



FAST Professor: Strategies for Surviving the Tenure Track

Patricia Welsh Droz, Ph.D.
Lorie Stagg Jacobs, Ph.D.
Assistant Professors of Writing
First Year Composition Co-Directors
University of Houston – Clear Lake

Patricia Welsh Droz (droz@uhcl.edu) is Assistant Professor of Writing and Linguistics at University of Houston–Clear Lake, where she teaches first-year writing, writing for the social sciences, language & gender, and the sociolinguistics of writing. Since 2018, she and Dr. Jacobs have co-directed the UHCL First-Year Writing program. Patricia’s research interests include gender and workplace communication, first-year writing, and computer-mediated discourse. She was the 2017-2018 co-recipient of the Marilyn Mieszkuc Professorship in Women’s and Gender Studies for her corpus linguistic work on Hillary Clinton’s secretary of state emails.

Lorie S. Jacobs (jacobs@uhcl.edu) is Assistant Professor of Writing at University of Houston–Clear Lake, where she teaches first-year and professional writing courses. She is also the Faculty Fellow on Writing Across the Curriculum, coordinating construction and leadership of faculty professional development in the teaching of writing campus-wide. She and Dr. Droz are the current co-directors of First-Year Writing. Lorie’s research interests include discipline- and profession-specific writing curriculum, labor issues in academia, first-year composition, and student persistence.

Abstract

In response to Maggie Berg and Barbara Seeber's 2016 manifesto on academic deceleration, *The Slow Professor*, the present article posits that the slow approach is dangerous for those seeking tenure, but is nevertheless a fruitful resistance philosophy to be adopted once tenure is achieved. For those seeking tenure, we advise an alternative philosophy, FAST professing, as a means to mediate workplace stress and offer to those on the tenure-track a pragmatic alternative to premature slow professing. We outline the nature of stress in today's academic climate, suggest identifying the major sources of stress, and finally, offer strategies to streamline the workday and maintain life work balance en route to tenure.

When friends and colleagues Maggie Berg and Barbara Seeber published *The Slow Professor*, their 2016 manifesto on academic deceleration, they were praised for giving voice to the thousands of academics who similarly felt pushed to do more with less in the neoliberal university. Recalling the months following the release of their book, Berg and Seeber summed that they had “hit a nerve” with their colleagues in all the disciplines (Charbonneau). With sales upwards of 22,000 in various formats, Berg and Seeber hit a nerve, indeed. Several of those 22,000 copies found their way to the shelves of our own university's brand new Center for Faculty Development, which chose *The Slow Professor* as the inaugural text for its newly started faculty book club.

Weekly, the same professors who labored in our university's culture of budget cuts, neoliberal values, and expediency, would take refuge in a small room to resist the dark forces eroding their sanity and scholarship and to instead learn how to fight back by slowing down. In reading *The Slow Professor*, our faculty took in Berg and Seeber's practical advice, strategies, and systemic critiques. Chief among their advice was to “act with purpose, taking the time for deliberation, reflection, and dialogue, cultivating emotional and intellectual resilience, [and become] able...to hold our ‘nerve’” (85). However, the general consensus among the junior faculty in the group was that “holding our nerve” may not be the best advice for those on the tenure track.

In the Preface, Berg and Seeber suggest their book is for everyone, including graduate students, although they also offer a brief acknowledgement that their primary audience is tenured faculty. They admit their book is “idealistic in nature” (ix) and purposefully hopeful. In many ways we deeply appreciate the hope and the advice given by Berg and Seeber. Indeed, we agree with nearly everything in *The Slow Professor* and hope one day to earn the type of job security that makes following

their advice possible. We also appreciate their calls to tenured faculty to protect junior colleagues.

In this article, we answer their call “to foster greater openness about the ways in which the corporate university affects our professional practice and well-being” (ix). We also wish to provide a survivalist philosophy, primarily for those who are pre-tenure, and also for those who are unable to adopt the philosophy of the slow professor without serious consequences. Indeed, we would like to argue that slow professing may even be dangerous advice for those working toward tenure or tenure-track jobs. For untenured faculty, to actively resist the bureaucratic nature of the corporatized university is the fastest way to lose a good job. And yet, succumbing fully to the pressures of the fast lane may result in sacrificing a quality life outside of academia.

As junior faculty and working mothers, we hope to find a middle ground that is tolerable. In this paper we hope to voice our own concerns as junior faculty regarding slow professing, concerns that have been shared by others in similar situations (e.g., Carrigan & Vostal). This is not to say that the ideals put forth by Berg and Seeber are problematic in and of themselves—we hope our senior colleagues take up their torch and use it to light fires on campuses far and wide. Instead, we hope to offer our reflections on the realities for junior faculty in today’s university workplace and offer to those on the tenure-track a pragmatic alternative to premature slow professing: FAST professing on the tenure track.

The FAST Philosophy

F – Fear Is Real. Embrace It.

We are fans of zombie lore. Collectively, we are attracted to the horror genres, especially cross-genre, humor-filled horror like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1996-2003), *Shaun of the Dead* (2004), and *Zombieland* (2009). It occurs to us that zombies are an apropos metaphor for neoliberal creep and the corporatized university. The zombie consumes mindlessly. Neoliberalism favors the free-market above all else. Zombies, in most depictions, move slowly but ruthlessly, and similarly to the corporatization of the academy. Zombie-ism, typically characterized as a relatively easily contracted virus, spreads rapidly and soon becomes an uncontrollable epidemic, wiping out reason and values. That certainly sounds familiar. Sometimes it seems as if reason and value are abandoned entirely in the administration’s endless hunt for more student flesh to feast on.

As *Zombieland* progresses, the central character, played by Jessie Eisenberg, lists his rules for survival and strategies to evade the brain-eaters. The first rule is Cardio. Jessie Eisenberg’s voice explains that the number one rule is to outrun the zombies. If you are slow in this world, you will be the first to get eaten. Thus, regular cardiovascular exercise is required. Often at a dead sprint.

It seems to us that life on the tenure track is not all that different from *Zombieland*. In the quest for tenure, speed is quantified by the

numbers and prestige of publications. Hurry up and publish or “perish” as is so often stated. Slow professing, then, for us, is equivalent to a slow career death.

After many long conversations about the *feeling* that our careers are constantly on the line, we decided to investigate. At our university, part of the fear comes from undefined publication guidelines and a university identity crisis, as our traditionally “teaching” institution strives towards becoming a “research” institution. The lack of clarity about publication expectations is particularly problematic in light of a trend of ever-increasing demands on junior faculty and is also striking in light of a phenomenon that we believe deserves more attention than it gets—the emotional labor of being pre-tenure. Meanwhile, there is not much data available on typical publication requirements in our field. Thus, we distributed a survey at a national conference in our field in order to quantify publication guidelines in the context of course load among tenure-line professors. We found that “teaching” institutions generally require about half of the publications required by research institutions. But there was another element revealed in our survey: uncertainty. A significant number of our tenure-line respondents were not able or willing to articulate publication requirements at their home institutions. Sentiments like “I don’t know” and “there are no specific guidelines” were hand-written on the survey instrument. Further, since we collected data in person, we engaged in several conversations with respondents who explained that even though they had committed to a number on the paper, in reality, they were unsure.

We were at once relieved to discover that we are not the only ones completely dismayed by unstated or unclear tenure expectations and also disheartened by the spread of unease and fear amongst our colleagues. While our study targeted tenure-line faculty, we imagine the situation is just as bad or worse for NTT and contingent faculty. Publication guidelines are equally unclear or nonexistent for them as well, and this group is even less likely to have university support for research. Incidentally, we have little support to count on ourselves, but what else would you expect in the zombie apocalypse? At least the grocery stores are still open.

Some choose to stand back and resist, to Slow Profess as an activist stance. Others choose to hit the ground running in fear of the zombies. While it is neither brave nor ideal, you will survive! You will not perish! We suggest you do your cardio. Embrace your *Zombieland* reality and get on with it. After all, publishing (or not) is not your only source of stress. Figure out what the sources of tension are and find ways to manage them so you can live a life.

A - Assess your Stress

Tomes numerous enough to fill the Royal Library of Alexandria have been written to name, denounce, and strategize against the workplace stressors of tenure-track professors. Indeed, a simple search of “workplace stress”

on the *Chronicle of Higher Education* sends one down a rabbit hole to dozens of articles and dissertations on synonymous categories: among them, “occupational stress,” “emotional labor,” and “faculty burnout.” Collectively, the literature suggests that the level and nature of one’s stress is dependent upon the faculty member’s time in his or her job position, workplace climate, and increasing job responsibilities. And, it will come as no surprise, the pressure to publish is cited as “the highest perceived stress factor” across faculty rank (Sanders qtd. in Carr 27).

Clearly, we are stressed out and freaked out. But, of course, you already knew that, didn’t you? If you work in the academy and eke it out as faculty, you are aware of the hard data available on academic workplace stress. You have talked about it with colleagues informally in watercooler chats, and formally in meetings; you have read about academics’ stress in journals, and while scrolling the Internet late at night — searching for another line of work, no doubt. None of this is news.

New, we hope, is the realization that knowledge about the source of academics’ collective stress, while paliative in its promise of shared suffering, cannot account for, nor mitigate long term, your own personal sources of stress in and out of work. If leaving this career is not something you actually want to do — heck, you are not really qualified to do much else any more, are you? — then you have to find a way to make this work *feel* better. Therefore, your second task in fast professing is to assess your own *personal* sources of stress. To demonstrate how to assess your individual sources of stress, we will do a FAST job of assessing our own.

The primary source of our home stress is the daily grind of working motherhood. With young children incapable of tending to their own basic needs — food, clothing, shelter, and safety — and spouses with schedules that require early rises, late nights, and time away from home, we carry the family load a disproportionate amount, albeit the right division of labor, given our families’ dynamics. On top of negotiating all of that, we have to manage the emotional labor required for the incessant battle between impressions of ourselves as good/bad workers and mothers. While we are busy writing our grocery lists in faculty meetings, we are similarly busy thinking of our grading-load while our children are recounting their days at school. That disconnect is stressful.

So, what are your individual sources of stress? Might it be the four-year-old who will not stop interrupting your evening writing time? The spouse who promises to make dinner at least once during the workweek but arrives home well-after the dinner hour? Possibly it is the ever-growing mountain of laundry, or the countless household tasks that seem to be getting away from you. Whatever it is, name it, denounce it, and strategize against it.

The primary source of our workplace stress is teaching. We both have a hard time turning that part of work-life off. Long after we first identified it was the time-sucker of time-suckers, we were still doing the same bad things: taking too long to grade, writing detailed emails, constantly reinventing assignments or changing the calendar. Only since

FAST-ing have we really gotten it under control. Why? Because even though we knew we needed to cut down on comments and reinventing assignments, we were flooded with guilt, thinking that we were not giving our students the good education they paid for. We would lie in our beds at night worrying about how the last lesson went, or if the comments we wrote on that paper were constructive. It was a shared, but personal battle. We had to decide that other things — like research — were more important, and let ourselves off the hook - which at first just meant lying to ourselves: Students would rather do less work. Students hate schedule changes. Until one day we finally believed it. Such deliberate thinking, or active measures to master the subtle art of not giving a f***, were some of the strategies we implemented in our efforts to FAST.

We outline a few more below by tackling the “S” of FAST: Survive & Thrive. But before you get to managing the stress, take the time to diagnose the source and function of your stress. Identify the time sucks; monitor your processes; find the source of your tension, especially emotional tension, because that is the stuff that eats away at you.

S - Survive & Thrive

Let’s be real here: current junior faculty want to earn tenure. To get it, they will have to both survive and thrive. For now, it is the junior faculty member’s job to mediate stress and ensure the number of hours spent working are productive. To that end, we have compiled a list of strategies we have used to balance our time between work and home. The strategies that follow are, admittedly, primarily shortcuts in teaching, research, and service that will help you FAST toward tenure, after which you can Slow profess with the best of them.

The best stress relief at this career stage is to get the job done faster. Some readers will likely be bound by certain constraints, and thus, what has worked for us will not likely work for everyone, such as contingent faculty. And to be honest, we don’t know for sure that these strategies work for us either - our tenure alarm clock won’t ring for another year or two. (Where’s the snooze button?) We are not going to tell you to find a mentor — you know that already. Instead, in the spirit of “everyday acts of rebellion” (Berg & Seeber 56) we would like to share some of the strategies we employ daily to stay productive and progressive in all areas of evaluation: teaching, service, and research/scholarship.

Teaching efficiently starts with the schedule. After identifying sources of stress and time-wasting above, give thought to a teaching schedule that will best support time-saving and a productive research agenda. We teach a 3/3 load. Therefore, one big time-saver is a single prep. Teaching multiple sections of one course cuts down on preparation time prior to the start of the semester and throughout. Take that further and teach the same course several semesters in a row, virtually eliminating prep after the first or second semester. If you are unable to reduce to a single prep, choose the courses you have already developed and resist the temptation to tinker with the syllabi one more time. Think about teaching

days and times as well. If you work with a collaborator on scholarship, make sure teaching schedules allow times to work together. Identify whether you are a “little bit each day” writer or a “need large blocks of time” writer and schedule teaching accordingly. Opt for course times that leave your most productive time of day open for research, align with your writing style, and still get you done in time to pick up the kids, and get dinner on the table, most days at least.

Of course, such strategies may limit the options of NTT and contingent faculty, the folks who will be left with the times and courses refused by tenure-stream faculty. These hardworking people have families and obligations, too. We encourage our NTT colleagues to speak up and argue for their own schedules as much as they can, but recognize they may have little choice in these areas. Like the survivor who volunteers to gather resources that will support the entire community, we hope to pay it back when tenure is earned: take more course preps and some less stellar timeslots *after* we earn tenure. And we hope our more senior colleagues already aim to make scheduling choices more amenable for all. The adjunct schlepping between universities could use the break. Until tenure, though, keep running and survive by any means possible.

It is quite common for graduate students in Writing Studies to teach as instructor of record for the bulk of graduate school. Indeed, many of us work as adjuncts or lecturers while completing graduate work. Therefore, teaching is one area where we as co-authors felt comfortable from the start. Perhaps too comfortable. By the time we graduated we had a combined total of fourteen years of experience teaching our own courses. Teaching came naturally by the time we landed our respective tenure-track jobs. Still, this is not to say there were no hiccups. Learning the intricacies of a new student population took time. In addition, there were some things we needed to unlearn. Both of us were “brought up” at large state schools. We soon discovered we had too many assignments on the course calendar and assigned more reading than our new commuter-college students were used to. We had to streamline our courses considerably to meet student needs. The first tip, then, is to meet your students where they are. It may be better to cover twenty pages more thoroughly than forty pages at the surface level. Similarly, taking the time to complete three assignments in-depth may outweigh completing five for the sake of completing five.

Even after streamlining courses by reducing page count, we both still found we were spending too much time grading. To some degree this is par for the writing course, in which students write pages upon pages of material that must be read and graded. Still, it was helpful to set clear boundaries for grading: no more than twenty minutes per paper and restrict feedback “to no more than one or two things your student can do” (Haswell 17). Turns out there is pedagogical value here: researchers like Ferris, Haswell, and Lunsford, have determined that too many comments on papers can overwhelm students, impact confidence, and leave them apprehensive. Make it clear that students who want more feedback can always ask for it during office hours. Writing across the curriculum experts

like Bean also suggest seeing yourself as more of a “responder” than a “corrector,” asking questions about their ideas or encouraging students to develop ideas further (242). Whatever you do, do not edit student papers. Know that grammar and mechanics are rhetorical and “error” is more often a reflection of the professor’s pet peeves than correctness (e.g., Ferris and Roberts). Language fluency improves naturally over time, meaning your incessant pointing to subject-verb disagreements has very little impact. One last suggestion to limit grading time is to ask for earlier drafts or encourage revisions so that students benefit from feedback while the ideas are still in development, and it frees you to ignore drafting mistakes, as Bean suggested.

One of the best things we have done for our students and ourselves is to make the big final project a team assignment. The math here is simple: grading time is quartered if four people turn in one assignment. This, too, has pedagogical value. In 2015, the AAC&U reported that employers expect students to be well-practiced in teamwork upon graduation. Yes, some students will groan when the team assignment is first mentioned, but there are plenty of ways to structure team projects so that students are graded fairly even if one member is less productive. It is also advisable to scaffold the team project so that students turn in small parts of it throughout the semester, thereby limiting procrastination opportunities and making the workload more manageable for all of you.

Service commitments can get out of hand quickly. Therefore, common advice is to “say no” to committees/administration/service pre-tenure. But that’s not exactly good advice for tenure track faculty. We are evaluated on service, too. Further, in some institutions and for some job descriptions, it is a necessity to take on administrative roles such as the First-Year Writing Director, for example. Wherever possible, turn down time-consuming projects and say yes to highly visible, low commitment service work. Look for one-day service events, or events that happen during a finite window: orientation, graduation, faculty assembly. Sign up for things that are recognizable to every level of the university, such as the parking committee and space allocation committee. Consider work that comes with a course release, if the required work can actually be completed within the time allotted by the course release. Apply for award-based service, so as to double-dip into the recognition pool, like a faculty fellowship of some kind. If you must choose a high-commitment service option, make sure it is one that is chaired by the dean or some other higher-up—talk about visibility! Let regional and national professional organizations know you would like to serve. They will find something for you, no doubt.

It is easy to put research and scholarship in the back seat when students are clamoring for attention, and the New University Committee plans to meet semi-monthly. We, like many, find it is hardest to stay on top of a productive research agenda when school is in session. The ideas above should help free time to focus. We don't want to simply echo decades of advice for getting research done or being a productive writer.

The 15-minutes a day strategy does not work for us. But we have found things that have:

First, listen to Jesse Eisenberg's Columbus from *Zombieland* and follow Rule 8: Find a partner — or better yet, find several. We find we work well as co-investigators on our projects, that together ideas are refined and strengthened. We were lucky enough to find each other within our own department, but if that's not possible, multidisciplinary topics are really hot right now. Find a collaborator in another field and pair two (or three!) brilliant minds. Partners help maintain a regular writing schedule and hold all parties accountable. A writing partner can also be someone who simply agrees to write at the same time. For this, we are taking a page from tried and true diet/exercise advice. It is harder to skip a workout if you are meeting someone at the gym. The same is true for writing: A writing buddy can help you with your cardio and keep your fear of the zombies in check. So, check in with each other via Skype or meet at the coffee shop to keep each other on task. Collaborators and writing buddies can also make for a strong support system, providing a place to vent about frustrations and find support.

Second, look for scholarship opportunities amidst the things already on the to-do list. For example, can students help with a research project? This will be a no-brainer and part of the regular curriculum for some fields, but is less common in the Humanities. Why not borrow from our social science colleagues and make our own research agenda the topic and central project of the course? Students are also good sources of data for projects investigating teaching and learning. Similarly, if you find yourself voluntold to take part in a huge university endeavor, ask if you can co-author the report, and then list it on your CV. We were tasked with marketing our department's new minor, and that turned into a study of workplace writing that is forthcoming in *Technical Communication*.

Third, choose projects with specified deadlines. For us, there is nothing like a firm deadline to stimulate productivity. Open-ended deadlines yield lackadaisical work. But a due date at the end of the week? That will get us in front of the keyboard pronto. Deadlines also help to prioritize. As researchers, we often have multiple projects in progress at the same time, making it hard to decide which to focus on next. A deadline solves that problem.

Our last bits of advice are overarching, applicable in all areas of professorship. Nominate yourself for every award opportunity. Even if there is no way you will get it, do it anyway. This advice is especially important for women in academia: Haynes and Heilman suggest we have a harder time bragging about ourselves than our male colleagues. If you absolutely cannot do it yourself, follow the advice of *Feminist Fight Club* author Jessica Bennet and get a "boast bitch," a colleague who boasts for you and you boast for her. If you both do this, you will look better to everyone else in the room and like a team player, too. It has been demonstrated that in workplace settings, women's voices are sometimes tuned out, interrupted, or co-opted (e.g., Hancock and Rubin; Karpowitz

and Mendelberg; Solnit). To mitigate this dilemma, we suggest that you become an amplifier and find one of your own, someone who will echo good ideas and give you credit to make sure the idea is heard multiple times. Find another junior colleague. Amplify all of her good ideas and ask her to do the same for yours. Nominate each other for award and recognition opportunities, as Smith and Huntoon suggest.

Finally, it is important to make sure all of the above is done within confined blocks of time. Family time is important. Having fun with friends is important. Neglecting them will not make you more productive and will likely make you a stressed out and isolated basket case who cannot get anything done. Make a no-work policy and stick to it. Each family is different and each job is different, so this will vary for everyone. One of our rules is no work on weekends and family dinner every day. Weekends are strictly, 100% family/friend time; 6pm-8:30 pm is strictly family time. To make this work, we typically work 8:30am – 6:00pm during the week, working through lunch, and occasionally for an hour or so after the kids are in bed. Someone else might decide not to work over the summer, but work near constantly when school is in session. Decide what is right for your family and your preferred work style. It is a tradeoff, and it is worth it. We may not get to attend every school event, but we definitely get to hear about it at dinner.

T – Tenure: Sprint Like You Mean It

The fear is real. The stress is real. And there will definitely be times the road to tenure seems like it winds through an undead dystopia. Perhaps the biggest stress reliever of all is knowing that you probably will earn tenure. There is little research on promotion and tenure rates, but where we do find it informally, the promotion and tenure rates are somewhere between 75%-90% (See Fox, 2014). Anecdotally, we hear more stories about approvals for tenure and promotion than otherwise. We do recognize, however, that the concern is wrapped up in whether or not you and I will be the first ones to be eaten in the zombie apocalypse — that we will be the unfortunate percentage to perish. The only paliative to that anxiety is to FAST profess. Do your cardio and sprint until you get tenure. As Jessie Eisenberg’s Columbus advises, “Rule 20: It’s a marathon, not a sprint. Unless it’s a sprint, then sprint” (Fleischer). You can slow down and return to your ideals in teaching, research, and service in the marathon that is your career once you achieve tenure. Until then, haul ass and survive.

Fear is real. Embrace it.
 Assess your stress.
 Survive and thrive.
 Tenure: Sprint Like You Mean It.

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