Academic couples place a strong emphasis on the success of both partners’ professional and personal well-being. It is important to understand what role these values play when couples are on the job market. Climbing the ladder with respect to rank, salary, professional opportunities, and prestige often drives faculty to seek outside offers. When asked, “Have you applied for another position within the past five years?” 37 percent of all faculty said yes.

Surprisingly, academic couples (42%) along with faculty who are single are the groups most likely to pursue outside offers. Why is this so?

Academics Choose to Work in One Location

First and foremost, academic couples seek to have both partners settled in one location where each can thrive professionally. A full 88 percent of faculty who successfully negotiated a (sequential) dual hire at their current institution indicated that the first hire would have refused the position if her or his partner had not found appropriate employment. Put differently, more than 600 faculty would have rejected offers had institutions in our sample not stepped up and taken candidates’ partners into account. Another measure of how important academic couples consider the careers of both partners when making decisions about where to work is the fact that more than 20 percent of both women and men who were part of a dual hire report that they or their partners have taken a position at a less prestigious institution in order to improve the couple’s overall employment situation. Couples will compromise in order to find the best of two possible positions.

“Women won’t take the jobs if their partners are not suitably employed.”
– Dean of Social Sciences

From the report: Dual-Career Academic Couples: What universities need to know by the Michelle R. Clayman Institute
Salaries Matter

Second, academic couples worry about salaries. It can be difficult—especially as people become more senior and more expensive—to move two bodies in tandem to suitable jobs elsewhere. Helen Astin and Jeffrey Milem’s study of academic couples in 1997 showed that men with academic partners earned less than those with non-academic partners but that women with academic partners earned more than those with non-academic partners.¹ Our study found that respondents (both male and female) who were part of a dual hire (either jointly or sequentially) do not make significantly less than do other faculty members. Although many couples may indeed be underpaid, looking at the aggregate data from the institutions we studied, and accounting for field and rank, couple hires make slightly more money than their peers overall. First hires and joint hires do the best (as might be expected) but, looking at all respondents, the earning power of dual-career academic respondents is not diminished by their couple status. Follow-up research may offer some explanation for this finding.

Counter-Offers

What builds couples’ loyalty to their institution and keeps them from accepting outside offers? Not surprisingly, among faculty with academic partners who have refused an outside job offer in the last five years, strong counteroffers are persuasive reasons to stay (Figure 20). However, professional opportunities for

partners also play a major role. The top reason women refuse new job opportunities is that their partners are not offered satisfactory positions in the recruiting institution area. A dean confirmed this finding, commenting that in his experience universities make more effort to employ an accompanying male (in heterosexual couples) than female because, he said, “Women won’t take the jobs if their partners are not suitably employed.” The top reason men refuse outside offers is a strong counter-offer, but following closely at number two is that their partners (and children) do not wish to relocate.

Academic partnerships also come into play when faculty consider professional gains and losses. Almost half (47%) of all faculty with academic partners note that they have lost professional mobility as a result of their partnerships compared with 29 percent of faculty with stay-at-home partners and 39 percent of faculty with employed (non-academic) partners. This finding appears to be true especially

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of women in academic partnerships, who, as we have shown, tend to place a great deal of emphasis on career equality. However, men with academic partners also perceive a higher loss in professional mobility than do other men—a far cry from the notion of the unfettered male academic of the past (Figure 21).

It is important to note that the “losses” incurred by academic partnerships are such only in the context of current hiring and employment structures. Many of these current structures are built around outdated models of family and faculty life that presume academics will act as “free agents” as they climb the tenure ladder. Having a partner is, therefore, a “loss”—a partner can compromise the mobility ostensibly required to maximize career success. However, academic couples are unlikely to cede the benefits of partnerships to gain mobility. For these and many other reasons, academic couples will continue to make choices about their careers that take one another and their families into account.