Who Privileges their Career? Men or Women?

An important issue for dual-career couples—whether academic or non-academic—is which partner in a particular relationship privileges his or her career. Academics, like other professionals, advance more quickly and get substantial pay raises with multiple offers. In the days of male-headed households, it was relatively easy for a professional to move quickly and effectively to take advantage of career advances as they arose. This is not the case for professional couples who seek to make the most of two careers—not one. Dual-career academics may compromise personal lives to keep careers on track and vice versa. The questions then arise:

- When push comes to shove and couples must decide to apply for particular jobs, what gives?
- Whose career comes first?
- Who follows whom?

We examine this issue first by looking at differences between couple types. We then look at the differences within relationships between men and women.

In response to the question “in your relationship, whose career is considered primary?” academic couples more often than others answered “both careers are equal” (Figure 17). Academic couples, in other words, place a relatively high premium on balance and equality in their relationships.
Men Privilege their Careers at Higher Rates

At the same time, and within each partnered group of respondents, men privilege their careers over those of their partners at significantly higher rates than do women. Sixty-eight percent of all male survey respondents report that they consider their own career more important than that of their partner. Less than one-third of women did so. There is, of course, good reason for men and women with stay-at-home partners to give priority to their own careers—they tend to provide the household income. However, 92 percent of men with stay-at-home partners privilege their careers, versus 79 percent of women with stay-at-home partners. Among faculty with partners employed outside of the academy, 71 percent of men give priority to their careers, versus 40 percent of women.

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

Same-Sex Academic Couples

Like all academic couples, same-sex academic couples value balance and equality in their relationships. Lesbians and gay men in academic partnerships are more likely to give equal weight to both partners’ careers (64%) than are lesbians and gay men in other types of partnerships (46% among faculty with employed, non-academic partners; 11% among faculty with stay-at-home partners).
Partners Support Each Other’s Success

Analyzing this finding further by academic rank, women even at the highest rank (full or endowed professor), whom one might expect to have to put their careers first in order to succeed, report that within their relationship they value their own and their partner’s career equally. In fact, this trend of lending equal weight to both careers in the partnership increases as women move up the academic ladder. Men at all ranks, even the lowest, give priority to their careers significantly more than do women (Figure 18).

**Partners Support Each Other’s Success**

Although many personal relationships experience stresses and strains in the context of working lives, our study shows that faculty across all couple types think that they are “more successful” in their career because of their partner (Figure 19). The professional “value added” of partnerships is particularly strong for academic couples. Partners share intellectual interests and discuss their academic work with each other. Sharing professional networks stands out as perhaps the greatest career gain for academic couples compared with other couple types. Fifty-eight percent of academic couples share contacts, mentors, colleagues, and friends compared with one-quarter or less of faculty with stay-at-home or employed partners. This greatly enhances each partner’s reach into the other’s circle of mentors, friends, and patrons. In academia, where power and privilege still often

From the report: *Dual-Career Academic Couples: What universities need to know* by the Michelle R. Clayman Institute
Benefits of Partnerships

divide along gendered and racial/ethnic lines, access to multiple circles of knowledge and influence can potentially boost careers.

Research productivity is another career “gain” for academic couples. In response to a separate survey question (not included in Figure 19), 44 percent of faculty in academic couples report that they have gained in terms of research productivity as a result of their partnerships compared with 35 percent of faculty with stay-at-home or employed (non-academic) partners.

Underrepresented Minorities
Underrepresented minority faculty in academic partnerships also tend to give equal weight to both partners’ careers. Nearly half (49%) of respondents from underrepresented racial and ethnic backgrounds consider their partner’s academic career to be of equal importance. This is higher than the proportion of minority faculty in other types of partnerships who do so (34% among faculty with employed, non-academic partners; 7% among faculty with stay-at-home partners).

From the report: Dual-Career Academic Couples: What universities need to know by the Michelle R. Clayman Institute
Why do Men Privilege Their Careers?

Why do men persist in privileging their careers, and why do many women continue to adjust their own careers to suit their partners’? A number of men in our survey pointed out that the decision to lend priority to their own careers boiled down to the simple fact that they make more money than do their partners. One business school faculty confirmed that when the issue arose of who should stay home to care for the children, the answer was easy: “Frankly I made much more money. If it had been the other way around, we would have done the opposite.”

Things are, however, a bit more complicated than this simple equation might suggest. Our study (where salaries are self-reported) shows that many men and women who out-earn their partners do, indeed, privilege their careers over those of their partners. However, even here gender differences remain significant. Among respondents who out-earn their academic partners, 61 percent of men and 44 percent of women consider their own careers more important than their partners’, whereas 37 percent of men and 51 percent of women consider the careers of both partners to be of equal importance. In other words, higher-earning men in academic couples more often privilege their careers whereas higher-earning women more often assign equal value to both careers.

In some instances, men privilege their careers because, as the demographics in our study suggest, they are more senior-ranking and consequently the more sought-after partner. It is true that U.S. women still practice hypergamy, the tendency to partner with men of higher (or at least not lower) status than their own. Consequently, in heterosexual couples male partners may be somewhat more established professionally than are female partners. Still faculty commented that when one partner makes too great of a sacrifice, the couple will move when good opportunities for both arise.

A study by the European Molecular Biology Organization (EMBO) confirms our findings. EMBO surveyed recipients of its two major fellowship programs— the Long-Term Fellowship and Young Investigator Programme—from 1996 onward and found that even though women often selected partners with qualifications similar to their own, women frequently put their own careers second to their partners’ and move professionally more often to support their partners’ careers and not their own. A study done in 1997 showed that this practice is detrimental to women’s careers.