

The Wise and Trusted Counselor

Since the time of the Greek poet Homer and his epic work *The Odyssey*, wise and trusted counselors have been called *mentors*. Many of us today who have fulfilling careers as IT professionals in higher education can point to someone who made a difference in our lives and in the career paths we've chosen. Our mentor may have been a professor, a supervisor, or a colleague who took a special interest in us. He or she saw some potential, offered advice, and provided the encouragement we needed to take on challenges that we thought were beyond our reach or abilities. This person helped to shape our careers and regularly shared his or her wisdom and experiences. Some of us can even point to more than one person with whom we've had this special kind of relationship.

Having someone play that role for me very early in my career meant that I was introduced to a world of colleagues outside my institution—people who became valuable resources both at that time and in the future. Fresh out of graduate school with a technical degree, I had little awareness of the broader issues. My mentor helped me understand the importance of information technology to higher education: the role that IT plays within the institution; and the potential for IT to help transform education overall. He encouraged me to attend my first professional conferences and insisted that I submit proposals and give presentations about our work. He helped me understand some of the unwritten rules of our institution and taught me how to work effectively with vice presidents, provosts, and the presi-

men·tor ('men-, tōr,-tər) *n.* 1 A wise and trusted counselor or teacher. 2 *cap* (Greek mythology) : Odysseus's trusted counselor, in whose guise Athena became the guardian and teacher of Telemachus.

dent. He provided guidance when a sticky political issue arose. He took a personal interest in my career and introduced me to the people who would offer me my next job. He once told me that his reward was seeing his protégés succeed in life as they moved on to take roles with greater responsibility, visibility, and influence in the profession. To this day he still is, for me, a "wise and trusted counselor."

By offering guidance to me and to others over the years, my mentor has helped to ensure the future of the higher education IT profession and has helped develop people who today are leaders both in colleges and universities and in industries serving higher education. However, many current IT leaders are concerned that we "seasoned professionals" are not, as a group, assuming this role of mentor—we are not paying close enough attention to nurturing the next generation of leaders. At the annual EDUCAUSE conference, for example, the average age of the attendees is 45.8. The regional EDUCAUSE events reach a broader population of IT professionals, most of whom do not usually attend the national EDUCAUSE conference. We had expected that this group would include more junior-level, and hence younger, attendees. The average age

of attendees at the regional EDUCAUSE events is, however, the same.

Many IT professionals may already be involved in some kind of mentoring relationship, though they may not be thinking about it formally, as an obligation to their institutions and to the next generation. Yet those who have reached a level of proficiency and success in their field must think about giving back to the profession—by being a coach, a trusted counselor, and a guide to someone else. Now is the time.

Imagine what it would have been like learning the ropes of the higher education IT profession alone, through only trial and error. Think about how much better it was to have had someone who really cared about you helping you along the way. As a mentor, you can do the same for someone else. You can give younger professionals the advantage of your experience, your contacts, and your knowledge, and you can help them to build the skills and the self-assurance they need to excel in their careers. Seek out and cultivate a relationship with someone who needs your guidance. Become that "wise and trusted counselor." You'll be glad you did.

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