

Balancing Work and Life in Times of Economic Crisis: Strategies for of Dual Career, Long Distance Couples

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"It's a grueling, brain-frying, wallet-emptying, time-wasting, body-breaking, soul-draining way to live. It's incredibly hard on myself, schizophrenically split between two commitments—work and family—that I both take seriously. It's incredibly hard on my wife (.....)The only aspect of this commute that makes it tolerable is that I love my job. I'm good at my job. I thrive at my job. And I'm surrounded by kind, generous colleagues at an institution that values my unconventional teaching and research." (Professor Mark Sample, writing for 'Antenna' in 2011)

The Clayman Institute for Gender Research at Stanford University released a study in 2008, showing that 70% of academics are in dual career relationships, oftentimes with their partner being also an academic. As academic jobs are extremely competitive and almost impossible to find at the same university, or even in the same state, more and more couples are involved in long term, long distance relationships.

This phenomenon has become particularly widespread since women have started earning more PhDs and are joining academic ranks in higher numbers than ever before. According to the Clayman Institute: "40% of women and 38% of men first hires at the assistant professor levels" seek employment for their partners. If this employment does not materialize, partners are oftentimes reluctant to move.

As a result, many assistant professors, especially women, have to manage long distance relationships, as well as the rigors of an academic career, often for extended periods of time. The Clayman study points out that women are more likely to give up first hire positions and accept second hire, or non-tenure track, positions (such as research associate or lecturer) in order to be able to eventually join their partner or spouse.

Long Distance Dual Career Couples by the Numbers

The Clayman Institute study mentioned above is quite thorough and illuminating, but it was completed in 2008, when the full effects of the global recessions were not yet felt. Thus, this presentation focuses on patterns and numbers after 2008, thus coinciding with a time of economic crisis and increasing professional pressures for young professional couples.

According to the Center for the Study of Long Distance Relationships, the phenomenon is on the rise in the United States. If, in 2006, there were 3.6 million couples living in such an arrangement (living apart for long periods of time, at a distance larger than 150 miles), by the end of 2013 the number had reached about 4.6 million.

The causes for this phenomenon certainly tie into the realities of challenging economic times: unavailability of professional opportunities in certain geographical areas for well educated graduates who are seeking employment in highly specialized fields makes moving an imperative.

Tenure track jobs in academia (thus positions that can be worthily described as 'career choices') have declined dramatically. According to the New York Times and the National Public Radio in 1969, 78.3% of academic positions were tenured or tenure track. By 2009, only about 33% of academic positions were estimated to be tenured or tenure track and the numbers have been further declining since. All the while, adjunct positions have increased by about 320% during the same time frame. Thus, positions that are truly conducive to and protective of careers, are quickly disappearing, a matter that provided an added incentive to those offered such opportunities to seize them, even if they present a great personal and family challenges.

Besides poor economic conditions, another factor that contributes to the increase in the number of long distance couples is the fact that a growing number of women are earning PhD degrees. If in 1999, 47% of those earning PhDs were women, in 2013 women made up 53.3% of all PhD degrees earned in the US. Women, as opposed to men, tend to be married to older partners, who have an established career and who are not willing to move in order to accommodate the career aspirations of their wives. This situation is quite different from one or two decades ago, when most PhD graduates were men, some of which married, usually to younger women with less

defined career goals, who would then become 'trailing spouses' and would be willing to follow their husbands in order to accommodate their careers.

Long Distance Relationships: Professional and Personal Impact

Long distance relationships have an impact on the personal and professional lives of those involved, but can also affect others: family members, colleagues, students, etc.

Numerous accounts from colleagues living in this type of arrangement testify to the personal, emotional and professional strain it can cause, especially since for many academics, long distance relationships can last for many long years.

The costs are financial (two households to maintain, travel costs and communication costs), but not only. Costs can also be emotional as well as professional. Travel to visit with a partner or spouse far away adds to challenges and time pressures for faculty that has to meet the same demands and deadlines as their non-commuting colleagues. Emotional fatigue and all its negative consequences often result from this type of experience. Both partners are exposed to such pressures and fatigue, but women tend to be more vulnerable, as, sooner or later, they face the dilemma of having and bringing up children (biological clock concerns) while being away from their partner.

Besides personal concerns, the Clayman study outlines several ways in which professors' ability to teach, research and fulfill departmental duties is negatively affected by a long distance relationship. Other studies and testimonials detail the psychological and emotional toll this phenomenon takes on the spouses and children involved. In my study, I have gathered and compared such accounts from both Internet fora and personal testimonials from colleagues on campus. All point to the need for more institutional and personal support for all those involved.

Work- Life Balance Strategies and Resources for Long Distance Couples

From what I have learned from both statistics and personal accounts of colleagues, it is clear that the dual career long distance academic couple phenomenon is on the rise. Not only are more and more people involved in such arrangements, but the time frame during which couples stay apart has been increasing. This is mostly due to the scarcity of appropriate employment opportunities in a weak economy.

Thus, the ubiquity and persistence of the phenomenon, the growing number of faculty affected by it, should lead to more universities looking into initiatives to address this issue and support faculty members.

In addition to the Clayman Center at Stanford University, the University of Michigan has also dedicated resources to studying the dual career long distance couple phenomenon. As a result, a special program was created, seeking to promote dual spousal hires within the university, but also to find academic employment opportunities in the broader community, through the Michigan Higher Education Recruitment Consortium. Such institutional models could and should be adopted at all universities in the United States, including UCF, along with initiatives granting professors access to on-campus career centers that could facilitate employment in related (non-academic) areas for non-academic, professional spouses.

Besides employment and career guidance and assistance, universities should also provide counseling services to assist faculty with the challenges presented by long distance relationships, time pressures and personal concerns. Numerous studies have pointed to the importance of counseling as a mean of encouragement and support in such circumstances (see "The Family Journal" reference below). Counseling should be available both for individuals and couples. At UCF, two institutions could be well suited for this task: the UCF Community Counseling and Research Center (<http://education.ucf.edu/ccr/>) and the UCF Marriage and Family Research Institute (<http://www.mfri.ucf.edu/>)

Along with counseling, I hope to help put together a networking group, providing a space for informal socialization and support for all UCF colleagues involved in long distance relationships, who wish to share their experiences, learn from others and offer and be offered collegial support and advice.

Meetings of the group will start in Fall 2014 and will be announced through the Center for the Success of Women Faculty.

References and Resources:

- If interested in participating in group meetings, or in more detail about this topic, do not hesitate to contact Anca Turcu: anca.turcu@ucf.edu
- The Clayman Institute for the Study of Gender, Stanford University: "Dual Career Academic Couples: What Universities Need to Know"-- 2008
http://gender.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/DualCareerFinal_0.pdf
- The Center for the Study of Long Distance Relationships:
<http://www.longdistancerelationships.net/>
- University of Michigan Dual Career Program
http://www.provost.umich.edu/programs/dual_career/
and
http://www.provost.umich.edu/programs/dual_career/Academic_DC_Services%20Jan%202011.pdf
- East Central Illinois University report:
<http://eastcentralillinois.sites.acs.org/Dual%20Career%20Research.PBSimpson.pdf>
- The Family Journal: Long-Distance Relationships in Dual-Career Commuter Couples: A Review of Counseling Issues:
<http://tfj.sagepub.com/content/10/4/398.abstract>
- American Association of University Professors:
<http://www.aaup.org/issues/balancing-family-academic-work>
- New York Times "Part Timers Crowd Academic Hiring"

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/23/world/europe/part-timers-crowd-academic-hiring.html>

- National Public Radio: "Part Time Professors Demand Higher Pay"

<http://www.npr.org/2014/02/03/268427156/part-time-professors-demand-higher-pay-will-colleges-listen>