

A New Approach to Dual-Career Services

Transforming the Two-Body Problem Into a Community-Building Opportunity

By Melissa Curry

In 2013, the University of Florida embarked upon a recruitment plan to hire 100 nationally recognized faculty members over a five-year period. As we began to develop our plan to anchor top talent to the university, we also needed to explore the potential barriers. In our review, we discovered that, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, two-thirds of families rely on dual incomes. In academia, this number is even higher, thus making it harder to attract and retain top talent — especially in smaller, non-urban communities. The “two-body problem” has become a significant hurdle for universities, posing challenges to recruiting and retaining the best and brightest faculty and staff.

A 2008 survey by Stanford University’s Clayman Institute indicated that 72 percent of full-time faculty at U.S. research universities have partners working outside the home. Those working partners are equally divided between academia and other industries. In a dual-earner household, relocation presents a number of distinct challenges because of the potential effect of the move on the trailing partner. While relocation may be a good career opportunity for the candidate, the situation may not always be so bright for the other individual in the partnership.

Universities have struggled for years to develop meaningful dual-career programs. Like many other institutions, the University of Florida offers a dual-career program for academic couples, with partial funding available to the department hiring the trailing spouse/partner. However, this only applies to about 36 percent of total recruits to the university — it fails to address the increasing number of faculty that have partners that work outside of academia or stay at home.

Partners Matter

Job opportunities for the partners of recruited faculty are key to successful recruitment and retention. A faculty member’s career decisions are strongly influenced by his

or her partner’s employment status, and universities are in danger of losing some of their most prized candidates if suitable employment cannot be found for qualified partners. In independent, confidential studies analyzing factors influencing failed faculty recruitment, two major U.S. research institutions found that partner employment ranked high (number one or two) in lists that included salary, housing costs and 15 other factors. A German study found that 72 percent of German scientists working abroad in the U.S. cited “lack of career opportunities for partner” as a decisive factor for scientists contemplating a return home.

All families encounter challenges when facing relocation for a job. The act of uprooting a family, changing homes and schools and reorienting lifestyles in a new location is disruptive and not at all easy. With such high numbers of households with two earners, chances are that a relocation candidate has to consider not only his or her own career, but also a spouse’s or partner’s career. Income replacement can often become the primary concern of dual-career couples during relocation, and the family’s need to maintain a certain income level may play a vital part in the relocation decision. When income replacement represents an important need, the stress related to achieving that goal may affect retention — even if the candidate accepts the position and relocates, if the partner is unable to find a job or is unable to connect with the community then the family may be forced to relocate elsewhere.

Our Vision

Universities across the country have been devoting time and resources to developing solutions for dual-career issues. The Higher Education Recruitment Consortium (HERC) is a nonprofit consortium of over 700 universities, hospitals and government agencies created to share resources and strategies for dual-career couples. While there is no regional HERC in the Southeast, University of Florida used the HERC business model to craft its own plan of action.

When we examined the challenge of dual-career employment in our university more closely, we quickly realized we couldn't manage to solve the problem on our own. While we had a fairly good solution for academic couples, that only addressed a small percentage of our recruits. We also needed to provide support and job opportunities for professionals working in many different industries. We knew that if UF was having trouble recruiting dual-career couples to the Gainesville area, then our local employers were probably experiencing the same thing. So we turned to the Gainesville Chamber of Commerce for assistance. Together, we developed a holistic, collaborative approach for recruiting, relocating and retaining top talent to the Gainesville area.

UF's Dual-Career Program

Launched in 2014, the dual-career program is managed by the Chamber of Commerce, where a single point of contact provides a range of information and services. The program takes a three-pronged approach that includes career assistance, practical support for relocation and emotional support.

Career Assistance

In the area of career assistance, the program provides:

- In-person consultations with a career consultant;
- Formal career assessments;
- Dedicated efforts to identify local career opportunities; and
- Established business partners committed to a dual-career and transitional support network, thus guaranteeing trailing spouses'/partners' unprecedented exposure to regional hiring agents.

Practical Support

In the form of practical support, the program provides:

- A website showcasing the "Gainesville Story" to candidates and potential recruits;
- A website providing relocation information and information helpful to new residents of Gainesville;
- Gainesville-focused recruiting materials for candidates;

- Connection and meeting opportunities to learn more about the area and network with other professionals; and
- Tours of Gainesville for trailing spouses/partners during candidate interviews.

Emotional Support

In the way of emotional support, the program provides:

- Coordinated meet-ups and social gatherings for new employees;
- Mentorship/social contact opportunities with established dual-career couples and families;
- Resources on community activities, clubs, volunteer opportunities and entertainment; and
- Resources on mental healthcare professionals in the area.

Funding

The program was developed to be fee-based and self-funded. Companies are charged \$2,000 per referral. In order to implement the program, UF required some start-up funds through executive sponsorship. We pre-purchased 50 referrals for \$100,000. These start-up funds enabled the Chamber of Commerce to hire a career counselor to manage the program and provide marketing supplies.

Our Path Forward

Now that we are in the second year of our program, we have continued to grow and improve it. We continue to increase our community profile, we've established relationships with local businesses, and we've been able to develop other community partnerships. Partnering with a local publisher and a few local companies, we also developed and published a relocation guide. *The Guide to Greater Gainesville* was such a success that the publisher plans to republish the guide annually and has also developed a website and digital guide.

The University of Florida has now hired 92 of its goal of 100 nationally recognized faculty members, and the dual-career program has played a large role in that success. 

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