

The Mid-Career Slump

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

Part 3: Closing the gap

In my previous two messages, I outlined some of the difficulties that mid-career faculty members may experience as part of a real or perceived research slowdown or slump of some duration, and I proposed some strategies and tips that might help one avoid such a slump, or quickly reverse it once it begins. What can be done, though, when a research slowdown has progressed beyond that point - when a researcher begins to worry that there is a glaring gap in their CV, or that they have fallen far out of contact with the state of research in their field?

The first thing to note is that some of the suggestions already canvassed in my first two messages can be ways of backfilling CV gaps. What does this mean? It means adding information to your CV about the research success of students, for example. It means ensuring that any refereeing (journals, manuscripts, tenure/promotion dossiers) and academic commentary work you did - so much work at the time, but so easy to forget altogether afterwards! - is all appropriately noted. You should also take a hard look at other things you may have been doing, including public activism, media outreach, or voluntarism, and ask to what extent those activities comprise forms of applied scholarship or knowledge mobilization. Other strategies can be mentioned in this context as well.

- Attend a research conference where you are not presenting a paper. The first time I did this, I felt almost like I was getting away with something. Going to talks for the sheer interest of it? Without dealing with stress prior to giving my own talk, or with exhaustion and distracting elation after giving my own talk? Magic! Find something local, with a low or no registration fee (rare, perhaps, but they do exist). Or use your professional allowance, if you have one, to go a little further afield to a conference that seems interesting. Attend talks, ask questions and make comments. Research is fun! Hearing about it is inspiring.
- Make other opportunities to talk to colleagues about their work. You don't need to have a lot of your own work in the pipeline already in order to be stimulated and build research connections by hearing about what other people are doing. It's also a great way of making friends and building a research network, because virtually everyone likes having someone show an interest in their work.
- Write or present some modest pieces of public scholarship. It takes some effort to learn the style and standards appropriate to writing for a newspaper or speaking on the radio; but the timelines and certainties of publication and impact are much better for these kinds of activities than publishing even something like a book review in an academic journal. It's also an important form of research impact.

- Join research centres or institutes (on campus or elsewhere), or, at least, get on their events mailing list and go to some events. Hang out with people talking about research.
- Contact an academic society to volunteer to referee conference papers. Even if it counts as service, under the terms of your job, it plugs you into contemporary research.
- Volunteer to be a session chair at a conference that interests you; it puts you in a session, on the programme, and is a kind of research leadership and facilitation.
- Apply for bite-sized grants:
 - internal grants of many kinds
 - external funding agency grants for smaller projects, often having higher success rates
 - sponsored research through business partners, not-for-profits, and community groups - sometimes these groups want help with a very specific consulting, reporting, or analytical problem, and find it difficult to get interest because researchers are naturally more focused on their own projects.
- Make effective use of the resources you already have available. This includes:
 - Professional expense funds, Faculty funding programs, or Departmental special funding if available;
 - Collaboration with colleagues whose programs or labs are up and running, and who may be able to share instrument time, research personnel, or access to data, to support a smaller project or a pilot you could run.
- Start with small contributions, in a similar vein to the strategies list in my previous post: submit conference papers, discussion notes, short interventions, book reviews; volunteer to participate in and contribute expertise to colleagues' work.
- Participate in research mentorship in whatever capacity is available: you don't need to be a thesis supervisor to be on a thesis committee, which keeps you immersed in new research, and counts as training activity for "HQP," or highly qualified personnel, for grant application purposes.
- Remember, and keep reminding yourself, that the University's research support infrastructure exists for you to use, to benefit from, to rely on. It's not only - it's not even primarily - for "high fliers"; it's there to enable everyone to be research-active, and to accommodate a wider set of notions of research activity than you might have expected.

This is of course not a complete list of strategies for restarting a quiescent research life and enhancing your sense of engagement with research. I've surely missed some important things, and there are probably more helpful spins to put on the tips that I have included. Not all of these strategies will apply equally to every discipline and all types of research, scholarship, and creative activity, moreover. Some forms of text-

based scholarship may be more amenable than bench science or human participant research to being kept moderately active when not fully active. Still, some of these approaches and activities will be helpful to faculty members from most disciplines who experience or worry about a mid-career slump.

The long-term structure of a tenure-stream life cycle imposes barriers and constraints that few of us are formally taught to anticipate in our graduate training and junior faculty professionalization. These barriers are more manageable through strategies that reflect a few basic principles: Follow your interests as they are, not necessarily as they used to be. Recognize, record, and build upon those activities in which your expertise is manifest, even though this may form a much broader class than the forms of research activity that were recognized and valorized when you were first trained as a researcher. Find projects and problems in what you actually do, in all aspects of your current interaction with your work, and in your current way of life. Make use of the collegial and institutional supports at all levels that exist to support and promote research. And don't despair! The creativity, insight, and expertise of a scholar is part of who you are. Finding ways to put these traits in touch with what you do is a more tractable project than it might at first seem.