

Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development

Volume 17 | Number 17

Article 9

2018

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

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Recommended Citation

Riedel, Kirsten D. and Riedel, Joshua P. (2018) "The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy," *Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development*: Vol. 17 : No. 17 , Article 9.
Available at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/acsd_growth/vol17/iss17/9

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

Maggie Berg, Barbara K. Seeber; Hager
Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press

Reviewed by Kirsten D. Riedel and Joshua P. Riedel

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Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber's *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy* examines the corporatization of the modern university and the corresponding demands for productivity at a frantic pace. Berg and Seeber's work provides a cultural analysis that is both timely and relevant for professionals across the landscape of higher education. Their narrative acknowledges the challenges many readers face while navigating an increasingly "defensive culture of guilt and overwork" (p. 2). *The Slow Professor* serves as a groundbreaking application of Carlo Petrini's Slow Food movement to the world of academia by offering compelling and practical strategies for faculty implementation of slow principles. However, as Berg and Seeber present a thoughtful account of the culture of speed in the academy as well as specific strategies to adopt slow principles, they simultaneously leave readers questioning whether—and likely presuming that—the presented vision of *The Slow Professor* is overly idealistic.

Founded upon their own experience, the purpose inspiring Berg and Seeber's book is "to foster greater openness about the ways in which the corporate university affects our professional

practice and well-being” (p. ix). They further describe their vision of “Slow Professors acting purposefully, cultivating emotional and intellectual resilience. By taking the time for reflection and dialogue, the Slow Professor takes back the intellectual life of the university” (p. x). Through the following narrative, Berg and Seeber highlight pertinent research and utilize personal stories to provide a convincing case for the need for slow principles in academia, while also implicitly demonstrating that their vision for embodied Slow Professors is a lofty one.

In order to outline the detrimental effects of speed in the academy and to offer a counter-narrative through their vision of Slow Professors, Berg and Seeber utilize four chapters, which address distinct aspects of life and work in academia. Throughout these chapters, Berg and Seeber often “adopt the tone of a manifesto” (p. ix), critiquing significant literature and sharing personal experiences to directly make a case for slow in the corporate university. More specifically, the authors examine pervasive pressures associated with time management as well as within the academic realms of pedagogy, research, and collegiality. Following these analyses, they present corresponding and relevant strategies for adopting timelessness, optimizing pleasure, pursuing understanding, and engaging in community. To conclude, Berg and Seeber share their reflections on embodying and practicing many slow principles while writing the book together. By intentionally restricting the book to just 90 pages, they make *The Slow Professor* an attainable read for their colleagues who are most busy and, consequently, most desperately need this renewed sense of identity.

From the beginning, Berg and Seeber also strive to offer a book “unique in its blending of philosophical, political, and pragmatic concerns” (p. vii). *The Slow Professor* successfully addresses each of these three realms, providing an optimistic philosophical framework, an insightful political critique, and pertinent pragmatic solutions. However, Berg and Seeber fail to connect these three realms in a way that fully acknowledges the complex nature of the contemporary university.

Their astute political analysis highlights pervasive systemic issues, but they offer practical solutions only on an individual level, which would require faculty to virtually disregard such issues. Berg and Seeber, themselves, embody a defensive response to these pressures through their excessive political analysis, demonstrating a presumed need to justify their vision for *The Slow Professor*—a defense mechanism that a truly innovative and grounded Slow Professor would not find necessary

to employ. The implications are neutral at best: Readers find the authors implicitly communicating that their intention of blending philosophical, political, and pragmatic concerns—and consequently, their hope for readers becoming Slow Professors—is unrealistic. The disconnects between the substance of their political critique and both their defensive presentation as well as their inadequate solutions, therefore undermines their ultimate vision of *The Slow Professor*.

The aforementioned and inherent disconnects are pervasive throughout all four chapters. For example, Berg and Seeber write in the first chapter, “The problems of time stress will not be solved with better work habits . . . Time management does not take into full account the changes to the university system: rather, it focuses on the individual” (p. 25). This analysis of time management is deeply perceptive, acknowledging the conversation sustains innate flaws which perpetuate the frantic pace of our culture, and consequently, of our institutions. However, in response to this criticism, they offer four strategies, the second of which is, “We need to do less” (p. 29). While this suggestion is timely and relevant for individual faculty, it does not provide a solution to the primary, systemic issue. Berg and Seeber confess the shift toward doing less will prompt criticism from colleagues, but they do not acknowledge the full implications of that shift. Such a shift requires having to do less within the corporate university, which conversely demands more. In presenting this solution, therefore, the authors themselves make the same mistakes they previously criticized. Readers are left disheartened, realizing Berg and Seeber’s implied response to a systemic issue is at best just an overly idealistic practice for individual implementation.

Throughout the book, Berg and Seeber offer an extensive review and critique of the systemic problems symptomatic of the corporatization of the academy. To be fair, they choose to intentionally focus on the individual, having changed the title from *The Slow Campus* to *The Slow Professor* “to highlight individual agency within the institutional context” (p. 4). This pursuit is itself a noble endeavor, one worthy of widespread recognition. Perhaps, however, their thorough, acute political critique of the contemporary university necessitates a more comprehensive vision of the slow campus—where institutional issues are addressed through institutional strategies and solutions. Without such a comprehensive vision, how sustainable is their vision of *The Slow Professor*?

With mindfulness of *The Slow Professor*’s strengths and shortcomings, faculty members as well as professionals in diverse roles across university

campuses will discover the book to have widespread benefit. For student development professionals, Berg and Seeber offer applicable principles, which can easily be extended to the unique work of educating students outside the classroom. Furthermore, as the field of student development is becoming increasingly professionalized, there exists a felt and growing pressure to speed up in order to justify our distinct value to the institution and our place in the broader landscape of higher education. Berg and Seeber can appropriately challenge student development professionals to resist this temptation for speed and to adopt slow principles instead. These same principles are also relevant to the Christian narrative, capturing the idea of slowing down in order to create space for contemplation—the place in which we are reminded of our true identities and find freedom to faithfully live out our vocations.

Berg and Seeber, therefore, offer a critique of the culture of speed in the academy that is appropriate and applicable throughout the field of higher education. While their presentation of this culture and their proposed slow strategies reflect an overly idealistic vision of the Slow Professor, reading this book alongside colleagues with whom we can discuss the particularities of our institutional contexts will allow their vision to more realistically inform our work. As we intentionally adopt a lens that recognizes both the strength of their cultural critique as well as the overly idealistic nature of their vision, Berg and Seeber's *The Slow Professor* can become a deep breath of fresh air—providing enlightening new perspectives as well as a compelling call to adopt a more peaceful disposition toward our life and work.

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