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Career Advice

Kitchen Cabinet of Mentors

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By **Owen Sutkowski**

Many higher education professionals find mentors with similar backgrounds to seek advice and test their ideas. Borrowing an idea from president Andrew Jackson, what if you create an informal cabinet of mentors from a set of diverse backgrounds? As we build a network of mentors, it is important to have a diversity of viewpoints and connections. Having a variety of mentors will serve as a strong sounding board for professional growth as we face different challenges. Five types of mentors are important to consider appointing to your mentorship cabinet. Each of these types of mentors can contribute a unique perspective to your professional and personal development.

The Friend: The friend mentor is someone who can see connections between your personal and office life, knows you outside of your professional pursuits, and can offer feedback as an "outsider" to your professional world. Although we have many friends, it can be helpful to have a dedicated friend with whom to talk about your professional goals and issues. When thinking about someone for this role, it is also important that this person knows enough about your field and even more about you. The friend can also give you feedback in a context outside of your work environment and will not have the biases of mentors within your profession.

Pick someone who has been a part of your life through several professional roles and has seen you through work and personal change. The friend mentor does not need to be an expert in your field; he or she only need be a person whom you can trust to give you authentic feedback. For example, I have a good friend who works on the career counseling side of higher education. She has been invaluable as I chart the logistics behind professional moves and has been someone who has seen me grow professionally since we were in graduate school together. She knows very little about my higher ed field and has learned more about it through my talks with her.

The Role Model: This member of your mentor cabinet is in the professional position and has the skill set that you strive to achieve. This person may have followed a similar educational or professional path to you. As you seek out this type of mentor, look for both professional role and skills. Having this mentor means first knowing what professional role and set of skills you are working toward. Role models can give you feedback about the challenges they face and the path they took to get where they are. The role model can also be valuable when you are looking to apply for a similar role at your institution and you need a reference. I am a firm believer in personal reflection on what skills you wish to develop, seeking out a mentor with those skills, and asking them if they would be willing to mentor you. The skills you develop lead you to the positions you are interested in. Many people think about position and work their way backward instead of thinking about abilities and working their way forward. Having a role model with the skills and position you aspire to will help you see at least one path and hopefully learn from it. I am still seeking out this mentor for myself.

The Insider: Higher education professionals do not always think to seek out this kind of mentor. The insider is a person who works at the institution at which you are currently employed, and has been there longer than you. Insiders can be situated in any part of the institution, and it is important to seek out a professional you feel knows the workings of the institution. The value of insiders is that they know you and they know the institution. They can offer feedback about your work in relation to the institution and give advice from an institutional process and historical perspective. This mentor can also help you learn and continue to understand the dynamics of your institution as well as offer feedback on your performance within the institution. You should find someone outside your department for this member of your cabinet.

Having a mentor like this will be important as specific institutional questions, issues, or concerns arise. I have been in my current position for seven months. I immediately sought out a mentor when I started. The one I found has been with the institution for over seven years and

offers insight and advice that has helped bring me up to speed very quickly about the workings of the campus. Had I not met this mentor, it would have taken me years to learn all the information. She has also helped me to learn the personalities of the campus. So as these colleagues have sought me out for assistance the background knowledge has helped me to work better with them.

The Veteran: This member of your cabinet may be the most traditional way of looking at a mentor in the field. The veteran has been in his or her role for decades and may have held a variety of leadership roles. This person is also higher up in the leadership chain and therefore can offer a broader, more holistic, viewpoint. Many professionals see this mentor as a maternal or paternal figure. To this mentor you can take a variety of issues for a historical perspective as well as advice on how to handle the politics of higher education. A colleague of mine at Indiana University has been through many higher education roles, including residence life, student unions, and facilities. He has a holistic viewpoint, having had experiences from so many areas, and I have seen him successfully navigate the politics of the profession. He has both a breadth and depth of experience. His skill is in asking questions. Whenever I have an issue I know he will have a line of questioning, without ever telling me to do anything, which will open my mind as well as focus my thoughts. The veteran mentor has a long and deep view of the field. Many professionals already have this kind of mentor and it is the person who most impacted them during their undergraduate or graduate work.

The Teacher: Many of the mentors above have this role inherent in how you choose to work with them; the reason I list this one separately is to make sure you think about what you want to learn. Are you seeking managerial, pedagogical, research or other skills? We are eager to seek out mentors and do not always think about what we hope to learn from them. Think about how the teacher mentor fits in with the other mentors above. Many professionals can be teachers of what not to do as much as they can for what to do. It is important to understand what you are seeking to learn. Being a minority professional in higher education also means the possibility of needing a unique kind of teacher. Therefore, as you think about teachers, consider seeking a mentor with a similar background (i.e., racial/ethnic, faith, sexual orientation) who you feel can offer insight into addressing the specific needs of relating to your background. As a gay man, I have had several mentors who have talked through challenges I have faced and prepared me early in my professional life for unforeseen issues.

Each mentor serves a specific role in the cabinet and it is always good to have a variety of perspectives. However, make sure to know what role(s) you are looking for perspective mentors to fill.

Professionals who are new to the field or have been in it for decades can benefit from thinking about which categories their mentors fall into and seek out new mentors as needed. Some of the types above may be found in one person; however, seeking several mentors who are independent of one other provides you with multiple viewpoints. Some issues may be appropriate for one mentor while others fit better with a different one. Creating this network of mentorship offers multiple outlets to address the unique issues you will face on your path.

Higher education professionals are also called to be mentors for others, and it is important to think about what kind of mentor roles you are filling, or could fill, for others. Take a moment and write down the five mentor types on a piece of paper and start "appointing your cabinet." As you write in the names, think about how they fit the role or roles you have assigned to them. Also, think about how you want to keep in touch with your mentors. You may connect with each mentor in a different way and it is important to have a regular connection. Each of these mentor types will play an important role in your professional life.

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