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The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy (Book Review)

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy. Berg, Maggie and Barbara K. Seeber, Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2016. 128 pp. ISBN: 978-1442645561. Reviewed by Walker Reid Cosgrove, Associate Professor of History, Dordt College.

It is an understatement to say that there are many struggles in higher education today. Recently, a friend of mine emailed to tell me of the financial woes at his own institution that led to over 50 percent of all faculty positions cut. As well, a battle for the soul of the American college and university is underway as more and more institutions heed the siren-song of pragmatism to emphasize technical and vocational training in their colleges and universities, against what has traditionally constituted liberal education in the West for the past millennium. In an attempt to remain relevant, a more recent trend, particularly among the Ivy League schools, is to disavow any part of the history of one's institution that does not sit squarely with contemporary ideologies. A final trend of concern in higher education, no doubt intertwined with all of these in some fashion, and with which the book under review wrestles, is that of the Corporate University.

There has been a host of recent publications about the dire situation that academics find themselves in when subjected to the corporatization of higher education. Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber, in *The Slow Professor*, do not write in this apocalyptic genre, as they harbor hope that positive change in American higher education is possible. Although they do criticize the rise and dominance of the Corporate University, which dehumanizes faculty and students, they also attempt to transcend that criticism by offering ideas for change, particularly in connection with the broader "Slow" movement (vii). A strength of their approach to the corporatization problem is their mixing of quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Rest assured, number junkies; there is substantial data to back up their claims. But, more importantly, the human face is never lost among the stats because Berg and Seeber are attentive to personal narrative and stories from their own experiences and those of colleagues. These narratives make it easy for any academic at one point or another to find various places of their own experience

intersecting with those in *Slow Professor*.

The Slow Professor for Berg and Seeber is "an intervention," and more than that they hope it will be "a call to action" that is "idealistic in nature" (ix). At their clearest, they express their hopes in "The Slow Professor Manifesto," which include their goal to "alleviate work stress, preserve humanistic education, and resist the corporate university" (ix). In what is perhaps the clearest summary of the book, they write,

In the corporate university, power is transferred from faculty to managers, economic justifications dominate, and the familiar "bottom line" eclipses pedagogical and intellectual concerns. 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. (x)

Thus, they do not simply argue against corporate-minded administrations (though they do this) but also invite faculty members throughout the academy—from small liberal arts institutions to large, tier-one research institutions—to join a movement, to say "no" to speed and bottom lines, and to say "yes" to being deliberate and intentional (in other words, not slow for slow's sake, but with purpose).

This is a book that most faculty members (at least those I know in a variety of institutions) should want to read and will probably enjoy reading. While I highly doubt that many administrators will read this book, it should be on the reading list of any administrator who claims to be serious about education and is not simply sustaining a business that happens to be a college or university.

After the preface, the book is divided into four chapters, tied together with a brief introduction and conclusion. The introduction lays out the combatants in an epic battle. On the one side is the administrator, for whom corporatization of the university equals

survival under which all the trends I mentioned in my opening paragraph are connected; the administrator emphasizes productivity, efficiency, competitive achievement, and—their greatest weapon toward conformity to the corporate university—continuous improvement. By contrast, the “slow professor” is the hero against the anti-educational values of the administrator, the only one who can grind to a halt the pragmatic emphasis on speed (11). For this professor, the university ought to be a place about the pursuit of knowledge, and, dare I say, wisdom (8-9).

What weapons do the champions of “Slow” have with which to slay the corporate monster? To begin with, the authors argue, we need to think differently about time. It does not take much imagination to think about the dehumanizing effects of corporate time, which leave the faculty member weary, ineffective as an educator, and closer to desk worker than intellectual. To fight this, Berg and Seeber encourage faculty to move toward “timeless time,” which allows for the time to think, reflect, consider, and ultimately be creative (25, 28).

This means, however, that the faculty member will have to make tough decisions and must have the audacity to stand by them, in particular, getting offline (i.e., off of the Internet, Social Media, etc.), doing less, and scheduling “timeless time” (31-32). These are wise suggestions, but they challenge the key values of corporate culture, and thus they will not be popular among administrators who will equate doing less with laziness or worse. For example, a great moment for timeless time is summer, when faculty members have extended time to study, think, and reflect; however, I have heard college administrators bemoan the fact that it is difficult to run a successful “business” (i.e., an institution of higher education) when a third to half their “workforce” (i.e. faculty) do not work over the summer. This is a severe misunderstanding of a good use of time for faculty, who are scholars and teachers.

On teaching, Berg and Suggs suggest that we need to think about education in a more traditional sense, as I mentioned in my first paragraph above. Education, they claim, is more about wisdom and formation than simply “an exchange of ideas” (38). With this in mind, teachers know that face-to-face teaching in the classroom is the ideal pedagogical method because, they suggest, we are embodied people, and the nearness of our embodied lives is important for true education.

This notion can re-humanize both the faculty member and the student. Online education is a modern-day Gnosticism that denies the need for bodily presence in education; it assumes that information can simply be transferred or downloaded from one computer to another, or, rather, one brain to another (34-38). The thought that education is more about wisdom and formation counters the corporate emphasis on education as information and measurable data (48). And while true education might not be as efficient or cheap as its pragmatic imitation, it is the job of faculty to convince their administrators, students, and parents that it is a model worth following. Attempting to stand fast for change will be difficult for any faculty member, because I routinely hear administrators referring to students as “consumers” and education as a “product” peddled at them. This mindset misses the true identity of students as fully embodied human beings, and education as a way of life.

The corporate model further dehumanizes because it treats our vocation as a series of lines on a CV as evidence of production, rather than seeing it as a life in pursuit of contemplation, understanding, and ultimately wisdom, which can be shared with and encouraged in the next generation (57). Regarding faculty research, Berg and Seeber write,

Slowing down is about asserting the importance of contemplation, connectedness, fruition, and complexity. It gives meaning to letting research take the time it needs to ripen and makes it easier to resist the pressure to be faster. It gives meaning to thinking about scholarship as a community, not a competition. It gives meaning to periods of rest, an understanding that research does not run like a mechanism; there are rhythms, which include pauses and periods that may seem unproductive. (57)

Just as teaching should be more about formation and wisdom and not simply information transfer, so too for the faculty member, research ought to be formative for us. Thus, they argue, we should never feel guilty for simply taking time to read, whether or not a book or article is directly connected to our teaching or our research. To illustrate the importance of reading, they recount a story of a faculty member asked to show what represented humanities research who said “it was clear what I ought to be doing: I ought to be sitting alone reading a book.” They go on to recount

that “He fantasizes that one year, his annual report will simply put, ‘Rereading the Complete Works of Henry James with Special Reference to Getting to the End of *The Golden Bowl* This Time’” (68).

A final way that the corporate university dehumanizes faculty is that it has “imposed an instrumental view of not only time but also each other. We are enjoined to spend our time in ways that can be measured and registered in accounting systems” (72). In order to encourage more community and collaboration in the university, we have to break from the corporate model and see each other as human beings, whole people, instead of as a position or rank (88). They argue, and I agree from experience, that by seeing each other as human beings, we will be more patient and compassionate with each other when we do not “produce” as quickly as corporate life would like. Ultimately, this “humanization” of our profession will trickle down and help us to think of our students as human beings, and treat them with the compassion and respect they deserve as humans (88).

Over the past academic year, I tried to implement some of their suggestions and bring “Slow” to my own professional life as a faculty member. But I felt even more push-back from colleagues than administrators, which makes me wonder if Berg and Seeber’s “movement” could ever get started. For example, I tried to more carefully guard my time this year. The response

from some of my colleagues was that I was being selfish and un-collegial, while others said that I must be favored somehow by my administration, which appeared to allow me so much “free time.” A month or two ago, instead of driving, I walked to pick my daughter up from an appointment, a walk that took close to 45 minutes round trip. As Berg and Seeber suggested, the walk was invigorating and stimulating—it was good for my soul to be out of doors by myself with my thoughts, and walking and talking with my daughter on the way home was a much richer experience than had I driven. But, that was 30–45 minutes I was not in the office, I was not responding to student emails, I was not grading papers—all things that I had to catch up on later. Plus, I had colleagues later checking why I was not in my office during “business hours.”

I hope Berg and Seeber are correct, and I hope they kick-start a movement; however, given my own recent experience, I think it will take a long while to change academic culture, and it will take a community of like-minded faculty members who are willing to think outside the corporate box and who are courageous enough to challenge administrators in thinking differently. I hope it happens in my lifetime, because then being part of a faculty might be filled with joy and wonder and life instead of despair, delivered through meetings and deadlines and data.

The Essentials of Christian Thought: Seeing Reality Through the Biblical Story. Olson, Roger. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017. 256 pp. ISBN: 978-0310521556. Reviewed by Jamin Hübner, Associate Professor of Christian Studies and Director of Institutional Effectiveness, John Witherspoon College.

The concept of a “Christian philosophy” has always been a controversial one. What does this pair of words even mean? If we knew, how does Christian philosophy relate to theology? To biblical scholarship? To education? Are the teachings and narrative(s) in the Christian tradition restricted to a particular philosophical orientation, such as ethics?

Philosophy itself can be intimidating enough, and questions like these and others compound the difficulty of such inquiries. Roger Olson, perhaps best known by his former work as General Editor of *The Christian Scholar’s Review* and a prolific career as a seminary professor, attempts to tackle these basic questions in a ground-level introduction to the concept of Christian philosophy, especially of Christian

metaphysics or ontology.

The central assumption behind *The Essentials of Christian Thought* is that there is such thing as a “Christian metaphysic.” In Olson’s words, “the Bible does contain an implicit metaphysical vision of ultimate reality—the reality that is most important, final, highest, and behind everyday appearances” (12). A declaration of an “implicit” vision, though, is not the same as saying the Scriptures “teach” philosophy. Rather, Olson argues that there is framework, coherent at some basic level, behind and shot through all that emerges from the biblical story. In delineating this claim, Olson ably navigates through the various misunderstandings, potential anachronisms, and historical contexts of metaphysics as it relates to broader