



# The Slow Professor

*A Review by David Manderscheid*

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

by Maggie Berg and Barbara Seeber  
University of Toronto Press, 2016  
136 pages

Have you ever had a student email you at eleven o'clock at night to ask you a question about a homework assignment that was due the next day? Was that student then upset with you when you did not get back to him before class at eight-thirty the next morning? Have you ever emailed your department chair with a question expecting an answer the same day and she didn't get back to you until the next day? These are examples that illustrate the subject matter of this book. The pace of academic life has increased over the years. Many academics, including the authors of this book, believe that this trend is not healthy and that we should make every effort to reverse course.

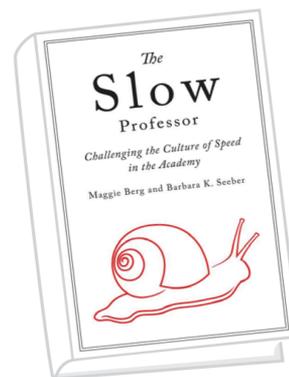
The authors are tenured full professors of English and occasionally use language and terms more common to the humanities than to mathematics, but they make their argument for all disciplines. In particular, they assert that the "corporatization" of the university has led to dismissal of reflective work in pursuit of economic goals. They argue that metrics imposed by deans—and let me be clear, I am one—such as grant dollars, impact factors, and number of publications should be eschewed in favor of attaching greater value to contemplative thought and reflection about our disciplines and research.

I imagine that many of you might be sympathetic to their argument at this point. After all, Andrew Wiles did not publish for years. Moreover, he would not say what

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he was working on until he released a preprint of what he thought was a proof of Fermat's Last Theorem. His argument had a gap, but Richard Taylor soon helped him fill that lacuna. But what if Wiles had not released the preprint? What if, à la Fermat, he had merely written a marginal note in his copy of a paper by Goro Shimura, saying that he had a proof of Fermat's Last Theorem but the margin was too small to contain it? Or what about your colleague who's down the hall (at least when he's in his office, which isn't often)? He hasn't published in ten years, shuns committee work, and his students give him horrible teaching evaluations. Perhaps, though, he is days away from a verification of the Riemann Hypothesis.

Of course I am engaging in hyperbole to make my point. We need accountability in academe but we shouldn't be slaves to metrics imposed by the administration of our universities. How do we find the sweet spot between these extremes?

The authors suggest that we can find the answer to this question by looking to the slow food movement for inspiration. The slow food movement advocates embracing local products and regional and traditional cuisine and renouncing "fast food" and products from distant corporate farms. The movement was founded thirty years ago in Italy and has since spread worldwide, contributing to the proliferation of farmers markets, farm-to-table restaurants, and the like. The related slow living movement, started ten years ago, applies the slow food principles to life more generally. To oversimplify, slow living is mindful living—taking the time to reflect on one's life and the lives of others. The authors claim they are the first to apply the slow food and slow living principles to academe.

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The authors' viewpoint is not one of nostalgia for the past—far from it. Yes, the pace in academe has increased, they say, but it is now time for us to reclaim academe and fight the “remasculinized” university, which dismisses turning inward and disavows emotion in favor of hyper-rational economic goals.

Here are a couple of the main arguments presented in the book. Trying to deal with the increased pace of academe through better time management is to buy into the system imposed upon us by our universities, in which they foster loyalty in order to improve productivity. We are reluctant to talk about the stress of being in academe for fear of being seen as weak. Buying into the language of crisis in academe worsens our fears. What we need to do is to stop abusing ourselves with overwork. I am reminded of a famous scene from the *I Love Lucy* television show of my childhood. In that scene Lucy is working on the assembly line of a chocolate factory. She views it as the ideal job, as the pace is not too fast and every so often she gets to eat a chocolate. But as the scene progresses the production line starts to move faster and faster. All of

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they assert that the ability to work on-line at home and thus spend less time in our offices lessens our interactions with others, leading to poorer research and teaching. They point to the work of Sherry Turkle, Professor of Social Studies of Science and Technology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, to argue that we have become “universities of the absent,” with a diminished sense of community. I must admit that I find this argument peculiar. To my mind the ability to work from home, for example, empowers faculty members to better manage the blend of their work and personal lives. As for spending more time off-line, I am reminded of my wife's mother who didn't like to talk on the telephone or do email. We would have fewer interactions with her than we would have otherwise, even though she lived in the same city, as we actually had to visit in person. The internet and smart phones enable us. We just need to use them in appropriate ways.

On the subject of research, the authors make the following points. The corporatization of the university has led to the privileging of certain types of research over others, so that research for the sake of knowledge is not valued, while research that has application is privileged. This corporatization has also led to collaboration being about dividing the work when it should be instead about the sharing of ideas. The emphasis on shortening time to PhD, particularly in the humanities, buys into the corporatiza-

tion of the university and leads to poorer outcomes for our students.

On the teaching front, the authors argue that we should reduce emphasis on learning outcomes, as they bastardize things that can't be measured into things that can be measured. We should move away from evidence-based teaching to teaching based on joy. One of the keys to such a move

is to take the time to prepare psychologically for teaching our classes much like an athlete prepares psychologically to compete. If we convey positive emotions in our teaching, the authors say, then students will learn more.

I have some sympathy for their arguments both on research and on teaching. I do think the research pendulum has swung too far to areas where applications are immediate. Universities are where basic research gets done, and we need that for the future. That said, basic research for an English professor and a math professor are relatively inexpensive investments, while a more nuanced approach is needed when you move into fields like chemistry. As for the argument against reducing the time to the PhD, I don't buy it. For too long we have believed that, with the explosion of knowledge, graduate students need to know more and more before they graduate. This belief does our students a disservice, and, to be blunt, we often cling to it unwittingly for our own benefit.

This provides a natural segue to my next criticism of the book. The authors write, as I do, from a position of

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This photo shows a plaque posted outside the 1800 Restaurant in Oia, Santorini, on the Cyclades Islands in Greece. Principles of the “slow food” movement—such as appreciating traditions, taking the time to savor life, valuing personal relationships, and avoiding automation and haste—provided inspiration for the book *The Slow Professor*.

privilege. We are tenured full professors at major research universities with incomes that are much greater than that of the average worker. The number of tenure-track faculty nationally is dwindling. With that comes the rise in the number of non-tenure track and adjunct faculty. I do agree that we should spend more time on our teaching, but the nominal teaching load for a faculty member in the Ohio State University Department of Mathematics is 2/1. What about the adjunct faculty member at another institution who teaches a 4/4 load and struggles to meet financial obligations? Is teaching with more “joy” realistic for these faculty members?

Despite my criticisms I highly recommend reading this book. The authors make valid and important points about staying true to our research and teaching missions and taking care of ourselves and those around us. Moreover the book is a quick read at roughly a hundred pages. I read it on a plane flight, along with another academic book, and also did some email. One might argue that the book didn't have much effect on me since reading it was the first thing I did on the flight, and then I continued with my administrative work instead of perhaps napping, thinking about research, or watching a mindless movie. But I would argue the opposite. I was doing what I wanted to do, and that is one of the privileges of the life that I am able to live as a tenured full professor.

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Photo of David Manderscheid by Kevin Fitzsimons, Ohio State University.



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**ABOUT THE REVIEWER**

**David Manderscheid's** research is in the area of representation theory with applications to number theory. His outside interests include cycling and cooking.

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