

# THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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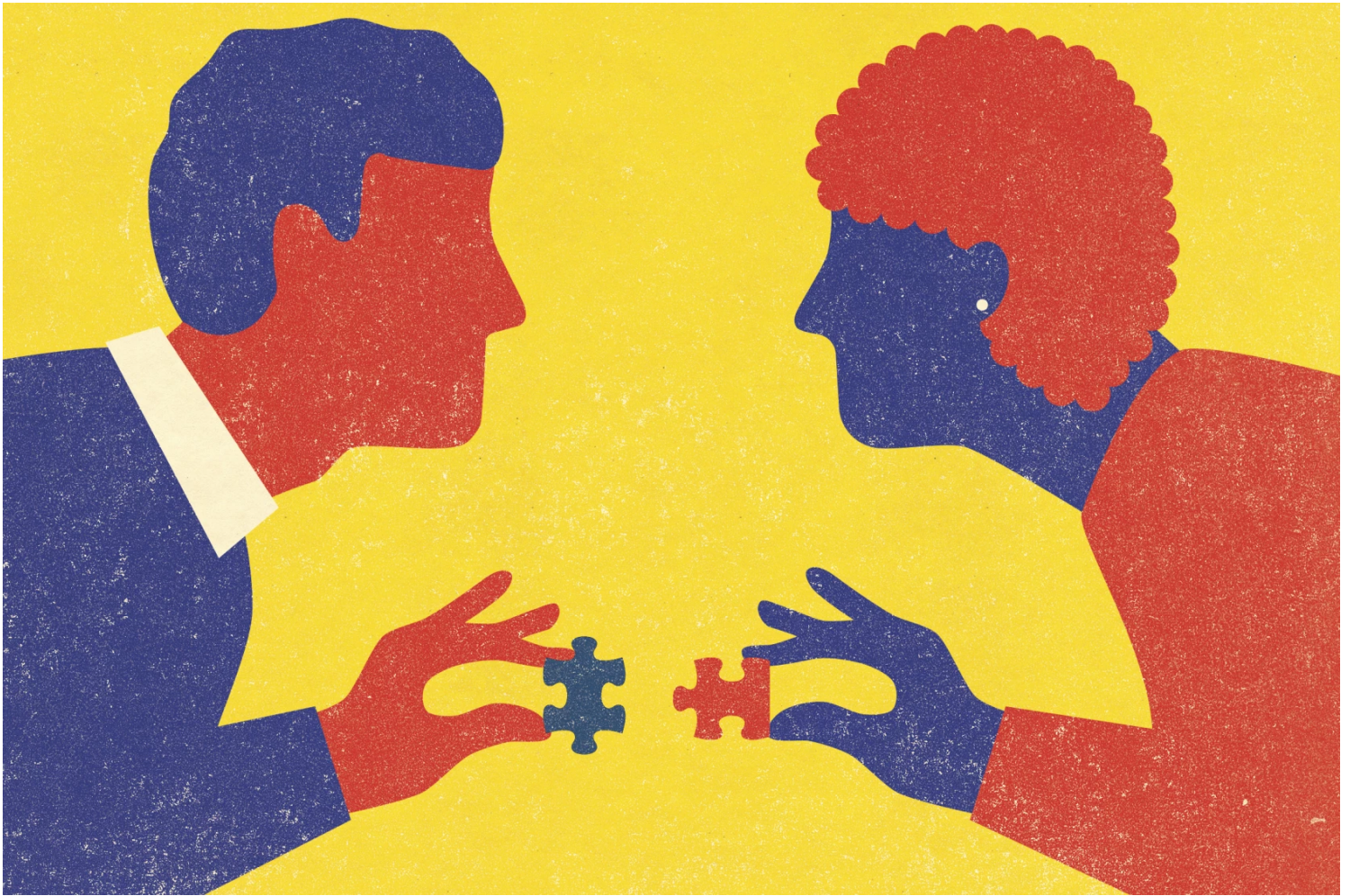
ADVICE

## What I Gained From a Year of Professional Coaching

You can't see the entire field while you're playing the game.

By *Manya Whitaker*

JULY 8, 2022

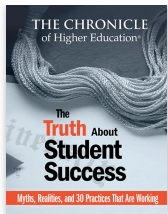


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Like a lot of working adults, I’ve spent the past two years deeply reflecting on my career. And like a lot of academics, I’ve spent every Monday through Friday of my adult life “going to school” — either as a student, a professor, or an administrator. Witnessing the “[great resignation](#)” during the pandemic has prompted me to pause, too, and reconsider my career goals: Am I still in the right field? Or at least on an upward trajectory within my field?

That kind of reflection is difficult to do on your own, especially given the fixed nature of professional paths in academe. Last summer, I wrote about participating in a four-week, virtual [boot camp](#) for department chairs that included three sessions with a career coach. Before that experience, I had never considered seeking such advice because I didn’t know what [such coaches did](#).

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It turns out that the most significant thing to know about coaching is that it's very different from mentoring:

- Mentoring involves a long-term relationship — usually with someone more senior and experienced than you — who offers occasional, off-the-cuff advice. Mentoring meetings tend to be casual: You might ask a mentor about where to publish, which conference to attend, or which neighborhood to move into.
- Coaching is much more structured and performance-driven. Coaches offer guidance on dealing with acute problems in a short time frame. They help you to set specific, measurable outcomes.

In short, mentoring is about answer-seeking while coaching is about self-directed problem-solving.

Once I understood that distinction, I learned about the different types of coaching: Career, leadership, and professional coaching each have varied goals. Even though I was in a period of reflection, I knew I didn't want to leave academe and start a new profession, so a career coach wasn't necessary. The boot camp I attended last year focused on leadership, so I already had a good sense of my leadership strengths and weaknesses, and I had identified specific workshops and webinars to enhance those skills. A leadership coach seemed redundant.

That left general professional coaching, which, it turns out, is a lot like cognitive therapy. Professional coaches follow your lead, allowing you to set the agenda for each meeting based on your current professional difficulties.

With that in mind, I explored coach profiles via [Academic Impressions](#), a professional-development organization of which my institution is a member. Based on prior experiences with therapists, I knew the characteristics of an effective coach for me. I had to avoid people with too-similar personal and professional backgrounds so that our conversations didn't contain false equivalencies (e.g., "that happened to me, too!") and presumed understanding (e.g., "you know what I mean.").

But at the same time, I needed a coach with cultural competence and sociopolitical awareness so that person could appreciate how my personal demographics (black and female) intersect with my professional position within academe. As I scrolled through a list of coaches, I thought about their professional credentials and industry, gender and race identities, age, and geographic location (the coaching would be virtual but a familiarity with my region would be helpful).

I chose "Ellen" (a pseudonym) — a British, middle-aged white woman who recently retired from the medical profession and lives in the United States on the West Coast. Her profile listed a breadth of experience with mediation, conflict resolution, and coaching. Ellen described herself as an executive coach who enjoys helping people develop professional identities in the context of career growth. She sounded perfect for my situation, and I liked that she, too, is a woman in a high-achieving male-dominated field. That Ellen grew up in Britain was a plus because she was less likely (I hoped) to endorse stereotypes about race, gender, age, and intellect that are pervasive in the United States.

Ellen replied quickly to my request for more information, inviting me to a 15-minute consultation. She asked why I was interested in coaching and how I thought it could improve my career. I immediately found her to be patient, thoughtful, and kind. She described her coaching style as "targeted but flexible." Most professional coaches help you set six-month goals but Ellen said she preferred a session-by-session approach to goal-setting.



I couldn't have predicted that Ellen's approach would initially be difficult for me. I was a bit frustrated after our first two sessions because it seemed like all she did was ask questions:

- "What would you like to work on today?"
- "What would success look like at the end of today's session?"
- "What have you done in the past that might inform what you could do now?"
- "What values do you want to uphold as you work through this?"

And on and on and on.

I realized that I had to take seriously the "focus forms" that Ellen asked me to fill out before every session — identifying problems, describing ideal outcomes, reflecting on recent insights about myself and my work style. What I wrote on those forms informed the content of our discussions. It quickly became clear that coaching was pointless if I came to the meeting unprepared. But when I took the time to identify a professional situation with which I was struggling, coaching became incredibly productive.

For example, in January, after I decided to leave my position as department chair to [assume a new role](#) as an executive vice president at my college, I worried I was abandoning my faculty colleagues in the middle of an academic year. Ellen encouraged me to consider their perspectives, and helped me realize that I was jumping to an unwarranted conclusion. My departmental colleagues have always supported me and I had no reason to think they wouldn't anymore. We end each coaching session with "action steps." In this case, that meant having one-on-one conversations with department members about what they needed from me as I transitioned out of the department.

In subsequent sessions, Ellen encouraged me to outline an upcoming difficult conversation with someone I supervised, to find software on project management,

and to practice low-threat conversations with a friend in preparation for a tense meeting with my boss.

Each session helps me get better at making coaching useful. Now I schedule our meetings right before a work “event,” so we can focus on something concrete and immediate. Ellen, too, has learned to push me to recognize and name the soft and hard skills I can use for continued success. She frequently helps me reframe what I perceive as possible limitations in a leadership position as leverage points.

For instance, I tend to be extremely compassionate (think: cries at sad commercials) and genuinely want everyone to feel valued and happy at work. That sounds lovely until you have to reprimand someone for misbehavior. Ellen helps me figure out how to give sensitive-yet-constructive feedback that leaves me and my supervisee feeling positive at the end of the conversation.

I leave each coaching session confident that, whatever the next work event, I will manage it in ways aligned with my core values and supportive of my professional goals. I honestly didn’t think coaching would be this useful — probably because I didn’t know I needed it.

In retrospect, there were a few red flags that could have pushed me in this direction, had I given any thought to the implications of my personal characteristics on my career advancement. For example, I tend to be impatient, dislike teamwork, and have very high expectations. Those traits have served me well in my career because I am focused, efficient, and deliver quality work quickly.

But when your job frequently requires you to work with others, being someone who does your best work on your own does not exactly engender success. I’ve had to learn to integrate people into every aspect of my workflow, even if that means I have to work slower and less efficiently.

So should you hire a coach? Before I answer that, I have to disclose that coaching is a substantial financial investment. Because I found my coach through Academic Impressions, I paid a flat fee of \$3,600 (with an institutional discount) for 12 sessions. I was fortunate to be able to use grant money I had received from my college to cover these costs. Many institutions do not offer financial support for this type of professional development, and private coaching is even more expensive: A colleague shared with me that she had received a coaching estimate of \$15,000 for six sessions.

If you can find the right coach at a price you can afford, I can now say it's worth the expense. Coaching can help you assess how your personal traits emerge at work, and how they may or may not be contributing to your long-term success. Especially as your professional responsibilities increase, it's critical to reflect on your soft skills since it is likely that, in moving up, you will be supervising people. I frame supervision as support. Communication skills are paramount in creating an inclusive and supportive work environment that fosters engagement and job satisfaction.

If you are feeling frustrated on the job, take a little time to identify what is causing you distress:

- If it's a particular situation or problem, a professional coach can help you develop specific strategies to mitigate the issue.
- If you feel like there's no room for career advancement at your institution, consider a career coach who can help you identify new professional challenges aligned with your strengths and interests.
- Or, if you have a clear career map and know for certain what the next step is, get a leadership coach who can help bolster existing skills and cultivate new ones.

Whatever point you're at in your career, and whatever your discipline, in my experience, one-one-one coaching is well worth the investment. You can't see the entire field while you're playing the game.

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

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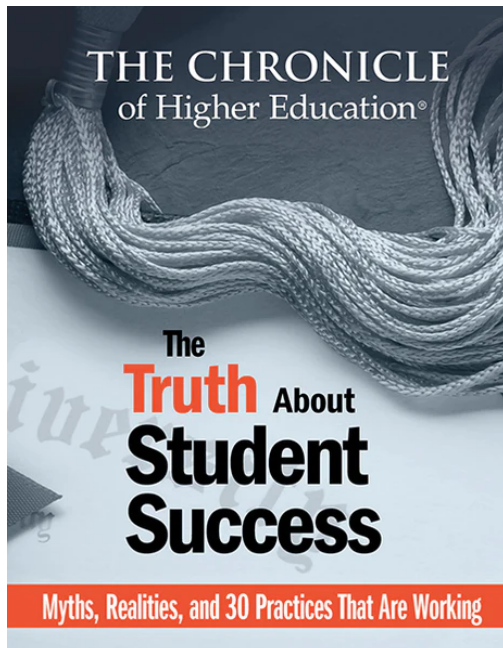
HIRING &amp; RETENTION

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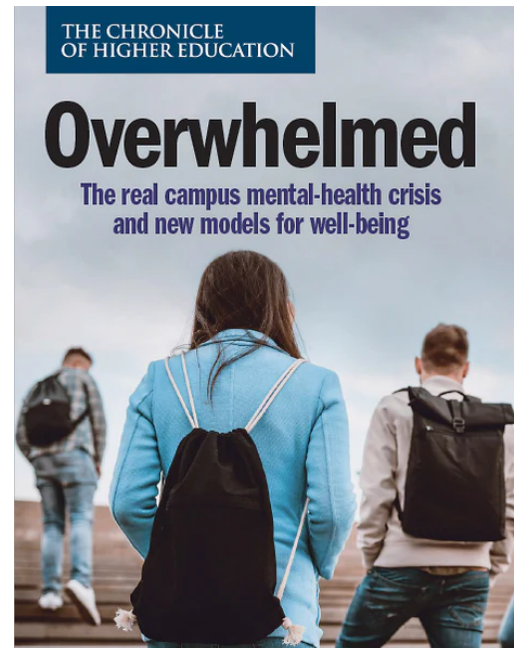
## Manya Whitaker

Manya Whitaker is an associate professor of education at Colorado College and executive vice president and chief of staff. She writes regularly for *The Chronicle* about academic-career issues. Read her previous columns [here](#).

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