

## The expanding role of human resources executives at colleges and universities

Chief human resources officers on campus are taking a more strategic role as their institutions respond to waves of change that are sweeping across higher education.



**Traditionally, the human resources role at colleges and universities was largely transactional.** A university HR employee performed routine tasks, such as collecting résumés and scheduling interviews, managing benefits programs, and providing orientation sessions for new employees. In recent years, however, the HR office at many universities has evolved into a “trusted advisor” role to senior leadership and has taken a more active part in promoting change.

“There’s no question the HR role is expanding,” said Nerissa Morris, vice president for human resources at University of Miami. “We’re less back office oriented and less tactical. We’re shifting our organizational structure to be more business partnership oriented and more strategic.”

Broadly speaking, most chief human resources officers are focused on building a workforce that reflects their institution’s strategic vision. To that end, they are more involved at a strategic level in the recruitment of both staff and faculty members, compensation strategies, performance management, and leadership development.

To some degree, the expansion of the human resources role in higher education mirrors the evolution of the HR function in the corporate world in the last two decades, whereby the HR role grew from a largely administrative function to a proactive and consultative role oriented around the management of human capital.

Because of the evolution of human resources inside corporations and the resulting “best practices,” colleges and universities are increasingly considering HR talent from the for-profit world for roles in higher education.

## A New Role

HR executives in higher education are moving from a transactional focus to becoming a strategic partner.

### Transactional Focus

- Collecting résumés
- Scheduling interviews
- Managing benefits plans
- New-employee orientation



### Strategic Partner

- Recruitment of students and faculty
- Compensation strategies
- Performance management
- Leadership development

# Competitive pressures

**The elevation of the HR function at colleges and universities has also been spurred on by competitive pressures and a move away from traditional classroom instruction.** Institutional leaders have engaged HR to help their organizations operate in a more business-like fashion and to develop or recruit skill sets that reflect the modern workplace and changing educational processes.

Higher-education institutions are competing for faculty, students, research dollars, and external support. While they are, for the most part, not-for-profit enterprises, they must pursue these areas with a business-like approach that requires a high level of staff and faculty effectiveness. Human resources can be very helpful in supporting engagement, improving performance levels, and leading transformation efforts.

"If you're not going through some change or transformation, you're not in higher ed," said Robert Pietrykowski, vice president of human resources at Nova Southeastern University. "Competitive pressures are immense. We're competing for a student population that is very similar in demographics. In addition, we now have more for-profit, proprietary institutions in the mix. Higher-education institutions have to adapt to survive and grow."

Education itself is also changing dramatically. Gone is the day of a professor lecturing to a classroom full of students and writing notes on a blackboard. Technology has dramatically impacted teaching. For instance, some courses are taught completely online. Others consist of online lectures with team-based projects and presentations in a classroom. In the life sciences, virtual dissection tables are used instead of cadavers.

"If you're a faculty member who wants to teach with a paper textbook, students sitting in tidy rows, and a chalkboard ... well, that's not going to meet the educational aspiration of the university or its students," said Amy Donahue, vice provost of academic operations at the University of Connecticut.

On the staff side, Donahue said, jobs and functions have also changed. "We don't need mainframe analysts or clerk typists anymore. Work is changing and it's easy for people to get stale. We can't do what we need to do with a workforce hired 20 years ago using the systems and tools from 20 years ago."

Larger institutions have become international in scope, with overseas campuses and medical and research facilities. Indeed, helping to manage a global workforce is another skill set that is more common in the corporate world than in higher education. "We have affiliations in Singapore and China now," said Kyle Cavanaugh, vice president of administration at Duke University. "What that means is that employment of people internationally is a new core competency."

"You have to look across the institution and its various components: academic, research, and administrative," said Jodi Gentry, vice president for human resources at the University of Florida. "And you need to understand the changes that are impacting the institution, both internally and externally. With that knowledge, you're in a position to proactively anticipate what the organization needs and how you can provide a service."

At the University of Miami, every leader on both the staff and faculty sides has an HR manager that works with them on a strategic level and a transactional level. As vice president for human resources, Morris ensures that the strategic component is emphasized.

## Anticipating needs and building partnerships

To operate as a strategic partner to senior leaders in a higher-education setting, HR executives need to develop a deep understanding of all aspects of the institution, including:

- The institution's overarching mission and strategy and how it affects students, faculty, and staff
- The institution's metrics for success in the areas of education, finance, and external impacts
- The skills and capabilities that are needed to execute the institution's strategy
- The organizational risks that could derail the strategy
- The top talent within the organization and how it can be best utilized

“When I meet with a dean, I’m not going to talk about a list of HR transactions that need to get done,” Morris said. “Rather, it’s about what you’re working on, what you’re thinking about, how we can help you, and is your HR manager engaged with you on these issues.”

While the core HR function is recruiting, hiring, compensation, and performance management, HR can provide other services to higher education leaders, such as providing insights and advice on regulatory compliance, developing an inclusive workplace, and off-campus working arrangements.

“In a public higher-ed environment, there’s a lot of scrutiny around hiring,” noted Donahue. “It is more the case now that HR is expected to be the experts on regulatory matters and teach the institution how to fulfill those requirements in their candidate searches or other areas, whether it’s on the staff or faculty side,” Donahue said.

One of the University of Florida’s strategic goals is to be a preeminent global research institution, a goal that sometimes necessitates hiring faculty members to work on projects overseas. HR is often called in to facilitate the hiring and making sure the infrastructure is created to support the position.

Ultimately, the onus is on the HR executive to establish a “trusted advisor” relationship among top leaders, HR executives acknowledge.

“Formal reporting structures won’t get it done,” said Morris. “You have to learn inside your organization how to get things done and you have to create the relationships to make that happen. At the end of the day, if you offer perspective in a way that you become a respected counselor then you will have an opportunity to provide input on a number of things.”

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University of Miami

# Hiring the professors

**Traditionally, faculty hiring has been the province of the department heads.** However, many institutions are tapping into the expertise of their HR offices to manage more aspects of faculty recruitment and hiring. While the candidate choice is still the department head's responsibility, HR is often utilized to manage search committees, recruit a pool of candidates, educate candidates on the institution, and to negotiate compensation.

"We have a much greater role in faculty hiring than in the past," said Gentry. "Ultimately, the hiring authority is the department chair. But we position the university to be as compelling as it can be when we go after a hire."

The more important the position, the more likely that the HR department will be called in to assist, HR executives say.

"The hiring of a rank-and-file academic remains a decentralized college and department responsibility," said Pietrykowski. "I get involved with higher-level positions, such as the dean level. I may head the search committee. This kind of search typically entails some introspection. 'What are we looking for? What's the state of college? Do we want someone who will be transformative? Transitional? Or is it a turnaround situation? How can we use this opportunity to make some giant leaps? It's an interesting, exciting, and revealing process to go through."

At UConn, HR will be brought in to situations where higher-level administrators—deans and provosts—are building a new interdisciplinary center or a research capacity in a particular area, and a large number of new professors or researchers need to be hired.

"When we're trying to build a whole area of strength, we're often brought in to assist," said Donahue. "We refer to it as building a zoo. We need one of these, one of those. HR is typically charged with tending the process."

While department heads have specialized knowledge and generally have a wide range of professor-level contacts in their disciplines, they may not have the expertise to conduct a broader search that will unearth qualified candidates outside of their direct contact base. This can be an especially significant issue for institutions that are committing to building a more diverse faculty pool.

"We help search committees understand the issues of diversity in hiring faculty," said Morris. "We developed an inclusion program for hiring staff, which we also make available to deans who are dealing with the issue."

"We could have easily said, 'I'm not in faculty hiring, [it's] not relevant to us,' " Morris continued. "But whether or not I'm in faculty hiring, I have a responsibility to the institution. We want to make sure our hiring practices across the board are as complete, robust, and inclusive as possible."

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# The talent challenge

**As HR executives in higher education attempt to partner with top leaders and provide strategic guidance, many are finding that they don't have a suitable number of HR staffers ready to take on strategic responsibilities.**

In most institutions, HR staffers develop a functional expertise in a specific area of HR but are not provided an opportunity to develop higher-level strategic or leadership skills.

"We've been dismayed at the limited capacity of the HR workforce in academia," Donahue said. "We've conducted some extensive searches. They took a long time and we were not impressed with the quality of candidates. There's a lot of people who grew up doing traditional HR transactional operations but don't have broader HR leadership experiences. If you're looking for someone who can be a strategic leader, there aren't many of them out there."

When UConn recruited in the corporate world, it found many candidates were strong in talent management but lacked other skills, Donahue said. "We need someone to understand the whole strategy of the enterprise and to think about how to make systems work well, how to satisfy collective bargaining requirements, and how to deal with large hiring plans, not someone who does talent management for a big corporation."

To develop people for higher levels of responsibility, they need to be provided with career paths—the opportunity to move horizontally to gain a broader range of functional skills and to work with different departments to develop greater institutional knowledge, noted Morris.

"When I was at Ford, I was developed both horizontally and vertically," Morris said. "I have tried to do that here, for example, moving people from the medical campus to the academic campus. The idea is to give them different experiences. That kind of development helps to create the pipeline and then you can attract people."

Despite the obstacles, there are success stories. Cavanaugh of Duke noted that two of his staff hires at other schools where he worked went on to become the head of HR at other institutions. "That's something I feel proud about and something we all should be thinking about when we hire people."

Formal leadership development programs have become more prominent at most higher education institutions in recent years. In most cases, the programs are administered by the HR department and HR leaders are encouraged to participate in the programs themselves. The programs usually cut across all areas and, as such, afford an opportunity for people in very different areas to interact and learn more about the institution.

"We have a leadership academy that has proven to be successful," said Pietrykowski. "It includes both staff and academia. There is a good deal of cross-pollination. There might be a provost with an IT technician. Maybe their paths would never cross otherwise."

For the most part, however, the leadership development programs at higher education institutions lag behind the programs in the private sector, HR executives acknowledge. "Our investment in leadership development is uneven," Donahue said. "In general, academia doesn't do this well. For example, most faculty have never received formal training in how to teach. And most department heads used to be faculty and never supervised anything. Now we're asking them to be administrators."

In the case of the HR function, the lack of programs to develop strategic leadership skills means the onus for finding the leaders HR needs will fall largely on the initial hiring process. "We need to have innately smart people in our HR unit that are attentive to their environment and proactive about the issues we face," Donahue said. "That moves the ball."



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