

Book Review

Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber, *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy*. University of Toronto Press, 2016, pp. 115, \$14.92 (cloth and paperback)

Reviewed by Rima Y. Mullins

The premise of *The Slow Professor* – that “[w]e need ... to protect a time and a place for timeless time, and to remind ourselves continually that this is not self-indulgent but rather crucial to intellectual work” – is an appealing one (28)¹. Described by the authors as part manifesto, part self-help book, *The Slow Professor* purports to be a call to action, and inspiration for resistance against the forces in contemporary society that threaten the “long-honoured aims of higher education,” by promoting the adoption of the Slow Movement within the academy (xvii, 13). The Slow Movement challenges the haste and standardization of contemporary culture. Thus, *The Slow Professor* acts with deliberation, “cultivating emotional and intellectual resilience,” rather than engaging in frantic activity (11).

The idea that a tension exists between endless quotidian work responsibilities and the conditions necessary to nurture intellectual creativity, and to effectively transform that creativity into scholarship, is not new. Almost a hundred years ago, in “A Room of One’s Own,” Virginia Woolf offered a similar premise. In Woolf’s essay, she argued that the demands of everyday domestic life stifled the ability of many women of that time to effectively engage in intellectual pursuits.² In *The Slow Professor*, the authors assert that it is the corporatization of the academy that has resulted in the “attack on the core principles of the university” by the “temporalities” that govern academic work today and stifle the ability of academics to engage in effective teaching and research (13).

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1. I began reading this book on an airplane from Miami to Ohio, at 10 pm, after coming directly to the airport from teaching a two-hour Complex Litigation class. At the time, I was feeling particularly crunched, having spent the two weeks prior grading papers and preparing the syllabus for my summer class while traveling around the country with my child for his sport. The irony of the circumstances under which I was reading the book was not lost on me.
2. VIRGINIA WOOLF, *A ROOM OF ONE’S OWN*, Harcourt Brace & Co., 1929.

Somewhat unexpectedly for this type of manifesto, the authors focus on encouraging individual adoption of the “Slow” approach to work, rather than on demanding institutional change to reverse the corporate university model. They contend their approach empowers individual professors to take control of their relationship with their work environment, and “resist the corporate model’s effacement of the role of the professor” (4). These individual changes, the authors assert, will inevitably result in institutional changes. Given the authors’ privileged status as tenured professors, however, this view has been criticized as indicating a lack of understanding of the relative powerlessness of academics who do not occupy such a privileged position.³

The authors first identify and address the problem in general terms: professors as a group are overworked and time-crunched, which negatively impacts both intellectual creativity and personal fulfillment. The remaining chapters explore the application of the Slow Movement to three specific aspects of academic life: pedagogy, research, and collegiality. Each chapter begins with a critique of the current state of academia and then offers practical ideas for incorporating the principles of the Slow Movement into the professor’s daily life.

In Chapter One, the authors sharply criticize the promotion of time management techniques as a solution to the problem of time starvation. The authors argue that popular techniques, such as planners and scheduling, while not in themselves wrong, are ultimately unhelpful in addressing the stress and fatigue caused by task overload. In fact, these management methods only compound the problem because they imply that a professor’s time deficit is merely the result of that individual’s failure to properly organize her day, rather than acknowledge the systemic and institutional forces that have created the lack of time issue. Here, the authors persuasively compare traditional time management techniques to diet plans, which may work to help an individual lose weight in the short term, but often, rather than providing a permanent solution, create long-lasting feelings of anxiety and deprivation (23).

Less compelling is their broad criticism of university administrators for focusing on the connection between time spent by faculty on work-related activities and university finances. The horror the authors express at the idea that an administrator would ask a professor to account for her time in 30 minute increments, something other professionals routinely must do, simply feeds into the stereotype of the ivory tower academic who believes that her role in society is above those in the “trades”(24).⁴ The problem with the criticism

3. Several reviewers raised the criticism that the idea of a Slow Professor reflects the authors’ privileged status because when tenured faculty engage in “slow” behavior, junior and non-tenured track faculty are expected to work harder to compensate. In a 2017 interview, the authors responded to this criticism by pointing out that they had acknowledged their privileged position in the preface and arguing that their privilege allows them to advocate on behalf of all faculty. Leo Charbonneau, *The Slow Professor Revisited*, UNIVERSITY AFFAIRS (Mar. 23, 2018), <https://www.universityaffairs.ca/features/feature-article/slow-professor-revisited>.
4. The authors take as given that a professor’s intellectual work (research and learning) “must

of the monetization of learning is not that it lacks validity, but that the authors offer no acknowledgement of, much less alternative to address, the very real financial issues with which universities must grapple in order for professors to have the resources necessary to teach and conduct research.

After the “manifesto” portion, the chapter sets forth practical steps that professors can use to create what the authors call “a place for timeless time.” (28). For the most part, the practical tips are clear and helpful, but they are not really anything new: disconnect from technology, avoid multitasking, recognize that some tasks do not need to be done, and set aside time for contemplation and thinking.

In the next chapter, on pedagogy, the authors advance the idea that live teaching is necessary for the “human exchange” of information to be maximized in the classroom. Drawing on research showing that students’ emotional state affect their intellectual development, the authors are strongly critical of online courses. They argue that the social nature of live classes creates a superior educational experience for both the student and the professor. They further assert that live classes are preferable because live classes are “obstructionist” to the corporate university system (34).

One can debate whether pedagogical decisions should ever be made, even in part, based on how “obstructionist” the chosen path would be. Setting that aside, however, the authors’ approach to the issue of on-line classes suffers from the same problem as their approach to the issue of the monetization of learning: they fail to acknowledge or address the practical reasons for online learning. In particular, the authors ignore the fact that online learning provides an opportunity to students who might otherwise not be able to participate in higher education. Instead of providing some insight into how the Slow Movement could be used to improve the emotional and intellectual interaction between student and instructor in the on-line context, the chapter on pedagogy focuses solely on the live teaching experience. Within that limited context, the suggestions for increasing the enjoyment of teaching, and concomitantly, increasing its effectiveness, are practical and helpful, with an emphasis on fostering an emotional connection between the students, the professor, and the material.

The discussion of the role of the Slow Movement in transforming faculty engagement in research begins with a biting criticism of the corporate university’s stress on the marketability and utility of knowledge. The authors bemoan the pressure on scholars to quantify the value of their research and to produce scholarship on a schedule dictated by administrators, rather than the

be measured in a way totally different from the way we measure the work of industrialization” (26). Implicit in this assertion is the unfounded (and unsupported) assumption that work other than academic work lacks the intellectual components of research and learning. Similarly, the assertion that it would be “hopelessly impractical” for a professor to engage in such record keeping for research and reading (24) ignores the fact that job requirements for many professionals (for example, attorneys) routinely include keeping time records of research, reading and writing activities.

natural flow of the research process. The authors also argue that the current university environment, requiring professors to spend hours on committee work, administrative task, grant-seeking, and other non-intellectual tasks, distracts from the creative process required for productive research.

The notion that properly developing and refining ideas take time is one that everybody who has engaged in creative activity intuitively knows is true. Whether drafting a brief, writing an article, developing research, or preparing a lecture, the creative process does not easily lend itself to a schedule. And, often, part of that creative time is spent staring into space, puttering around the office, doing the laundry, or chatting with a colleague. The brain takes time to process information and make connections. The authors encourage readers to acknowledge that creating knowledge is not a linear process and embrace that “wasted” time as a necessary and important part of developing and nurturing new ideas. Although none of this advice is groundbreaking, the authors’ open recognition that the experience of the creative process is universally challenging is comforting.

In the final chapter, the authors address the lack of faculty collegiality in higher education. This chapter relies heavily on remembrances of the “good days” to support its premise that the corporate university culture has caused the loss of a sense of community among scholars because “corporatization has imposed an instrumental view of not only time but also each other” (72). Maybe. But the authors are not persuasive in suggesting that the Slow Movement can effectively address their primary indicators of the loss of collegiality -- faculty’s tendency to be on campus only when necessary, and the failure of faculty to provide intellectual and emotional support to each other. Lack of collegiality is an important issue that hinders faculty both intellectually and emotionally, but to explore the roots of the problem, the authors should have been more willing to acknowledge the long-standing power differentials in academia among tenured, tenure-track, and non-tenure track faculty, and how the self-interest of these different groups pushes them apart. Blaming the lack of support by faculty on a general indictment of “[t]he corporate and remasculinized university [which] dismisses turning inward and disavows emotion in pursuit of hyper-rational and economic goals” is ultimately insufficient (83).

Indeed, the authors’ criticism of the lack of faculty on campus seems somewhat at odds with the book’s message, which encourages the reader thoughtfully to do less, make more time for contemplation, and engage in outside activities that encourage creativity. One could easily imagine their outrage if a “corporate” university began requiring faculty to be on campus for specific business hours. Moreover, while the authors reject the efficacy of forced collegiality through department events and mandatory social hours, they do not provide any real suggestions for changing the environment on campus.

Overall, I suspect the book will provoke mixed reactions from many readers. While I found myself agreeing with many of the authors’ specific points, and

I appreciated the practical advice, I found the book's overall tone off-putting. The authors' "manifesto" risks coming across as the tone-deaf complaints of tenured professors whining about how busy they are, rather than an authentic call to examine the institutional constructs that create the pressure on academics (and other professionals) to constantly engage in busyness in order to prove their worth.