

Nibbled to Death by Ducks

By Laura McCullough

“Nibbled to death by ducks.” The phrase, though nearly three centuries old, is still remarkably apt for the role of the department chair today. Our jobs are filled with little nibbles taken out of our time and attention; no individual nibble may be all that significant, but the accumulation of nibbles can lead to exasperation, frustration, and burnout. In order to manage the nibbling, I have found a humorous way to highlight all those little bites out of my time, which has helped me cope with the interruptions as well as train my faculty to be more conscious of how often they come to me for help.

As department chairs, we encounter many demands on our time. Which of these should count as nibbles? I prefer not to include scheduled meetings, regular or occasional, on the list. I also have not counted emails: I choose when to look at my email, so I don’t count it as an interruption; it is under my control. The items I think of as duck nibbles are the little things that disrupt your work or your train of thought: the mail carrier needing a signature for a package; the faculty member needing to know a department policy; the student needing to drop off an assignment; the secretary needing your input on a form. Whether it is 10 seconds or 10 minutes, these nibbles are a significant part of a chair’s job. Yet they are often also an invisible part of the job, even to the chair. Do you know how many interruptions you deal with each day? I didn’t. I just knew that during a very rough stretch one semester, I was getting very frustrated with them.

My difficult semester had started with my departmental associate needing to take family/medical leave to care for her husband. We didn’t know how long the leave would be, but I thought I could manage for a few weeks by get-

ting help from the other associates in my building. While you finish laughing, let me note that I have a small department. We have only seven tenure-line faculty and between two and four temporary teaching staff. It is also a very collegial and familial department; we like each other, tease each other, help each other out both at school and outside of school. My half-time secretary is the only support I have, and we work together very well, so I knew what she did and knew what parts of her job I could cover for

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a few weeks. But the weeks turned to months. I was overwhelmed, despite the assistance from my faculty and the other secretaries. And the part that was really getting to me was the incessant knocks on the door, the “have you got a minute?” talks, the never-ending nibbling away at my time.

I was complaining to my husband and for the umpteenth time used the phrase “I’m being nibbled to death by ducks.” My helpful spouse suggested I get a rubber duck to signify the nibbles and the unrecognized work associated

with them. After laughingly agreeing it was a good idea, I put it aside for a bit. But the more I thought about it, the more I liked the idea of a visible symbol of the work. In the end I went one step further and expanded the concept into something that was more useful: I ordered 100 small rubber ducks. A mixed bag of silly ducks: nurses, soldiers, beach bums, princesses. The ducks went to my office and the box sat on the floor. Another box, empty, sat next to it.

During the next day, whenever someone stopped by with a question or a piece of paper, I moved one duck from the original box to the second box. I had 25 ducks in the second box by the end of the day.

The test of concept showed that it had merit. So I brought my faculty and student workers into the experiment, telling them about the ducks as they stopped by. A key piece to keeping it light and keeping them engaged was letting each person choose which duck to move over. My faculty took it very well and joined in with the exercise in a playful spirit. One professor brought in a nice wicker basket for the ducks to live in at the start of their day. Her children decorated my “nibbled” box with pictures of ducks and the word “nibble” scribbled all over it.

We had conversations about what should count as a nibble. Phone calls probably should have counted as nibbles, but I didn’t count them in this initial experiment. Needing a signature? Definitely. Asking a work-related question? Probably, depending on how long it takes. Long conversation about a problem? Oh yeah. A basic “good morning” conversation? No. One friend and colleague from another department re-

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ceives a blanket “duck exemption” since her interruptions are social in nature and usually help reduce my stress.


I found this to be a great humorous way to show my faculty just how many of these little interruptions I experience each day. I didn’t tell everyone about it; sometimes a person who only stopped by occasionally would leave my office and I’d toss a duck in for them. Having a variety of silly ducks, and having a lot of them, helped prevent it from becoming a negative experience for people; my department joined in the spirit of it quickly. One faculty member teased me that his goal was to get all 100 ducks in the nibbled box by noon some day. And, indeed, when I returned from a conference trip, I found all the ducks in the nibbled box when I walked into my office in the morning. On this same trip I’d bought a special extra-large duck to represent larger nibbles taken out of my time. This one only gets used rarely, but it usually feels appropriate to my mood and the situation when that big duck gets tossed (or forcefully thrown, as has happened) into the nibbled box.

As a scientist, I was interested in seeing if this making visible the invisible work of the chair would have any effect on the number of nibbles I received. So I kept track each day of how many ducks ended up in the box. Over a three-month period, I went from a low of zero on one blissful day to a high of 28 ducks. Twenty-eight unscheduled interruptions in one workday. My faculty learned that if the nibbled box was getting full, they might want to wait until another day to interrupt me. Or they might choose to email me instead. Or ask me if I wanted to go out for a drink after work.


The average number of ducks deployed per day showed a significant decrease over the three months, despite the workload getting worse. I started with an average of about 18 ducks a day and ended the semester at only around eight


to 10. My secretary was unable to work more than a few hours a week. My faculty did a great job of stepping up and helping me out, and at the same time they made a real effort to be more independent of the chair. I had lowered my overall number of interruptions by the end of the semester and had managed to do it without generating resentment from the department. Another benefit to this idea is that not only was I keeping track of the nibbles, but the number of ducks in the box is also an affirmation: every duck is a problem solved or task completed. One of my faculty members noted that the duck showed both positive and negative impacts for her: yes, it was a nibble on my time, but it was also a symbol of my fixing something for her, which is my job.

It takes a very friendly and collegial environment for this to work the way I implemented it, with the faculty as part of the experiment; in a more formal department this might work better as a private tool for a chair to keep track of the problems acquired and problems solved.

This idea also worked extremely well to demonstrate the invisible side of the chair’s job: the little bits and pieces that peck away at our time and attention. In discussing my ducks with one of my mentees, she noted that this would be a valuable way to make visible a lot of the other invisible work that happens in our society, much of it “women’s work.” Housework is just one example: toss a duck in the box for every load of laundry folded or floor swept or sink of dishes washed. Make it visible. By using a symbol of happiness and silliness, I was able to help keep myself sane during a very stressful semester and help my faculty recognize a hidden part of the chair’s workload. I am still nibbled, but less than I was, and I can handle it a lot better now in part because of the lighthearted symbol I’ve attached to the process. 

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