

## First Person

# Ditch the Boyfriend

Does a woman have to follow 'the rules' to be successful

By ELIZABETH FLEER

**R**ULE NUMBER ONE: Don't talk to the media," a senior faculty member told me as I prepared to attend a meeting of science journalists last spring. As the date for defending my dissertation fast approached, he and other faculty members at my institution were concerned that I hadn't landed a job and were showing an increased interest in helping me out with the rest of my life, too.

"Any other words of wisdom?" I asked with a smile, since he knew full well that I tell my story of water resources and climate change in California to anyone who will listen.

"Rule number two: Don't teach. Rule number three: Don't fall in love."

"And what about children?" At this point, I was egging him on.

"Definitely not! As a female scientist with the potential to do real research, you *cannot* have children. My wife stayed home with my children, but you can't afford to do that. You need to focus all your energy on publishing peer-reviewed papers."

He was serious. I've been hearing such words of wisdom for the past six years, as a young woman studying in the male-dominated fields of meteorology, hydrology, and physical oceanography. While the proportion of female professors in physics departments has been increasing, that's not the case in meteorology, where women account for only about 10 percent of the faculty.

Articles in *Eos*, the weekly newspaper of the American Geophysical Union, have called on professors in the field to encourage promising female students to pursue research and tenure-track positions. The male faculty members in my department have taken that advice to heart. But as I consider my future career, their advice

makes me question who I am and what I truly value.

I talk to the media. I teach. I'm in love with a fellow student who just completed his Ph.D. and is also on the job market. And someday, I want children.

But I have a bad track record. I've already put my career before my personal life. After only a year into graduate school, I became a runaway bride. My fiancé got his bachelor's degree a year after me, and our troubles began when he wasn't accepted into my graduate program.

When I queried the admissions committee about his lack of acceptance, I was told to "ditch the boyfriend."

"If you think the two-body problem is bad getting into graduate school, think of how bad it will be when you both want jobs," a committee member told me.

At first I rebelled against that career-first attitude and made plans to switch programs to a university that would accept both of us. But none of my course work would transfer, and my first year of work would have been a loss. Initially, that seemed inconsequential in the name of love.

In the end, I couldn't do it. The strain was too much for our relationship, and with only three months before the already-paid-for wedding, I returned my engagement ring and stayed put, managing to secure a position on a research cruise around Hawaii for the entire month when my wedding was supposed to take place.

I can't say that I regret the decision. I've thoroughly enjoyed my time as a graduate student. In addition to several research cruises and a part-time job teaching oceanography at a local community college, I've managed to develop a research project that allows me to spend my summers living in the

high country of Yosemite National Park, hiking and wading in snow-fed streams.

On the personal front, I have a number of good friends and a boyfriend whom I adore. It's hard to imagine that life could get much better. But nothing lasts forever, and this past year I haven't been sleeping so well.

Ultimately I would like a job that combines both teaching and research. So last December I started applying for both postdoctoral and tenure-track positions. Because of the nature of my research, I focused on universities in the mountainous areas of the West.

By March I had four rejections, and my boyfriend had two job offers: both on the East Coast. He was quite distraught over deciding which to accept, and I was unable to generate any sympathy. Somehow the situation seemed oddly justified considering my last career-vs.-relationship dilemma: Now I was the one who wasn't wanted.

I begged my two advisers for help, asking, "Don't you know anyone on the East Coast whom I could work with?" They both specialize in Western water resources, and after a brief query about why I would possibly want to go to the East Coast, one replied, "We can find you a new boyfriend a lot easier than we can find you a job on the East Coast."

That was not what I wanted to hear.

**W**HILE MY HOURS of restful sleep dwindled, I applied to every job opening I could find, and as the rejections accumulated, I started to hate the question, "What are you doing after you defend your thesis?"

Finally in May I got a call from a small liberal-arts college in Southern California. After an all-day interview,

the college decided I was perfect for a tenure-track position in its environmental-science department. I could teach oceanography, hydrology, climate change, and meteorology and would be able to take students on field trips to Yosemite.

It was nice to feel wanted, but in my department, my job offer was not seen as an accomplishment.

From my advisers: "You're not going to accept it, are you? Teaching will suck you dry. You'll never do real research again."

From my boyfriend: "You can do whatever you want, but I don't want to teach, and I don't want to live near Los Angeles."

I deliberated, and I cried a bit. In the meantime my advisers started calling their colleagues, trying to scrounge up a research position that would save me from the "dark side"—teaching.

In June, on the day of my defense, I got a call from a university in the West, offering me a two-year research position. After a visit there, I decided to accept. Colorado is a bit closer to the East Coast than California, and I have two years to continue searching for a permanent position. I still want to do both teaching and research, and I want a family, too.

Am I dreaming too big? Will my boyfriend and I manage to find permanent positions in the same town? Or will the strain be too much for our relationship?

Should I have listened more closely to the words of wisdom that say, "Don't talk to the media, don't teach, and definitely don't fall in love"?

*Elizabeth Fleer is the pseudonym of a Ph.D. in oceanography. She will chronicle her search for a tenure-track job this academic year. For an archive of previous First Person columns, see <http://chronicle.com/jobs/archive/firstpersonarch.htm>*