

GRAD | LOGIC

navigating the ups and downs of graduate school

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THE SLOW GRAD STUDENT | DO LESS & BE MINDFUL

What is a “slow graduate student”? That is what I puzzled over while reading [The Slow Professor](#). Taking inspiration from the [Slow Food movement](#), this book advocates embracing the principles of Slow, to reduce stress and reclaim faculty control over their work.

Two themes of slowing down in academia are particularly applicable to becoming a Slow Grad Student. The first is mindful, deliberate doing, which necessitates doing less. This theme is

revealed in the book’s subtitle, “Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy.” Relatedly, Slow Academics also prize collegiality and community.

The authors “advocate for deliberative, imaginative and reflective thought as definitive of a professor’s work and life. Creativity and contemplation ... can’t be multi-tasked,” summarized one thoughtful review. You can also read about the book in [Inside Higher Ed](#) and [University Affairs](#).

How can graduate students adopt these principles and practices? What is “the slow graduate student?”

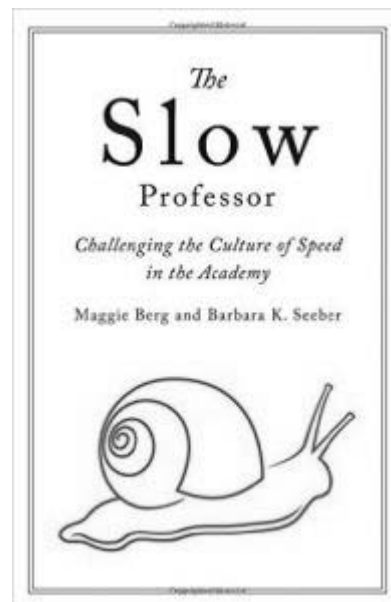
Principles of the Slow Professor

The authors, [Maggie Berg](#) and [Barbara K. Seeber](#), begin their book with a Manifesto. They say:

“Slow Professors advocate deliberation over acceleration. We need time to think, and so do our students. Time for reflection and open-ended inquiry is not a luxury but is crucial to what we do. ... We envisage 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.”

Their book springs from their shared recognition that, as faculty members, they are pressured to do more and more. Time is the rarest resource. This pressure on academics is higher education’s manifestation of the [“work first” culture in the United States](#).

Many time management books, including those particularly aimed at people in the university, advocate doing more, using time more efficiently, and multi-tasking. (Among the more extreme suggestions that Berg and Seeber cite are arising at 4 am to write; booking every hour of every week with tasks and meetings.) These “solutions” don’t attack the systemic problem that we expect to do more and more, faster and faster.



What we lose is time to think and reflect. We become less creative. Communal values of generosity and conviviality are the casualties when we don’t (or feel we can’t) take time with one another. The result of sped-up, work-centric academic life is chronic stress, unhappiness, and ill health. Some, like [these junior faculty](#), respond by leaving higher education.

We need to cultivate new practices—or reclaim old ones—that open up space in our lives for thinking, being, and connecting. This is a route to joy and wisdom.

Many of Berg and Seeber's suggestions are aimed at faculty. And grad students value faculty members who embrace and model the principles of slow. But you need not wait. You can put some practices into play now.

Four Practices of Slow Grad Students

Here are four practices to help you slow down. These are micro-practices that can make a small, but noticeable, difference.

Do Less

Graduate students report that they are expected to do more than can be done. Take classes, teach, do research, write papers and proposals, prepare for major exams, attend colloquia and seminars, participate in side projects, show up at department events, and more. Whew!

There is far more that you *could* do than you will be able to do. That is a fact. You plan (hope) to accomplish more every day, every week, every month than is possible. We all face the constraints of time and energy. You simply can't meet the goals you set for yourself—they are unattainable. One result is that you feel badly about yourself (rather than celebrating your accomplishments).

Slow grad students make peace with their limitations. (I coauthored [Your Bag of Apples|Set Realistic Goals](#) with Dr. Maureen Stabio.)

Slow grad students recognize that “done is better than perfect.” This doesn't mean that you should settle for mediocre work. But sometimes many hours are spent getting a piece of writing from “very good” to “flawless.” The time spent fretting and the time spent polishing, is time that could be spent doing ... wait for it ... not something else, but NOTHING. Managing your expectations and pulling back from perfectionism can open space for slow.

Remember, that there will always be those around you—students and faculty—who accomplish far more than you do. Hold yourself to the standard of what is realistic for you.

Make Space to Be, Rather than Do

Carefully structuring your time can help you be effective. But when every hour of every day is planned, things have gone too far. The To Do list overwhelms your efforts to be your authentic self. I wrote about this in [Create a To Be List | Your Life Manifesto](#).

Slow graduate students ensure that there is unstructured time in every week. If you can't imagine what to do in unstructured time, here is a list to get you started. (We Doers need help letting go of being task-focused.)

- Take a walk
- Doze
- Ruminant
- Talk with a friend
- Walk mindfully
- Observe the natural world
- Breathe
- Pray
- Think
- Play with a pet
- Daydream
- Doodle



Slow graduate students don't apologize for spending time on things that are not graduate school or work related. Go to a concert. Cook dinner with friends. Get away to the beach or the mountains or the woods.

Celebrate your non-grad school life. Applaud others when they do the same.

Eschew Performing Busyness

Graduate students are often performing (sometimes subconsciously) for the faculty and for one another. How does a successful graduate student behave? How do you demonstrate that you are committed to your work, your degree, and your field?

Looking busy is a tried-and-true way to show one's commitment.

Busy talk is the obligatory response to "How are you?" "I am so behind, overworked, stressed out."

Slow graduate students resist "performing busy-ness."

Put a moratorium on "busy talk." Instead, tell a different story. How we talk about our lives goes a long way to shaping our (and others') perception. I can't say it as well as this paragraph, excerpted from a [2014 essay by Nancy Chick](#) on her now-defunct [Mindful PhD blog](#):

Some years ago, [Jordan Landry](#) (English, University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh) introduced me to this notion of the professional stories we live by and, more importantly, the power to write those stories ourselves. She said we can live the "beaver narrative" (busybusybusy, working hard all the time because there are always more trees to harvest and lodges to build) or the "otter narrative" (approaching everything with a sense of play, floating on our backs in the sun, hunting and working as necessary). This distinction isn't really about the work we

actually do as much as how we experience our work lives, or the narrative we tell ourselves and our junior and future colleagues about the quality of our lives.

Cultivate Community

Community is an important element of the life of a slow graduate student. Students need time to be with other people; especially without a task. Time to talk. To get to know each other. Opportunities to discuss ideas. Writing groups can be communities of support, as well as places where work gets done.



Collegiality is the practice of coming together. Strong intellectual communities support risk taking and vulnerability. You can talk honestly. Be open about your challenges, failures, and dead-ends. This is the same spirit that motivates creating a graduate student CV of Failures.

Physical space is crucial for community. A lounge with a coffee machine and comfortable chairs is a place to seek out companionship. Showing up creates a virtuous cycle of community. If you can reliably trust that others will be there, it increases your likelihood of going to the communal space, which in turn increases the chances that others will find you there. (This is crucial for creating Playborhoods for kids.)

* * *

American culture greatly values work and busyness. This is also true in academia. Putting up a modicum of resistance is counter-cultural. It is hard.

It is not all or nothing. Not slow vs. fast.

Slow grad students are mindful of slowing down just a bit.

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