

Discrimination and Resolution in the Economics Job Market – A Real Life Story

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The Student's Story:

The job market for fresh PhDs in economics is a well organized and (apparently) a transparent process. However, my experience (then a student at the University of Washington (“UW”)) in January 2002 at the AEA meetings in Atlanta leaves much to be desired in the area of gender discrimination. This is a story of discrimination practiced in the academic job market for economists. Although this is a real experience, the name of the university has been withheld to preserve confidentiality of the administrative communication between UW and the university. It will henceforth be referred to as “U.”

As PhD candidates both looking for jobs in the junior job market in economics, my husband and I had consulted with Prof. Dick Startz and Prof. Shelly Lundberg before the Annual meetings on how to handle dual career issues. They told us that we should always try to convince the interviewers that we had no constraint on our mobility (given that we had in fact decided we were willing to live apart), should such uncomfortable questions arise, and that interviewers were unlikely to bring up the issue. Armed with such helpful advice, we flew to Atlanta confident that we would not encounter inappropriate questions pertaining to such gender issues - Especially in an age when such issues are passé and, more importantly, questions regarding them are considered *illegal*.

I was offered a fly-out to U right at the Atlanta meetings. The Chair of the economics department expressed a lot of interest and made plans for a three-day visit to the U. In the course of the conversation at the meetings, he said he would ask me an “illegal” question: whether I had a significant other. I mentioned my husband who had also interviewed with them. (Yes, *he* used the word “illegal.”) He said that this would complicate matters and that he would talk to the Dean and get back to me. Concerned by the tone of his voice, I once again consulted Startz and Lundberg who advised me to write to the Chair of U reiterating my unconditional interest for a position in the department. The Chair called me the next morning, said it was “the most painful phone-call” in his life, and *retracted the fly-out*. His decision was based on the fact that there were no visiting positions available for my husband in that university or any other nearby colleges that he might be interested in; the Dean would not make me an offer in any case since he was almost certain that I would leave after some time.

Dazed in disbelief, I immediately contacted Prof. Startz who brought the matter to the attention of a senior member of the UW provost's office (henceforth “P”); P plays a major role in the faculty personnel system on campus and in policy matters related to faculty and administration. We met with P who mentioned the options I had in responding to the situation. I chose to have the matter dealt with at an informal level where I did not have to interact with U. P offered to talk to the General Counsel (henceforth “GC”) of U. Since I did not consider U to be a great loss, my interest was to make sure that the Chair did not repeat this behavior with a future candidate.

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The GC of U spoke to their Chair who did not deny the story. He said his action was governed by his desire to prevent a fruitless visit and the waste of time involved. However, the university authorities of U insisted that the hiring committee go through a course or a workshop before they leave for the Annual meetings to hire next time. This would hopefully make job-hunting more fair and less uncomfortable for a female aspirant to a faculty position at U.

In conclusion, my husband and I ultimately settled for positions five hundred miles apart, and I have no immediate plans of leaving my job. Also, I was mistaken in thinking that obnoxious questions were asked by faculty interviewers only. On my way to another university at a different fly out, the cab driver (engaged by the university) expressed concern that I would not accept an offer made by the university, if at all, after learning that I was married!

The Advisor's Story:

My initial reaction on hearing Mitra's story was shock, followed shortly by fury at having one of my students mistreated. I first consulted with a female senior colleague, which I have learned over the years is a wise idea when gender issues arise. (And which is particularly convenient when you're married to a former CSWEP Board member.) With Mitra and Lundberg both concurring, I approached P for advice, as P deals with such matters as an officer of UW. P reacted very strongly, saying that UW had an obligation to protect its graduate students, that there were a number of approaches that could be taken, and that the main desideratum was what would best satisfy Mitra. Mitra and I then met with P together, and it was decided that P would contact GC at U – but that the contact would wait until after Mitra had secured a job.

P did contact GC, who was very responsive – and perhaps grateful that the initial contact had been something other than a lawsuit. GC saw to it that it was made clear to the individuals involved at U that this was unacceptable behavior. GC also used this as an opportunity to raise awareness of this issue at U. And since both Mitra and her husband landed excellent jobs, the story had a happy ending.

There's a bit of an interesting afternote to the story. When I've shared the tale with colleagues who know Mitra and her husband they too have been furious. But the first response from economists (okay, male economists) with no personal involvement has more typically been either that U was just trying to be efficient or that reproving the faculty at U will simply teach them to make the behavior less blatant next time. Maybe it's this sort of analysis that has led to the replacement of the "reasonable man" standard.