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Clarity and Confidence for Higher Ed Leaders Writing Their Next Chapter

Building Your “Backstage”: Understanding the Role of Leadership Coaching in Liminal Career Moments

Congratulations on your appointment as an Academic Leadership Fellow! I have been invited to speak with you at next week’s 2026 Summer Institute on how coaching can support your future administrative job searches. I look forward to hearing more about your goals and answering your questions then. In the interests of making that time as interactive as possible, I have prepared this brief memo for you to read in advance.

Defining the Role: Mentor vs. Coach

In higher education, the terms "mentor" and "coach" are often used interchangeably, but they serve different strategic purposes, and they play different important roles in your career journey.

- **The Mentor** typically shares their experience and earned insights over an extended period to help their mentee navigate a similar path; a mentor also sometimes functions as a sponsor, someone who can leverage their social capital and influence to open doors and create opportunities for the mentee.
- **The Coach** helps a client set clear goals and take ownership of their professional development and career journey over a defined period of time, often several months to a year. The coach creates a confidential space that facilitates the client’s insight, self-discovery, and growth with powerful questions and tools that help them build on their strengths and transform their learning into actions.

In a mentoring relationship, the mentor often gives direct advice. In a professional coaching relationship, the coach provides the confidential thinking space and guides the inquiry-based exploration necessary for the leader to find their own clarity.

Another distinction between mentoring and coaching is that most professional coaches work using a particular methodology. Mine is informed by my International Coaching Federation-accredited training and the ICF's Code of Ethics, as well as by my 15 years of experience as a faculty member and 10 years of experience as an Associate Vice President and Provost/Vice President for Academic Affairs. Below are a few of the issues that I commonly address with clients like yourselves.

From Disciplinary Expert to Institutional Sense-Maker

You are currently in what leadership literature often calls a "liminal" moment—a transitional space where your identity as a faculty expert is shifting and your authority as an institutional leader is taking shape.

However, the transition from the classroom to the cabinet requires a fundamental shift in how you process information, manage risk, and inhabit your professional identity.

The most profound challenge of the faculty-to-administrator transition is moving from a disciplinary expert or departmental advocate mindset to an institutional mindset. As an administrator, your effectiveness is measured by your ability to be a sense-maker, interpreting how myriad political, economic, and mission-driven signals affect the institution as a whole.

Academic leaders are often expected to arrive fully formed, learning high-stakes administrative skills under intense scrutiny with a narrowing margin for error.

Professional leadership coaching provides the necessary "backstage" to this public performance. It offers a confidential, judgment-free environment to:

1. **Unpack Complexity:** Test and refine ideas before they reach the public stage.
2. **Discern Agency:** Identify where you have choices and power, even within highly constrained institutional systems.
3. **Cultivate Steadiness:** Develop the capacity to remain grounded and clear-headed when institutional "noise" is at its loudest.

Maximizing Your Fellowship Investment

Leadership roles can be creative and exciting. They can also be lonely. Increasingly, colleges and universities recognize that letting their emerging leaders work in isolation is not sustainable, and they support leadership coaching as a strategic investment in institutional success.

My clients typically come to me when they are preparing for or experiencing a role transition. Together, we co-create a coaching plan that establishes the goals for our time together and anchors the individual sessions of our engagement. Common goals include building on leadership strengths, addressing specific challenge areas, preparing for each stage of the search process, and acclimating to a new role and/or institution.

By establishing your backstage now with trusted guides such as mentors and coaches, you ensure that when you step onto the public stage in your next role, you do so with the clarity, confidence, and the institutional mindset that higher education leadership demands.

I look forward to our time together at the 2026 Summer Institute next week! As you prepare, you may also be interested in my May 2025 *HigherEd Jobs* article, ["Exploring a Transition to Academic Leadership? Your Horizons May Be Broader Than You Think."](#)

See you in D.C.

Best,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Steve Crawford". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.