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Andriel Dees, JD, Vice President for Executive Search at Greenwood Asher & Associates, has led efforts in strategic diversity leadership within higher education through her roles as Vice Chancellor for Equity and

How can higher education's human resources officers navigate the changing landscape in 2025 and beyond, and move toward impactful leadership?

Human Resources in higher education has evolved beyond providing transactional processes or compliance measures for universities and colleges. Modern HR leaders must think strategically, be a partner across all of the organization, and serve as a key advocate of transformation for the college or university workforce. For those who aspire to become a leader in human resources, there are some key topics to consider:

Strategic Alignment with Institutional Goals

A strong HR leader cannot function in a silo; they must be at the table and participating in the essential conversations to ensure that there is a good balance of workforce who are aligned to support institutional goals, particularly around enrollment management for students.

Climate, Communication, and Culture Matters

Many titles for HR leadership are now incorporating the term "culture." The climate and culture of an organization is much more richly layered and complex than ever before. Each employee has value, and the organizational culture should reflect the balance of independent value with collaborative and organizational outcomes. For example, as institutions increasingly embrace hybrid work models, effective HR leaders will help the organization become more adept at communicating through technology, keeping a level of high engagement among employees, regardless of their remote, hybrid or onsite status.

Working Knowledge of a Unionized Environment

According to an August 2024 report from the National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education there has been a surge in unionization of employees, particularly in the area of graduate student workers. Student workers at all levels are an essential part of an academic structure. Regardless of whether a university is unionized or not, it is essential that a successful HR leader stay abreast of these changes and ensure employees have a way to engage with the idea of a collective voice, and promote a better university experience for all.

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Access, and Belonging (DEIAB)

There has been a significant backlash toward the work of DEIAB, through a variety of extreme tactics ranging from small changes to job titles of those supporting the work to complete dissolution of related offices and programs, as well as multiple state and federal legislative restrictions. The reality is that the higher education workforce still does not reflect the student populations they serve, and as a result there remains a chasm in outcomes for our student populations. Work to rectify this must be woven into the fabric of an institution, and today's HR leaders need to remain diligent to see that the policies and practices of their university are open to creating and retaining a diverse workforce.

Retention is a Holistic Practice

Universities have seen a rise in employees leaving higher education altogether, for a variety of reasons ranging from compensation, campus climate, a need for more flexible work arrangements, and career trajectories. Looking at an employee beyond what they bring to the work product and understanding their motivations, communication styles, even outside hobbies and talents, helps to build a sense of connectedness and belonging. Further, it is equally important to set the tone between an employee's work life and personal life so that while an employer understands the employee as a whole person, the two are able to set boundaries so that work doesn't seep into an employee's personal life. Working at a university should be positive addition to an employee's well-being and an adept HR leader will take into account these attributes, as well as others, in considering the value of an employee to the university.

Overall, the human resource leader in today's higher education environment needs to be a proactive partner in order to effectively support their institution in a way that articulates the value of being in a mission driven industry, and ensure that all people have a chance to achieve whatever goal or dream they desire for themselves, their family, and their communities.

If you have a recruitment question you'd like to ask Andriel, please send it to Katy@insightintodiversity.com and your answer may be featured in a future issue!