

The Mid-Career Slump

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

Part 2: Strategies to forestall, mitigate, and emerge from the mid-career slump

In my previous post, I reviewed some of the difficulties that can lead to a mid-career slump for tenure-stream research faculty. It is not uncommon for faculty members to experience at least some slowdown in their research post-tenure, as the nature of their jobs and their lives evolves. For people who love research, and who partly define their professional identity in terms of their research interests and aspirations, this can be a disconcerting or demoralizing experience. What can be done to forestall, mitigate, and emerge from such a slowdown?

I do have some advice, though I will begin by qualifying it. First, it is worth being clear that some of these strategies are intended to help accelerate a quiescent research program; but others aim at mitigating an overdeveloped sense that one's research program must forever be accelerated, no matter how active. The answer isn't always to speed up - a point made in detail by Brock University's Dr. Barbara Seeber, co-author with Maggie Berg of *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy* (University of Toronto Press, 2016). Sometimes the right course is to recognize the value of patience and of letting research unfold in its own time, at a pace sustainable by the researcher.

Some of what follows may seem obvious to some. It might not be obvious to all, though, and it is sometimes useful to draw attention even to things we already know in any case. I note also that these suggestions are intended to be sensitive to situations. Different disciplines, departments, department chairs, Faculties, and Faculty deans (and, more generally, different provosts, presidents, universities, collective agreements, and local received practices) will respond differently to some of these items. The differences might be trivial or they might be significant. Take these approaches as items to consider, therefore, and not as absolute endorsements. The idea is definitely not to attempt all the strategies described here to the greatest degree. This is meant as a kind of brainstorming, a license to pick one or more strategies that seem workable, and try them to some degree or other.

Some general thoughts or principles:

- **Don't be afraid to change course on your research.** Rather than plowing through or trying to reengage with former research that has come to feel stale or inaccessible, you can jump into something that engages you now. Your tenure is freedom to research what stirs you today. It is not a trap compelling you to do what you've always done. You aren't the grad student you used to be; your interests are allowed to change regarding research just as it has changed in many other ways. I feel so strongly about this that I'm going to bold-face

some text here: It's not cheating to work on something that interests you! And once you take this idea seriously, you are well-positioned to...

- **Build research activity and aspiration into other things you do, other things you encounter.** Your gifts as a researcher include not just (a) the specific topics you've worked on in the past, but also (b) the way your creativity and your expertise inform your interpretation of other things, even things that perhaps seem only distantly related, and (c) your proven capacity to develop new expertise. Something that piques your interest at the supermarket, on the train, at a soccer game, around the university, can all be fodder for a research contribution. And especially...
- **Let your teaching and student supervision inform and motivate your research.** You got into this gig because the field interests you. Teaching familiar material, whether at the graduate or undergraduate level, can launch that interest in new directions, or inspire continued work that had started to slow down. You can even build research outcomes into your personal teaching goals - say, by making it an intended outcome of a graduate or senior undergraduate seminar that you will write a paper to send to a conference or a journal. Include a draft or two of this paper in the reading list, even. Part of taking a course with a professor can be learning about their research on the topic, including their work in progress. Students might really enjoy and benefit from seeing the drafting and revision process up close, too. I've shared referee comments I received on a Revise and Resubmit with a seminar class, and it made a huge difference to the quality of the peer feedback they gave each other subsequently.
- **Confront and reject the feeling that you have to be doing something big to be doing anything at all.** A gap on your CV can be part of an escalating spiral of "Now I have to do something really big to make up for it! ...but I really don't have time...". That's wrong, and it can be a trap.
- **Recognize that most scholars slow down, at least from time to time, relative to the earliest stages of a research career.** This is to be expected in an academic career trajectory. It can even be an important reflective stage of developing scholarly depth and perspective. Many extraordinary researchers in every discipline have published (or created, or patented) things slowly over their lives and careers, or went through prolonged periods of reflection between bouts of great activity. You're in good company.
- **Make extensive use of the many institutional supports and resources at your disposal.** Many of these resources at Brock University can be found via the Research Enterprise Sharepoint website. But other supports are informal and

institutionally “local” - colleagues and administrators in your program or Faculty who have an open door, a ready ear, and experience to share.

Now let’s consider some strategies that get a bit more into nuts and bolts, beginning with those more suited to forestalling a mid-career slowdown, or mitigating it once it has started. (These strategies will apply to all cases to some extent.) Most of them are instances of a pretty general type of advice: Do something research-related now, however small and self-contained, feel good about having done it, and build on it.

- **Submit an abstract to a conference that reviews abstracts.** If accepted, the presentation counts as a peer-reviewed activity. But writing an abstract isn’t a large front-loaded cost. Writing or preparing the actual presentation can wait until you have the certainty (and motivation) of acceptance in hand. And if it’s not accepted, well, that’s not a major loss or disappointment.
- **Write a book review, critical notice, response letter to an article, or other short discussion notes for publication,** including in venues that publish only book reviews or short pieces. Email such journals or review sites and offer to contribute a review or note. Some such notices are only a paragraph or two in length; they don’t require massive feats of scholarship, but they are contributions and accomplishments. And reading the books or articles keeps you in contact with the literature.
- **Send work to publications or presentation venues with high acceptance rates,** even if they are (or you imagine that they are) less prestigious. Certainly this doesn’t mean patronizing predatory or fraudulent journals; but all disciplines have journals that are academically credible and procedurally sound, despite being less well-known or even, in the strictest sense of the term, less discriminating. Go ahead and send work to these journals. Yes, I’m serious. Doing this now doesn’t mean doing it with every paper you will ever write; but for now it gets your work out in print where it can be read and cited, both of which things will stimulate you to further work. Don’t give in to the perfectionism that can be so unhealthy in academic environments. Getting work published practically anywhere affects the way both you and others think about your research profile. Don’t imagine that you need an unbroken string of only glorious successes on your CV. Some quick wins and modest signs of activity are really valuable ways of keeping in touch with the discipline, and with your research aspirations. And perceptions of journal prestige can be deeply misleading anyhow; you never know which of your papers is going to really take off in the literature and become heavily cited.
- **Participate in grants as a collaborator,** even if you are added after the fact (e.g., through a research centre or institute). You needn’t be the Primary Investigator on a grant in order for your interests and your scholarship to have a

meaningful effect on its activities, or in order for your students to benefit from your participation.

- **Volunteer to comment on papers or presentations at conferences that have this component.** Often conference organizers are very happy to have someone commenting who is not already giving a paper at an event.
- **Apply for research grants.** Little ones or big ones, internal or external; something is better than nothing. Applying for grants can be daunting when you feel like your CV doesn't show very well. But you can apply anyhow. Don't worry about whether your CV is starting to show a slowdown - you may be far more focused on that than your reviewers are. Having a good research idea can make a big difference to an application's chances of success even when your CV is gappy. And you don't know with certainty - really, nobody does - precisely how the stochastic processes of a grant evaluation will turn out. In any case, many people report that the mere exercise of creating a long-term research plan, and envisioning a future research trajectory, is of inherent value.
- **Brainstorm a medium- or long-term career plan that has feasible research ambitions,** perhaps of quite small scale, for every year. The approach of only vaguely hoping to have more time or more opportunity for a major project (a book; a multi-site study; a major equipment grant) in the future can turn into disappointment and alienation as the opportunities fail to appear. More realistic is to specifically plan a tractable project year by year (a chapter draft; a pilot study; getting research time on specialized equipment for some results that will enable further work) that takes into account the demands on your time and attention. Here too even more limited projects or activities tend to lead to bigger things over time. Even if the plan doesn't pan out completely, it can still structure your aspirations, and help you reserve time and attention for research purposes.
- **Ask a trusted colleague whether they would be interested in putting together a research plan of their own,** and then meet for a coffee to compare notes and talk through the plans.
- **Remain involved in research mentorship of all kinds** - teaching and training undergraduates, graduates and post-doctoral researchers. And keep track of the research-relevant success of students, even after they are no longer your supervisees - things like whether they went onto other academic programs, published papers, registered any IP, etc. This information is important evidence of your mentorship, and can be a really big help in getting grants (as well as tenure, promotion, and academic awards). But it also helps you remind yourself and others that the effects of your research and mentorship continue to propagate even when you are not, for a time, directly engaged in it.

But what about when you worry that a slowdown has lasted for some time, when forestalling and mitigating are ships that you believe have sailed? When it feels like your CV isn't just gappy, but has gradually become mostly gap? In the next post, we can consider some strategies suited to addressing these cases.