

Berg, Maggie, and Barbara K. Seeber

The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy

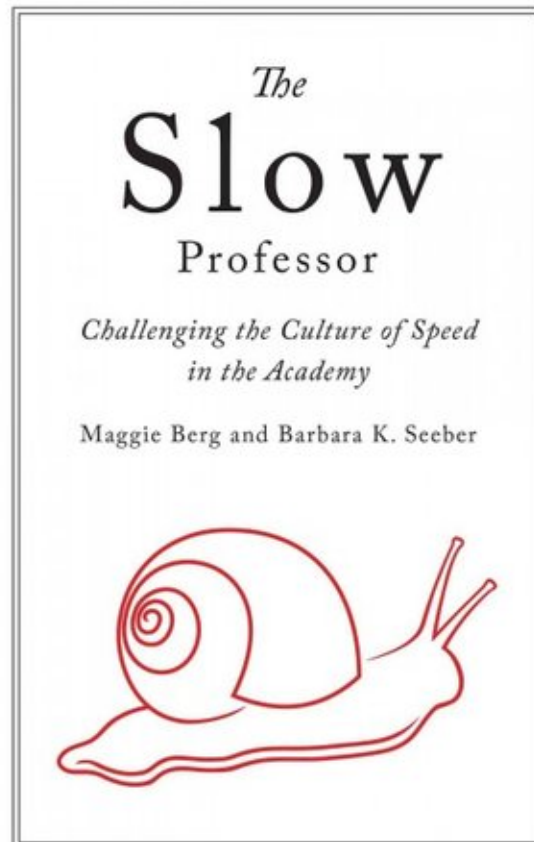
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The cultural ideal of “working hard” is pervasive in America. In the 2014 Global Attitudes survey by Pew Research Center, 73 percent of American respondents reported “working hard” is very important to getting ahead in life, as compared to 25 percent of French respondents, for example (Pew Research Center 2014). For many Americans, particularly those with greater educational credentials and more elite jobs, “working hard” has translated into an increase in time spent working (Gerson and Jacobs 2004). However, scholars and commentators alike have asked: what constitutes too much work? What contributes to “overwork”? What can be done to improve working conditions?

In *The Slow Professor*, Berg and Seeber (2016) build from their personal experiences in academia in Canada to develop a compelling self-help book/critical literature review answering the aforementioned questions for a specific subset of the “overworked” population: university professors. As a manifesto of sorts, Berg and Seeber seek to not only inform but *transform* university working traditions, using the principles of the Slow movement as a guide. Though their critiques and practical recommendations are closely connected to the occupation of professor in a corporate university context, seemingly speaking primarily to those with tenure, I can certainly imagine the applicability of their comments to other elite occupations and work settings.

This book is structured around five main parts: 1) a critique of the corporatization of academic life, 2) a discussion of how past advice on time management is insufficient for achieving “timelessness,” a key part of the Slow approach, 3) an application of the Slow approach to



teaching, with particular emphasis on optimizing “pleasure,” also a key component of the Slow approach, 4) an application of the Slow approach to research, focusing on quality over quantity, and 5) a critique of the elimination of collegiality from the corporate university context and why (and how) community building should be restored as an ongoing practice of university employees. The book culminates with a discussion of the authors’ own experiences adopting Slow approach principles in their own collaboration on this text, echoing the feminist slogan, the “personal is political.”

The backdrop for Berg and Seeber’s (2016) book is the growing trend toward corporatization of universities, including in Canada where the

authors work, as well as in the United States. Though not solely an exposé critiquing the corporate university model, plenty of scholarly attention is paid by Berg and Seeber (2016) to past works of this nature. The authors pay particular attention to how corporatization has sped up the pace of academic life, encouraged standardization, and emphasized measureable quantity over quality (e.g., producing “more” in research and teaching rather than necessarily “better”). The ensuing problems resulting from these shifts certainly resonate with some of my personal experiences in the academy, though my current department seems to resist these changes more than some departments and institutions. As the primary income provider for my family and mother of two-year-old twins in a tenure-track assistant professor job, I face many of the same stresses described in their book, from high self-expectations for productivity to time poverty at work and at home. This book all too well described the conditions of my own “overwork.”

However, to some disappointment I’ll admit, Berg and Seeber’s (2016) proposed solutions to the problems of accelerated speed in the academy failed to go significantly further than one would expect from a book labeled by its authors as a “self-help” guide for professors. The book was as marketed; I just wanted more. Their solutions, while reasonable, clearly described, and potentially even achievable (e.g., doing less, making teaching more pleasurable, taking time to read, etc.) aimed almost entirely at producing individual-level change. At points in the book, it seemed they wanted to create more of a social movement among faculty, such as when they wrote in the “Slow Professor Manifesto” in the preface: “We are Slow Professors” (Berg and Seeber 2016:ix). However, very few of their practical solutions were actually geared toward structural change, and as an environmental sociologist, I am particularly skeptical of how individual-level voluntary changes can be used to solve complex structural problems.

In addition, some of the problems they identified as a result of the corporatization of

universities seemed difficult to improve upon through individual-level adoption of the Slow approach. For example, they noted that, to cut costs, many universities are now increasingly relying on contingent faculty (adjunct/part-time or full-time non-tenure-track positions) and they argue that their book is “potentially relevant across the spectrum of academic positions” (Berg and Seeber 2016:ix). They explicitly recognize their own privilege, as tenured faculty, and see it as their “obligation to try to improve... the working climate for all of us” (Berg and Seeber 2016:ix). While this is admirable, acknowledging that time-related stresses are present across academic positions is not the same as evaluating the feasibility of implementing Slow approach solutions by contingent faculty in our current exploitative and inequitable system. In addition, it fails to recognize the ways in which university inequalities are impacted by other dimensions, including gender, race and ethnicity, parental status, and social class (as well as intersections of these categories). For example, a female professor following the Slow approach may be perceived differently than a male professor doing the same by students, other faculty, and administrators.

In the broader work world, for many Americans with less elite jobs and fewer educational credentials, individuals face declining work hours and struggle to piece together multiple part-time positions to create one viable income, which furthers a “growing division between the over- and under-worked” (Gerson and Jacobs 2004:32). While these conditions both produce individual-level stress and make balancing work and life difficult, it would be unlikely that the same “self-help” solutions one would adopt for the “overworked” elite would work equally as well for the underemployed.

With that said, I do hope that in envisioning an alternative, university professors may build collective resistance to the corporate model and begin chipping away at the McDonaldization of

higher education, to the potential benefit of all faculty. I may even try to be a Slow professor.

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References

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