



The role of CHRO goes beyond HR: Leveling up at the ARU-HRI CHRO Academy

Reflections from the ARU-HRI CHRO Academy



Higher education is experiencing immense industry change: students are questioning the value of a degree, academic offerings are being diversified, and enrollment drops have not recovered since the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ Colleges and universities are redefining their strategic direction, and when the work of higher education changes, so does the workforce.

Amid the changes in higher education, the role of Chief Human Resources Officer “CHRO” is becoming more than a standard fixture on the university organizational chart. The role of CHRO exists across industries and organizations, but CHROs at universities classified as Research 1 (“R1”)² universities have an especially unique—and challenging—role. These CHROs sit at the intersection of a university’s mission and operational needs, supporting a diverse workforce comprising academics, students, staff, and researchers, among others. This requires a special skill set that includes HR expertise, strategic leadership, and the ability to engage an array of stakeholders. At R1 institutions, the CHRO role also requires HR executives to balance the needs of their large and complex organizations—private and public universities, including with hospitals, health care systems, and professional schools (e.g., nursing, business, medical, law, teacher certification)—with those of the greater community, including students, faculty, staff, researchers, and patients. However, some institutions struggle to find CHROs with proven expertise activating change for reasons such as not having an established pipeline of HR leaders and persistent high turnovers in HR.³

As both the higher education industry and the employee experience, more generally, continue to evolve, now is the time to develop the next generation of CHROs in higher education. The American Research Universities Human Resource Institute (ARU-HRI) recognizes this need and is committed to developing future CHROs through the CHRO Academy.

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The development and launch of ARU-HRI’s CHRO Academy

The goal of ARU-HRI’s CHRO Academy is to prepare the next generation of HR leaders to be influential executive HR leaders in a disruptive world, to drive HR performance, and to deliver meaningful results for their HR workforce and university employees. This program was formed, nonetheless, after the ARU-HRI realized these specific competencies were absent in existing programs. Previously, programs were geared toward individuals already in leadership positions and focused on traditional HR outside the higher education setting. However, today, the expectations for a CHRO go beyond workforce management and extend to achieving a university’s mission by sourcing and supporting talent, which requires more than traditional HR knowledge.

Seeking to evolve and enhance curriculum that equips today’s leaders with the skills to tackle today’s challenge and help to shape the strategy for the future, ARU-HRI’s CHRO Academy Planning Team interviewed current R1 CHROs in their membership. These CHROs were asked to reflect on their roles (i.e., what did they wish they knew before stepping into their roles?) and their experiences as executive HR leaders (i.e., lessons learned and ability to identify a potential successor). In these reflections, it became evident that some degree of technical HR expertise is required to practice at a higher level. However, to be successful, skills in strategy, relationship-building, and leadership in the complex R1 environment were considered most helpful.

Equipped with the necessary insights, the Academy Planning Team developed the content of each course in partnership with Deloitte Consulting. Course development teams focused on the audience, which has been identified as the next generation of CHROs. This audience needed to be both prepared to step into an executive role in the next two to five years and have the acumen to lead a modern, sustainable HR organization. Moreover, current CHROs, who were part of the Academy Planning Team, collaborated with ARU-HRI members and Deloitte Consulting to create a well-rounded, practical curriculum that challenged participants to step out of their specific department and connect HR to the business of an R1 university. The result of such collaborations produced a program that paired leading HR practices and higher education industry trends with the practical knowledge sourced from current CHROs and Deloitte’s experience serving clients in higher education.

1 Stephanie Saul, “College Enrollment Drops, Even as the Pandemic’s Effects Ebb,” *The New York Times*, May 2022, www.nytimes.com/2022/05/26/us/college-enrollment.html.
2 The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching classifies institutions of higher education based on a number of factors, including the investment in research, number of research staff in science and engineering, and the number of doctorates awarded in a year. R1 is the highest-ranking award and requires a very high research investment. Only institutions with R1 classification can be members of the Association of American Universities (“AAU”), which has 69 members in the United States and two in Canada. The AAU website touts that its member institutions “are on the leading edge of innovation, scholarship, and solutions that contribute to scientific progress, economic development, security, and well-being.”
3 Greg Lewis and Joseph Soroñon, “The Jobs with the Highest Turnover Rates, According to LinkedIn Data,” *LinkedIn*, June 2022, www.linkedin.com/business/talent/blog/talent-analytics/types-of-jobs-with-most-turnover.

CHRO Academy welcomes its inaugural cohort

After eight months of curriculum development, the CHRO Academy Planning Team asked members of ARU-HRI to nominate candidates from their universities who were ready to delve into strategic HR leadership and who were already prepared in three areas: understood the business of higher education, had strong communication and presentation skills, and had a solid baseline understanding of people analytics.⁴ Sixteen CHRO Academy participants and instructors gathered in Westlake, Texas at Deloitte University—Deloitte’s world-class facility where learning meets leadership—for the inaugural program.

Participants attended five courses designed to develop critical skills needed to be successful CHROs at R1 universities:



Strategic HR leadership

Aligning university mission and talent strategies.



The business of higher education

Exploring critical business and financial concepts that are fundamental to the day-to-day operations of public and private R1 institutions.



Building allies in the academic and research communities

Sharing ideas on how to enhance relationships within the academic community while strengthening allies for HR initiatives.



How we show up as leaders

Discovering new skills and strategies required in the CHRO role, including executive presence, authentic leadership, visioning for the future, and boardroom readiness.



People analytics and the power of insight

Fostering a data-informed mindset and encouraging use of data to make better decisions, identify opportunities for improvement, and drive growth.

Each course balanced traditional lecture-style learning with practical applications and team exercises to allow participants to collaborate in strategy and problem-solving activities. From idea-sharing and meaning-making, true learning occurred. Participants and instructors shared their unique perspectives and backgrounds, shifting mindsets and ways of thinking out of traditional HR functional silos. One unique aspect of the CHRO Academy was that each course was instructed by current R1 CHROs, who were open, candid, and humble in discussing their challenges and successes, as well as providing lessons and insights that are difficult to find in any other setting. Current CHROs used case studies and storytelling to share their experience and expertise, which were powerful learning experiences. Through both the courses and the informal networking sessions, the knowledge and advice from the CHRO instructors was noted as one of the most valuable components of the CHRO Academy.

Praise for a successful outcome

In its inaugural year, the CHRO Academy was a resounding success. While ARU-HRI and Deloitte’s vision for the first CHRO Academy was to provide a rich and valuable experience to participants, the Academy Planning Team also gained valuable insights through the program’s delivery. 100% of participants were satisfied or very satisfied with the overall experience and each specific course, citing the group discussions, case studies, and range of perspectives as valuable components.

One common theme in the feedback was the value of the lessons not typically shared in traditional training sessions, such as the real-life teachings from current CHROs and in the Building Allies course. One participant wrote that “the session focused on something that’s usually not taught or addressed in a training session. It was very helpful in thinking about how our role goes beyond the subject matter expertise.” It was clear that the CHRO Academy curriculum included the right topics and lessons to provide a holistic overview of the role of CHRO.

When participants were asked, “which element from the academy was most valuable?”, the responses overwhelmingly identified the professional interactions and exchange of information with participants and sitting CHROs. The connections to colleagues and current CHROs were the differentiating factor of the CHRO Academy, with one participant writing that “the network and the advice [were] so valuable, and [I] loved the nuggets I will put into play immediately.” Instrumental to the CHRO Academy’s success was the recognition and implementation of one crucial point: leadership does not happen in a vacuum—it is cultivated through teamwork and building on others’ experiences.

⁴ The full set of qualifications can be found on the [ARU-HRI website](#).

Conclusion

Through creating, developing, and hosting the CHRO Academy, ARU-HRI and Deloitte have six key takeaways on aspects of a successful CHRO at an R1 university.

- CHROs must be well-versed in the business of higher education. Learning about the campus dynamics between schools, research centers, administrative units, medical systems, and multiple campuses is key to positioning HR and its services at the forefront of campus business.
- When stepping into the CHRO role, leaders should network outside of HR to build relationships across the university. Future CHROs need to learn about each department's specific needs and priorities to help tailor an effective HR strategy. Finding allies across the university who can help support future HR initiatives should start in the early days as CHRO, or even before taking on the role.
- Successful CHROs find ways to connect HR's strategy to a university's teaching and research missions, taking on the mindset that a university's talent is a key driver of overall success. CHROs should tap into intersections between these missions and HR initiatives to lead a purpose-driven HR organization.
- CHROs have been acting like CHROs before they took on the title. They lead from all levels, looking for opportunities outside of their specific HR department to gain skills that can translate to their next position.

- Data is and will continue to be one of HR's most powerful tools. HR data is valuable to many influencers across campus and can be used as a common language to build consensus and align strategy. CHROs need to exemplify data stewardship and explore ways to collect and share HR insights that support the university's business.
- The role of CHRO goes beyond just HR. As a senior university leader, CHROs' broad experience and knowledge makes them a strategic business advisor to many across campus. CHROs should spend time in each school and unit to partner in problem-solving—even beyond traditional HR issues.

Along the same lines, current CHROs should reflect on their own experience and how they are developing future leaders within their own organizations. Some questions to consider: Are CHROs providing opportunities for cross-functional knowledge? How can rising HR leaders gain experience at the higher level of complex research universities? How can CHROs instill a strategic HR leadership mindset?

As higher education continues to evolve and face ongoing disruptions, ARU-HRI and Deloitte take pride in this opportunity to develop the next generation of R1 CHROs and are pleased to offer the CHRO Academy again in 2024.



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