

Closing Remarks: Married to the Job

The life and times of an advancement couple

By [Mary Ellen Collins](#)

My husband, John, and I realized how entrenched we were in our advancement roles the day we inadvertently shared a businesslike handshake before climbing into separate cabs and heading to our respective donor meetings.

We had managed to synchronize our travel and snare a few minutes for a personal life within the hectic schedules of one vice president for institutional advancement (him) and one director of major gifts (me). But that moment in front of a New York City Marriott brought us up short: Maybe we were spending a little too much time meeting, greeting, and cultivating.

The courting years

When we began our advancement careers as new members of Tufts University's alumni relations staff, neither of us envisioned ourselves as fund raisers, much less married to each other. But nature took its course — professionally and personally — and we eventually moved on to other institutions and into development, and then made our way to the altar.

During those early alumni relations days, our lives revolved around special events. We spent many evenings together working on seating arrangements, menu choices, and opening remarks.

The year we produced back-to-back reunion weekends for our respective institutions, we helped each other plan formal dinner dances in the same Westin Hotel function room on successive Saturday nights. As John ran around helping me check setups that mirrored his from the previous week, it was little wonder that the banquet manager did a double take and asked, "Didn't you two just do this?"

Ever faithful

As dual development officers, we were a constant presence at each other's institutions — a fact not lost on our employers. The president of Simmons College (where I once worked) often greeted John by saying, "This sure is a busman's holiday for you!" And Berklee College of Music's president repeatedly thanked me for my support of John's work. I think they realized advancement doesn't fit within Monday-through-Friday, nine-to-five parameters, and respected the amount of time and energy we devoted to both places.

John and I shared 14 years as an advancement couple, celebrating big gifts, new jobs, and great hires. Whether the day's aggravation stemmed from demanding donors, a quirky computer system, or faculty members who just didn't understand why they should be solicited ... we kept each other sane.

An advancement spouse is more of an asset than even the best employee. He or she doesn't want recognition, has no hidden agenda, and will never, ever leave you in the lurch. John has photographed my events, fixed microphones, asked little old ladies to dance, and charmed some of the world's most boring dinner companions. I have worked registration tables for him, quieted rowdy waiters during a presidential speech, and remembered the names of countless donor spouses and children.

The "golden" years

A few years ago, when I decided I'd finally had enough of "the life," I left my job to pursue a free-lance writing career. I now limit my advancement role to that of supportive spouse at John's new campus, Arizona State University West. I dutifully learned the words to a new alma mater and memorized the vital statistics of a fresh set of prospects. Now that we've entered the world of PAC-10 public universities, I've even mastered the art of looking genuinely interested at football games while wearing clothing in the requisite — but most unflattering — shade of "Sun Devil gold."

During a major-donor cultivation dinner last semester, I realized just how ingrained my advancement instincts still are. We arrived at the function room to find that the campaign chair had invited 10 extra people to the event yet neglected to have them RSVP; plus, several members of the kitchen staff failed to show up due to an accident. John ran off to stall the unexpected guests; the caterer dithered over where to squeeze in an extra table; and I looked at the event coordinator and asked, "How can I help?"

I stuck out my hand and took a tray of filled champagne glasses, joined one waitress at the door, and began to welcome the guests. John's grateful smile let me know he would've done the same for me. And I think we both recognized that while you can take a spouse out of advancement, you can never completely take advancement out of the spouse.

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