All in the (Small College) Family

By MARK MONTGOMERY

It annoys me when someone in a circumstance that most people would kill for complains as if it's a heavy burden. Having said that, I'd like to describe a circumstance that many academics would kill for, and complain about the heavy burden.

My wife, Tinker Powell, and I are full-time, tenured professors of economics at a small college that we both happen to love. What good luck! We have avoided many of the problems that can so often strain an academic marriage. You know what I'm talking about: where one spouse has a tenure-track job while the other's career comprises equal parts of adjunct teaching and selling used books on eBay. Or where the wife reminds the husband (daily) that she turned down an offer from Princeton to follow him to a branch campus of the University of Rural-State at Remote-Town. Or even when academic partners are lucky enough to get two separate positions, each of which involves only six hours per week in the classroom — but another 24 on the Interstate. Tinker and I realize how fortunate we are to have avoided those problems. (For example, our commute — on foot, in a blizzard — is five minutes.)

There's even more to this rosy vignette of family togetherness: Our daughter, Mary, is a student at the very same college where we teach. Among other things, her presence here fills us with a warm, comforting feeling that can only be described as "tuition remission." We do pay $7,000 for her to live on the campus, even though it's just down the street, but many parents would pay more than that to put two blocks between themselves and their teenager. The great thing is that we know almost all of our daughter's professors and many of her friends. And we always encourage her to drop by for a chat. As it turns out, she drops by for a chat about as often, and with the same enthusiasm, as I schedule a colonoscopy, but that's to be expected. Besides, if we really want to see her, it's just a matter of staking out the local pub, the campus snack bar, or the college library (in that order).

Over all, our situation sounds like a heady combination of career, marital, and parental bliss, doesn't it? But there's also a dark side. And young academic couples should be warned about it.

Would you and your spouse, or partner, be happy working at the same institution? To answer that, let's first go back and recall your wedding. Who was it you vowed to love, honor, and cherish — your spouse or your department chair? (Ironically, it's easier to divorce a spouse than a department chair.) Up there at the altar, did you pledge to remain loyal in sickness and in health, and in a committee meeting in which everyone looks at you because your spouse won't shut up and let everybody go home? When your best man read from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, did he say, "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast — even when one of you gets a bigger raise"? Most wedding services don't cover such things.
Experts say communication is essential to any marriage, but those experts don't teach at the same small college as their spouse. Casual remarks at the dinner table can have professional implications. For example, it's a struggle to remain objective about a student who has often been referred to as "that obnoxious punk in my intro class." It's too easy to prejudge someone you've heard described as "an embarrassment to the admissions office." It can be hard to forget that when the class roster first arrived, your spouse pointed at the fifth name on the list and said, "Oh, my God, he's in your seminar?" But those problems pale beside the legal implications of having a daughter in the house who is also a student. An offhand remark like "Your roommate just bombed my micro exam" could get you sued under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act. So when you're all at the same college, you have to watch what you say, even in your own living room. It's a little bit like living in Cuba.

Of course spouses and partners have some control over how they talk to each other, but you can't control how students and colleagues talk to you about your other half. Consider the following 9:01 a.m. phone conversation:

Student: "Professor Powell was supposed to meet me at her office at 9:00. Can you tell me where she is?"

Me: "Of course I can. I'll just close my eyes, listen with my heart, and wherever she is, her soul will call out to me."

(I have yet to actually say that to a student, but I'm determined to do it before I retire.)

And some colleagues, who should know better, feel perfectly comfortable making you stand in as a proxy for your spouse:

Colleague Who Should Know Better: "When do you think Tinker will finally finish that curriculum report?"

Me: "You should ask her yourself — she's much less likely to punch you."

But here again, the problems associated with being spouses on the same campus are made so much worse by the advent of the student-child. The following true story illustrates my point. In Mary's first year at the college, my wife happened to be in a Victoria's Secret store, so she bought our daughter some underwear. When Mary thanked her mother for the gift, she said she especially like the black lace underwear. Black lace? "Uh-oh," thought my wife. My wife had also made purchases at Victoria's Secret that were (let's just say) not for our daughter. They were for a getaway weekend that she and I had been planning, and she had forgotten to take them out of the bag. Tinker explained the mistake to Mary — who thought it very funny — and demanded the return of the black underwear.

Mary refused. She wanted to keep the black lace, she said, but would return the "other lingerie" that was in the bag. "Oh, God," Tinker thought, "I left the other things in the bag, too?" She asked gingerly if Mary had by any chance mentioned this "other lingerie" to her friends, some of whom were almost certainly our students. (See college, small, above.) Well, of course she had, Mary told her. And they had all agreed that these were strange gifts to receive from one's mother.

The capstone humiliation of this saga came when Mary proceeded to update her friends in Cleveland Hall on the lingerie mix-up and its resolution. One of her friends said, "I think it's cute that they're still having sex at their age."
So am I saying here that the apparent blessing of two jobs at the same college turns out to be a curse in disguise? I would never say that. Indeed, I want to state for the record what a joy it is to work so closely with my beautiful, charming, and talented wife, who is a regular reader of *The Chronicle*. And I can't really complain about having my daughter here. The opportunity to catch even a fleeting glimpse of my child as she hurries across the campus is more than most parents of college students get. So I'm not trying to discourage academic couples from taking jobs at the same institution. Think of this essay as the tiny print on the box of your favorite cold remedy: "Side effects may include ..."

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