



Ask Academic Abby about what's bugging you right now. Send details with [Abby Submission Form](#) to protect your identity. Several details will be highlighted to protect you.

Dear Academic Abby,

I am nearing the point in my doctoral education at which I will need to begin the job search. In some ways, I am very excited. However, I have one pressing concern. I am a lesbian, and my partner and I have recently married.

Up to this point, I have never disclosed anything about my personal life to anyone in my academic department. As of now, I do not plan on being “out” during my job search, especially since my academic work does not involve LGBT issues. However, I am concerned that once I find a job, the need to be out in my new academic community will be more pressing — especially since my partner and I intend to have a child within the next few years, and it will be difficult to hide an entire family from my colleagues. Could you offer me any advice on being an out lesbian within the religion academy? How concerned should I be about the potential effect of being more open about my sexual orientation once I find a job?

Signed - Concerned Scholar, Wife, and Mother-to-be

Dear Concerned,

Congratulations on your recent marriage. Especially since you make clear that you are not generally out in your academic life, you are probably correct that it makes sense not to come out at a job interview unless you receive clear signals that it is fine. But being out once you have a job is a different matter. You don't say anything about your graduate program or the kind of job you are looking for. If you are seeking work at a conservative Christian institution, you may have to remain closeted. But at any liberal seminary, most secular institutions, and probably many Catholic colleges and universities (though certainly not all), being out in itself is unlikely to be a problem. (This is not to say that people who write on LGBTIQ issues or who are gay activists do not face repercussions.) Indeed, once you are hired, colleagues may well want to get to know you as a person. Informal gatherings can be important to institutional socialization, and people who aren't forthcoming about their families can appear "uncollegial." (See Stacey Floyd-Thomas's article on the problems surrounding collegiality in the [October 2009 RSN](#).)

As you interview for jobs, you will want to look carefully at the options open to you, weighing the need to have a job with the desire to be out and comfortable. Would you want to be at an institution where you can't be out? Do you need to temporarily take a job at a place where you can't be out while hoping for a job where you can be out? As you speak informally with students and faculty members at different institutions, what sense do you get of the diversity of the campuses and of the norms and expectations concerning sexuality and family life? It would be helpful to contact LGBT centers or organizations at the schools you are considering to discuss the environment for LGBT people and to get the names of queer faculty members with whom you might speak. Stress the need for anonymity as you talk with such people.

There are also a couple of legal issues that it's important to be aware of. As you undoubtedly know, your marriage is not recognized by most states or by the federal government. That means that, unless you find a job in one of the few states that recognizes gay marriage, your partner would not necessarily be eligible for health and other benefits. If you are depending on your job for health coverage, you will need to check out whether any institution you are considering has domestic partner benefits. Sometimes you can find such information on a school's website. You can also do a bit of advance digging by calling the Human Resources office without mentioning your name and saying that you are thinking of applying for a position (no need to say in what) and would like to know if they have domestic partner benefits. You can also raise the question with Human Resources after you are offered a job and before you decide to accept it. Moreover, even if a state and institution recognizes your marriage, you will still have to pay federal taxes on any benefits given your partner. Thus Human Resources at least will need to know of your situation.

Best of luck with job search.

Dear Academic Abby,

Graduate guides often advise students to start early in “networking” and “getting involved” in professional organizations. How and where do you do this? What’s the point of networking anyway? And how are students supposed to have time for this extracurricular activity in the midst of demanding graduate programs?

Signed, Overworked and Underpaid

Dear Overworked and Underpaid,

In my view, an MA student needs to focus on courses, preparation for exams, and perhaps a Master’s thesis. Sometimes MA students are ready and willing to submit papers for conferences, but most are not, and really at this stage it is not necessary. I do think MA students should talk with professors about which conferences they attend, and should get in the habit of checking conference websites, reading calls for papers, and even attending association annual meetings, if possible.

PhD students really do need to begin submitting paper proposals, attending conferences, and networking, because at this stage the job market is palpably looming. Conference participation and networking are ways of establishing yourself as a serious thinker and gaining the friends and peers who will help you throughout your career. There are many graduate student conferences every year, many of which will be relatively local for you; these are great for introducing you to conference culture, and for meeting colleagues at or near your own level of intellectual development. But I also encourage you to take the plunge into the national conferences that best platform the kind of research you are preparing yourself to do. Again, I suggest you choose conferences in consultation with professors you respect.

Why network? Because this is how you will meet other established and new professors in your fields of study, as well as other graduate students like yourself. Networking is not some abstract “good” in and of itself, but refers to the vibrant, strenuous, and inspiring relationships we have with other intellectuals who are interested in the kinds of things we are interested in. Sometimes

the overlapping interest is directly tied to the books we hope to write; other times, the overlap lies more in our shared concerns about gender or race, or in shared administrative obligations, such as developing undergraduate curricula, departmental policies, or the like. The academy, like our seminar classrooms, operates through dialogue, and through the push-pull between interest and need. Networking is, in a sense, developing your own ongoing “seminar of the academy.”

Finding the time for conferences and networking is difficult. But, then, juggling the multiple demands of academic life will always be difficult. In part, your ability and desire to attend conferences should align with your career goals. For some teaching positions the institution will expect you to be active professionally; figuring out how to juggle this expectation in graduate school will thus serve you well in obtaining such a position. For other teaching careers, institutions will praise you for attending conferences, but will not necessarily expect it, and for still others the institutions will discourage you from spending your time in that way.

Let your own career goals help you decide how to parse your time, then.

To ask a question without having it published in , please e-mail it to

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