

BEING MARRIED IN GRADUATE SCHOOL

What is it like to be married in a sea of singles? Some 30 percent of business school students struggle to balance wedded bliss (5 percent also have kids!) with the rigorous demands of B-school. Here's how a few couples have made it work, and even added value to their relationship.

Marriage adds a special twist to the business school decision. Like most of your classmates, you have probably relocated and will be out of the workforce for two years (good-bye, steady cash flow; hello, serious debt). You, on the other hand, are also dragging your dear spouse (and maybe kids) along for the ride. While you attend the lofty business school of your choice, your spouse and/or kids may have to live in a cramped one-bedroom apartment in a rundown area. While you are learning about heteroskedasticity and lease amortizations, your spouse may have given up a career to relocate with you and spend days tutoring or baby-sitting on campus.

Obviously, it's not always an easy transition. But with these tried-and-true strategies, you will be able to balance your myriad commitments and emerge with a marriage that's stronger than ever.

MARRIED WITH TEAMMATES

Be candid with your teammates, as well as your spouse, about goals, time commitments, concerns, and expectations. If time with your spouse on a weekly basis is sacrosanct, make sure you let everyone know up front. If you want to spend the weekend with your family, you must be flexible enough during the week to attend all the team meetings. Jason had one engaged and two married learning teammates at Wharton. He says, We met religiously every evening from 7 to 10, Mondays to Thursdays, and we only met on the weekend for emergencies. Since we knew that weekends were off, we were really productive during the week.

If for some reason you can't make a particular meeting, offer to do more than your fair share for the next assignment. When my son Joey was sick for three weeks, I couldn't make any team meetings. The following month, I made sure I worked on every single assignment, comments Glenn, an NYU Stern alum. My teammates respected me for making the extra effort, and I didn't feel like a total free-rider.

Prioritizing family time can limit friction in your relationship and provide immense dividends. Saturdays and Sundays are sacred for our family, says Doug, a student at Wharton. We plan a family dinner on both nights, go to church on Sunday mornings, and indulge the kids in whatever activity they want for the weekend. It means that my weekdays are very hectic, but I love the private time with my family.

MARRIED WITH RECRUITING

Rather than presenting your career options as an ultimatum, ask for your spouse's input and involve him or her in the decision-making process. Weigh the pros and cons, and keep in mind that your partner is not as informed as you are about the nuances of each industry and company. For example, if you are contemplating a career (or even a summer) in investment banking, make sure your spouse understands the trade-offs involved (i.e., you will see even less of each other than you did at school, and you will never be home for dinner, but you'll make gobs of money.) Likewise, if you are planning a career in consulting, explain that you may be on the road often and that your partner may have to spend weeknights alone. If you choose a high-tech career, your schedule could be erratic. During his first year at UNC's Kenan-Flagler school, John was fairly determined to work for a high-tech start-up in the summer, but my wife wanted to make sure that I wasn't working crazy hours. When interviewing with firms, I negotiated alternate Fridays at home and worked for only 10 weeks, instead of 12. She was happy that we had some time at the end of the summer to travel, and I still felt that I got the experience I was looking for.

You can also view your summer position as a wonderful opportunity for you and your spouse to test the waters of a specific career path and to modify your plan if things don't work out. I felt an awesome responsibility to provide for my family financially after taking on such a huge debt burden, recalls Alex about his experience at UCLA. So I decided to work in management consulting for the summer. However, my spouse was really unhappy with all the travel, and we decided the money wasn't worth it. When I came back my second year, I focused my effort in the corporate strategy area for a Fortune 200 company. I knew my lifestyle would be much less frenetic, and although the pay was slightly lower, we would still be doing well for ourselves.

Recruiting events are an important part of this process, but don't feel compelled to attend every last one just because all your classmates seem to be. Remember, you are no longer living in a dorm room and subsisting on ramen noodles, so resist the urge to attend every company buffet just to stuff yourself with smoked salmon canapés. Your marriage will benefit if you stay focused on your job search and don't overbook yourself.

Whenever possible, make sure your spouse knows whom you are meeting and when. If spouses are welcome at an event (never assume; always ask the Career Center or recruiting company), encourage them to attend. This is an ideal way for your partner to share in an integral part of your B-school experience and participate in the decision-making process. I wasn't so sure that I wanted my wife to be a management consultant for the summer, but after I'd met people at the firm over the course of the year, I had a better sense of where she would be working and felt much more comfortable with her decision, explains DC-based Richard, whose wife is pursuing her MBA at Columbia.

MARRIED WITH THE HIP 20-SOMETHING SINGLE CROWD WHEN YOU'RE NOT HIP, 20-SOMETHING, OR SINGLE

Some of B-school is a throwback to undergraduate partying days, so you'll have to recognize that you may not be able to attend the post-11 p.m. keg parties. If it is important to you to socialize with your friends, ask your spouse to come along for the first few parties and let them choose whether they want to attend later. If you have kids, develop an extensive baby-sitting network. Student-parents often pool their resources and take turns baby-sitting so that the adults can do the party circuit. If keg parties, beer pong, or co-ed naked Frisbee golf is not your thing, have no fear, there are numerous social outlets for married people.

Develop friendships with couples in similar situations. Most business schools have partners' and kids' clubs and regularly sponsor events suited to these crowds. They are an invaluable source of support, particularly for your family. Bring your kids/spouse to all open events to ensure that they meet your friends, classmates, professors, and administrators. I met a group of young women with kids, just like me, through the Wharton Partners Club, recalls Sita. We decided to regularly take trips to the grocery stores, meet in the park with the kids, and explore Philadelphia together. It was a great way not only to adjust to a new environment but also to meet other people in similar situations.

Encourage spouses to get involved in activities that interest them, particularly if they don't work. Most schools allow students' spouses and children to use the gym and other recreational facilities (for a nominal fee) and may also allow spouses to take classes. Paulo's wife, Mari, came from Brazil to be with her husband during his two years at Wharton. I took Spanish, French, and German classes, and I also took an international cooking class. It was so fun. Paulo and I would walk to school together, meet for lunch when he was free, and we would study in the library together.

If your spouse does have a job, be sensitive to time commitments, and try to balance your partner's social activities with yours. A lot of spouses feel overwhelmed by the constant social activity at business school, and they appreciate it if you make them feel their social networks are equally valued.

In general, married couples tend to gravitate toward other married couples and engage in alternative social activities like organizing dinner parties or attending cultural events. I was so tired of the keg parties with the same boring conversations about recruiting that I organized a dinner club, says one B-school spouse. We took one night out a month to sample restaurants with different international cuisine. It was a great way to meet new couples, as well as spend some quality time with our partners.