



# THE WILDFIRE EXPERIENCE: TAKEAWAYS, ADVICE AND LESSONS LEARNED

CUPA-HR's Wildfire program is a unique learning and development opportunity for individuals just starting out in their higher education human resources career. A year-long immersive experience, the program connects a small, select group of early-career higher ed HR professionals with CUPA-HR, key association leaders and multiple learning opportunities.

As the 2016-17 program winds down, we caught up with this year's participants to chat with them about what they've learned from their Wildfire experience and what the program has meant to them personally and professionally, as well as their thoughts on how managers and leaders can cultivate and support their early-career professionals.





**Katryn Stewart**  
Employee Relations  
Specialist, Virginia Tech

### What are your top three takeaways from your Wildfire experience?

- 1) There is always something you don't know.
- 2) Perspective is sometimes more valuable than experience.
- 3) If you ask, someone will answer.

### What for you has been the most rewarding part of the program?

For me, one of the most beneficial aspects of the Wildfire program has been the relationships I've formed within my cohort. HR can be a lonely place — everything is confidential; every relationship is suspect for political agenda; every conversation carries with it the weight of future perceptions. The Wildfire program placed me into a cohort of intelligent, like-minded individuals to whom I can go with even the silliest of questions and from whom I can receive the broadest range of well-thought-out answers.

### What is the best piece of advice you've received as an early-career higher ed HR professional, and how has this advice helped you or motivated you in your work?

The best piece of advice I have received is that you will never know everything — and no one expects you to. This advice reminds me that it is necessary to constantly be learning, and that people are okay with you asking questions. It also encourages me that while I do need to be the expert in my area, I do not need to be the expert in everyone else's areas. I need to actively seek out the information I need from other sources in order to make the best decisions I can, but I can never assume I know everything. A long time ago my father gave me a bracelet I wear daily that reads "Ancora Imparo" — loosely translated as "Still I am Learning." And I do believe that there is always something else to learn.

### What one piece of advice would you offer to those managing early-career higher ed HR professionals in order to help them excel in their work?

Create opportunities for your early-career folks to stretch their wings and succeed. Trust the people you hire to do their jobs well, and encourage them to push the boundaries of their jobs, their knowledge and their experiences.



**Veronica Lenegan**  
HR Coordinator,  
Stanford University

### Top three takeaways:

- 1) Continual learning is the key to professional and personal growth and to serving our institutions well.
- 2) Be of service to others.
- 3) Mentorship matters, be that as a peer relationship or between those at different stages of their careers. Learning from one another motivates, inspires and enriches the experiences and careers of everyone involved.

### Most rewarding part of the program:

I've been fortunate to have connected through my Wildfire experience with the CUPA-HR Northern/Central California Chapter, where I currently serve as secretary on the board of directors. The chapter work with my fellow board members has proven very rewarding and formative, and their committed, collaborative, generous examples of volunteer leadership in action continue to inspire me.

### Best piece of advice you've received:

Model what you value and hope to see in the workplace. That is to say, genuinely lead by example. What you say, what you do and how you do it matters, as others notice the little, the big and the in between. It takes continual effort

to build and cultivate meaningful and healthy relationships (and reputations), and mere moments to watch them unravel or dissolve. Relationships (at work and in life) require continual care.

### Advice for leaders/managers of early-career professionals:

Know that we are interested in you, your journey, your insights, your career, and that we enjoy hearing your stories. Know that we value and recognize good leadership and are looking to see that imperfect yet consistent example in action. Try also to cultivate a genuine relationship of mutual interest in and care of/for one another, which will serve both parties and the functionality of the department/team and institution.



**Kristina Gravellese**  
Recruiter, Harvard  
T.H. Chan School of  
Public Health

### Top three takeaways:

- 1) The value of networking. I am now connected to colleagues from all across the country at all levels in their careers that I can reach out to at any time.
- 2) There are opportunities for learning everywhere. Whether you are entry-level or a chief HR officer, there is always something to learn. Yes, about the rules, laws, regulations, etc. that govern the work that we do, but also about each other and the work we can accomplish together.
- 3) Always challenge yourself and others.

### Most rewarding part of the program:

The network of people that I was able to connect with through this program, and that I'm certain I will remain

connected with into the future (including HR thought leaders from across the country and the five amazing individuals in my Wildfire cohort that I now call close friends) is invaluable.

### Best piece of advice you've received:

Slow down! Get to know those around you — your immediate team members, your clients, the departments you support, etc. Slow down enough to understand who they are, as well as their needs, so you can work with them most effectively. Also, slow down and learn. Take the time to understand your organization's structure so you can understand how your work contributes to the greater picture. Slow down — there are amazing things happening all around you!

### Advice for leaders/managers of early-career professionals:

Present us with as many learning opportunities as possible, and expose us to as many areas/people as appropriate. Also, keep the line of communication open and clear. When I have open conversations with my manager, my team members, etc., we all walk away from the conversation feeling accomplished and informed. I can also say that feedback is key. Knowing what I'm doing right or well is great, but knowing what I'm doing wrong, what I can improve on, or what I may have missed in a given situation is invaluable. It's the only way I can grow and learn, and I truly value my manager's opinion and expertise.



**Clarity White**  
HR Coordinator for the  
School of International  
Languages, Literatures  
and Cultures, University  
of Arizona

### Top three takeaways:

- 1) I now know for certain I am in the profession I want to be in. I'm not just working a job, but I have a career with growth potential.

- 2) Perseverance pays off. (I applied for the Wildfire program in 2015, but I wasn't chosen. So, I applied again last year, and here I am!)
- 3) CUPA-HR is a professional association filled with genuinely caring individuals, and we are all lucky to be part of it!

### **Most rewarding part of the program:**

My Wildfire experience has helped me to rapidly bring my HR skills more in line with my overall years of experience. It has given me the community I didn't know I was seeking, as well as a strong sense of belonging.

### **Best piece of advice you've received:**

The best piece of advice that I have received as an early-career higher ed HR professional was at a time when I was weighing whether or not to take a promotion to a position I knew wasn't a perfect fit for me. I called upon a professor from my undergraduate studies who has remained an important mentor to me, and his recommendation was, "Take the position, but don't lose sight of your goals."

I took his advice to heart, because I could already see how life gets busy and you don't always make time to keep moving toward your own goals. His words stuck with me, and I made a point to learn all I could while I was in that less-than-perfect position while also allowing myself time for thoughtful reflection on what I did want and keeping an eye out for other positions that would provide me with the job satisfaction I was seeking.

### **Advice for leaders/managers of early-career professionals:**

I would urge managers to make time to find learning moments for early-career professionals. Along those lines, spend some time learning about the goals and aspirations of your employees, so you can identify opportunities fitting each individual's own goals. For some, frequently being challenged can keep the job exciting, whereas others may grow exhausted from always being asked to try something new. Knowing what makes your employees tick can help you foster an engaged and cohesive team.



**Andrea Alfano**  
 HR Coordinator,  
 Athletics Department,  
 Georgia State  
 University

### **Top three takeaways:**

- 1) Be a lifelong learner.
- 2) I need to take a more transformational approach to my role. Anyone can learn how to do a job, but to be successful as a higher ed HR professional, I need to be advocate for myself to show that my role can be strategic and not just transactional.
- 3) Give back to the higher ed HR community. I've seen first-hand the value of the relationships and resources with which I've been provided through Wildfire, and I want to in turn be a mentor and motivator to other early-career higher ed HR professionals.

### **Most rewarding part of the program:**

Wildfire surrounded me with dedicated and intelligent individuals who gave me the opportunity to explore areas of higher ed HR about which I was curious.

### **Best piece of advice you've received:**

Network! This is something I've always been told, but once I started putting myself out there and introducing myself to people in the industry, I truly have seen the value of building and maintaining strong professional relationships. This advice motivated me to apply for the Wildfire program, and I have since built a solid network of higher ed HR professionals which I often tap as resources and for career advice.

### **Advice for leaders/managers of early-career professionals:**

Provide your early-career staff with opportunities to voice their ideas and opinions. Many of us are eager to contribute more to our departments and institutions. The open support of our supervisors just might give us that confidence and reassurance we need to grow and become leaders in this field.



**David Elliott**  
Senior HR Specialist,  
Arcadia University

### **Top three takeaways:**

- 1) The importance of continually working to improve my planning and communication skills.
- 2) Through Wildfire, I've learned a lot about other areas of HR, and the many ways of doing things in HR.
- 3) The importance of giving back to the professional community through service and volunteer leadership.

### **Most rewarding part of the program:**

I feel as though being part of this group has unlocked something in me that motivates me to achieve something great to help the people I serve every day, empowers me to believe that it is possible, and connects me with those who can offer helpful advice and wisdom so that I can make it reality.

### **Best piece of advice you've received:**

A former boss once told me to question everything and to verify everything I possibly can. This continues to remind me that in my work in HR, I always need to look for the reason we do things the way we do and the validity of things that are said and done.

### **Advice for leaders/managers of early-career professionals:**

Take time to explain the big picture and how their work relates to it. Then, do things to stretch these professionals. Challenge them by giving them assignments or projects that are difficult or different from their normal routine, and a little above their level. Teach them accountability by giving them the space and autonomy to make a few mistakes here and there and to correct and learn from them. Share articles or books that you've found interesting or helpful and ask them to read them. Talk to them openly and honestly about growth and advancement. Finally, be intentional about establishing trust and openness. 