECONOMISTS

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The state of health economics today brings to mind that blessing (or curse) "may you live in interesting times." With all of the changes, turmoil, and uncertainty in the medical system and the entire area of health care, this is certainly an interesting time to be a health economist. Health economics is a lively and growing field, with a multitude of opportunities for timely, important, and sometimes controversial research, teaching, and consulting. There are numerous job opportunities for health economists, not only in academic world, but also in non-academic areas such as government, consulting, and private business. However, because these are such "interesting times," those of us who are health economists can by no mean expect a stable, tranquil, unchanging work environment.

Although there are many job opportunities for health economists in non-academic areas, I will focus here exclusively on academic positions because I have spent my entire career in academics and that is what I know best. I will classify academic positions for health economists rather loosely into four general categories, based upon the type of students taught, even though research in health economics is in no way bounded by the categories. The rationale for the classification is that the type of academic appointment defines the rules by which one is judged for tenure and promotion.

The first category consists of positions in Departments of Economics. The expectation with respect to teaching typically is three or four different economics courses, at either the undergraduate or graduate level, with health economics being a specialty course. One is, of course, expected to teach courses outside of the area of health economics. In an economics department a health economist is simply an economist among other economists, and one's performance is judged by roughly the same standards as a macroeconomist, a labor economist, or a game theorist. The advantage of choosing an economics department is that the rules of the game are fairly straightforward and well-established. The disadvantage is that many economics departments place a reduced (or possibly no) value on publications in non-economics journals, which are primary research outlets for many health economists. A health economist is expected to publish her research in mainstream economics journals just like anyone else. Furthermore, because in most economics departments there is typically only one health economist, it is sometimes difficult to find colleagues with similar interests. Nonetheless, many distinguished health economists have spent their entire career in an economics department.

The other types of positions are all in interdisciplinary departments, which in this context simply means that the academic department includes individuals from variety of disciplines. One interdisciplinary option is to teach students training for careers in the public sector. Appointments in this category would be in Schools of Public Health, Public Policy, Public Administration, or Government, with most courses at the graduate level (most commonly master's degree).

Another option is for a health economist to hold a position in a Department of Business Administration where the focus is on training students to become