

A three-part reflection by Dr. Tim Kenyon, Vice-President, Research

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## Part 1: What is a mid-career research slump?

Many of us in the academy have either witnessed or personally experienced how the excitement of becoming a tenure-track faculty member, and the energy (and anxiety) of working towards tenure and promotion, can be followed by a downturn in research activity. This in turn can be associated with a downturn in morale, in engagement, and in work-life balance. Mid-career faculty members and researchers often face a range of these challenges to their research aspirations and identity. Just to clarify, I am using “mid-career” to mean, roughly, faculty members who have held tenure for between two and 12 years - I recognize that this is an imprecise category. Some people outside this band might still reasonably consider themselves to be mid-career. This is a group within which many researchers face common difficulties and experiences. However, for the purposes of this post, I am focusing on the experience of tenure-stream faculty members who wish to reinvigorate their research.

In this three-part series of reflections, I will outline some of the common research obstacles mid-career faculty may encounter, offer some strategies and tips that might help to avoid a slump, and then finally offer some solutions if a research slowdown has progressed too far into an academic’s career. Some of what I say here will apply also to contract lecturers or researchers appointed outside the tenure stream, but these colleagues have distinctive experiences, as well as some mid-career challenges unique to their situations.

To start, let’s look at some of the common research obstacles that mid-career faculty face:

### **Post-tenure slump**

The build-up to the tenure process can include both a burst of productivity and heightened anxiety. After tenure, you may have less work “in the pipeline,” and also be worn down by the hard push and high stress. A slowdown is quite natural in these circumstances. But sometimes the slowdown lasts until it becomes the new normal, especially given other pressures on time and attention.

### **Associate grind**

Some institutional committees formally require members to be tenured, while other committees simply prefer to solicit colleagues who know their way around issues and processes. Either way, one result of gaining some experience and seniority is that faculty members find themselves pressed to juggle increased service commitments. Mid-career researchers go from being somewhat sheltered from administrative service to being the ones who do the sheltering for junior colleagues. A full undergraduate teaching load, increased demand as a graduate supervisor, and intensified service

work all add up to a continuous grind that can put real pressure on research time and change your sense of what the university values about your contribution.

### **Burdens of life stages**

While mid-career researchers comprise a broad age demographic, one common experience is reduced time, energy, and mental resources due to family and health pressures. It is not uncommon for researchers in this demographic to move fairly directly from raising young children to caring for aging parents - when the two don't overlap outright. It is difficult to focus on research when your family or health commitments are top of mind.

### **Losing contact with contemporary work**

Even a brief post-tenure slump can leave you worried that the field has moved on while you were less engaged with it. Suddenly it feels like you've lost contact with the hot problems and the new literature. If you haven't been able to attend major disciplinary events, you might feel like a stranger where you once were networked with other researchers. As your research interests mature, moreover, you might substantially lose interest in the topics that had once been of all-consuming importance to you. It can come as a shock to discover that a research focus and expertise, maybe one that used to seem like a defining personal characteristic, no longer interests or motivates you.

### **Losing resources**

A slump or run of bad luck in granting competitions can lead to reduced funding, less laboratory access, fewer graduate students, and loss of other elements of research capacity. And this can act as a ratchet, as the "[Matthew Effect](#)" kicks in: having fewer resources makes it harder to get the resources for greater research capacity. Grant programs that have a special separate category for early-career researchers are a great support during that earlier stage, but a research slowdown that occurs once past the window of ECR eligibility can leave a scholar at a disadvantage in a (theoretically) more competitive senior scholars' applicant pool.

Taken together, these challenges can have some unhappy effects on researchers, who are accustomed to being, and being seen as, highly active scholars. I have been in this position myself, and over the years have worked with and counseled other people experiencing it as well.

It is worth noting moreover that the pressures summarized above may be experienced disproportionately by women, people of colour, people with disabilities, Indigenous colleagues, and faculty members belonging to other underrepresented or marginalized groups in the academy. For example, well-meaning policies requiring diverse representation on collegial governance committees can create an unusual number of service requests for members of these groups, and can engender a greater emotional burden related to the aims of diversity and inclusion (i.e., "if I don't personally

shoulder this load, these ends won't be achieved for future students and colleagues in my position").

Taken together, these pressures may leave some colleagues feeling self-conscious or embarrassed: "I used to be on the cutting edge; am I now perceived by colleagues or students as lagging?"

There might be a sense of pessimism: "It would be so much work to get back up to speed on the literature and new techniques, and I just don't have time to do it now. Has my window of opportunity for being a successful researcher now passed?"

Some might end up feeling cornered: "I don't want to focus my efforts solely on teaching or administration, but at least those are ways I can make valuable contributions without doing a prohibitive amount of scholarly re-tooling that I just don't have the time and energy to do."

Of course, colleagues who do focus heavily on teaching and service are highly respected contributors within their institutions and beyond - influential and deeply appreciated colleagues who make a lasting impression on a university, on a discipline, and in countless students' lives. Teaching, mentorship, and academic leadership too are outlets for the creativity and innovative impulses of scholars. So any attempt to impose a very sharp contrast of skills and achievements between research, teaching, and service is to some extent a false one. Still it is a genuine distinction, marked by different effects, activities, valorizations, and descriptions of employment duties.

By and large, scholars want to be engaged with their disciplines, with research communities, and with research problems, by way of active programs of inquiry. What are some pathways back into greater research activity and a greater sense of connection with scholarship, for someone experiencing what they perceive to be a midcareer slowdown? That is the topic of my next post.