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In Love and In Academia



Written by Peyton Cabaniss.

Graphic by Peyton Cabaniss.

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When Dr. Keely Finkelstein came to the University of Texas, she brought her research in astrophysics and a fascination with all things extragalactic. Her partner, Dr. Steven Finkelstein, brought his interest in galaxies big and small as well as his obsession with the early universe. The stars aligned as they moved into the UT astronomy department together.

Earning jobs on the same campus, however, took more than a little astrological luck. The two astronomers sought out somewhere where they could work together, “in the same city, and the same university if possible,” turning down single-hire offers from both Caltech and UC Santa Barbara. Although the two universities are only an hour and a half apart, the Finkelsteins decided to wait for an opportunity that would allow them to be together, one they found at Texas A&M as postdocs, and later at UT.

The Finkelsteins are a phenomenon The Clayman Institute at Stanford University calls “academic couples—couples in which both partners are academics.” The Clayman Institute’s 2008 report, [“Dual-Career Academic Couples: What Universities Need to Know,”](#) notes that while the proportion of academic couples at four-year universities has remained stable since 1989, the rate of these academic couple hirings has increased by 10% since the 1970s. Like many institutions, UT has a Dual-Career Couples policy, an increasingly popular type of policy used to attract academic couples. Recognizing that accepting a position at UT often means a move for a significant other, [UT’s policy](#) states in part, “Whether your partner is in academia or not, we will help him or her find on-campus or local employment. Contact your department chair or school/college to initiate the process.” During the Finkelsteins’ hiring, belonging to the same department simplified the process since two chairs didn’t have to work together to make things happen. They also benefited from “a chair who was willing to advocate heavily for [them].”

“Faculty Couples, for Better or Worse” from The Chronicle of Higher Education calls working at the same institution as your partner “a dream” and dual-hire policies “an effort to establish an ideal workplace, one where professors are as happy in the lab as they are at home.” Keely Finkelstein appreciates that she and her husband can “more easily meet up to go to lunch or grab a quick coffee break,” in addition to being able to see each other more frequently. For Steven Finkelstein, being in the same department allows a shared understanding of “the various stresses [he] deals with daily, and also how these [stresses] vary based on the academic cycle.” The two take advantage of their proximity to swing by each other’s offices to exchange ideas and updates.

However, there are a unique set of challenges generated by sharing a work life. The Chronicle of Higher Education goes on to claim that “hiring couples can create a tangled web of relationships” which “infuse [a department] with a couple’s worst personal drama.” The Finkelsteins suggest that the challenges are far more pragmatic. Keely Finkelstein remarks that “colleagues or students will always defer to you [or] seek you out when they are looking for your partner/spouse and they can’t find them, because they’ll assume you know where they are all the time,” assuming a telepathic connection between the two. Some will even ask one Finkelstein to pass on a message to the other. Like many working parents, childcare is an issue, but particularly so for academics whose schedules are packed with “teaching classes, office hours, committee meetings, and meetings with students” according to Steven Finkelstein. When a child gets sick, “one of use has to cancel several meetings. We try to minimize the pain by taking turns when this happens (and sometimes bringing our children to work).”

As an academic couple, finding a university to call home carried added difficulty, but the Finkelsteins prioritized working together as they shaped their career paths. Navigating academia side by side, the Finkelsteins conquered the challenges of being in love and in academia.



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