Dear Labby,

I am the “trailing” spouse. When it was time for my wife and me to get “real” jobs we decided that if we did not get two positions at the same place, one of us would become a technician/research professor in the other’s lab. However, as things would have it we both got amazing offers and we accepted the offers. We decided we would live apart with the hope that we would start looking for new positions together in the fourth year of our tenure track positions. We have helped each other prepare proposals, get funded, and publish. Our research strengths and interests are complementary. Well, life got complicated when we had our first and then our second child. It was stressful only being together with our babies once a month. But then my spouse’s institution initiated a spousal hire program, and I was hired! She is becoming a science super star! I got a great start-up and was able to bring my funding with me. Life was great until I met with the mentor assigned to me, who is also the chair of the hiring committee. He told me that I would need to show the tenure and promotion committee that I truly am an independent investigator. I don’t want to give up my scientific collaborations with my spouse. Now what?

—Collaborator

Dear Collaborator,

Congratulations on your personal and professional success! Labby has followed the careers of many couples who are both in science, and the outcome is not always as positive as it is in your case. The department that hired you obviously knew about your history of collaboration with your spouse when they offered you a position, and Labby assumes that your plans for your future research projects were discussed on many occasions with the hiring committee and the department head before you received an offer. So ongoing collaboration with your spouse must be expected. However, in Labby’s experience, every promotion and tenure committee will want to understand that you have an indispensable and unique role in the research. It is important for you to go back to your departmental mentor and to try to understand the thinking behind this comment. Is this something that seems to be a concern in the department? Is there some history at the institution of negative outcomes for tenure decisions for spousal hires? What does he believe would show your scientific independence? Did he have specific metrics in mind?

The clearest evidence of research independence is to have funding for your work with you as the PI, and some significant papers from your lab that are independent of your spouse. Will the collaborative work have any weight? While you may want to continue your collaboration with your wife, Labby would advise you to consider expanding your collaborations to include others beyond your institution. Now is the time to tap into your scientific network! You might want to find out if there are any underlying resentments in the department about your hire—did somebody’s favorite candidate get passed over? Especially if this is the case, you will need to show your independence in your department and university. Labby suggests that you make an effort to serve on committees that are different from those your partner is on and perhaps to go as far as not sitting next to her at faculty meetings. Appearances matter. Good luck with your new position!

—Labby

Got Questions?

Labby has answers. ASCB’s popular columnist will select career-related questions for publication and thoughtful response in the ASCB Newsletter. Confidentiality guaranteed if requested. Write us at labby@ascb.org.