

Navigating political and regulatory change without losing mission focus



A guide for higher education HR leaders



A roadmap to help higher education HR teams stay compliant, mission-aligned and people-first through ongoing change.

Your campus runs on purpose. Students pursue meaningful degrees. Faculty push the boundaries of knowledge. Staff keep everything moving. At the center sits HR—navigating policies, people and priorities in an environment that grows more complex by the month. You're managing Title IX updates, multi-state labor laws, evolving DEI expectations and growing questions around AI. Your team is lean. Your time is limited. But the mission still matters.

Every policy you shape and every system you maintain carries weight beyond HR. You're protecting the student experience, supporting academic life and helping staff stay focused in a rapidly shifting landscape. When resources are tight and expectations keep rising, clarity and conviction mean more than ever.

This guide offers practical strategies for turning external pressure into internal alignment in three high-impact areas: DEI, pay transparency and AI governance.

HR leaders have the opportunity, and the responsibility, to lead their organizations with vision and purpose.

Anton Roe CEO, MHR
People First Reinventing HR eBook



The pressure is real: Trends shaping higher ed HR

Higher education HR teams are feeling the squeeze:

- Budget scrutiny that slows every hire
- New interpretations of Title IX and FERPA
- DEI policies under political and legal pressure
- Rising expectations around pay transparency
- AI implementation questions with few governance standards
- High turnover, fragmented institutional knowledge

It's difficult to find breathing room when the ground keeps shifting. Some days, the urgent outpaces the important. But patterns are emerging, and with the right lens, they become easier to navigate. Use this guide as a tool to help reclaim focus and move forward with less friction and more trust.

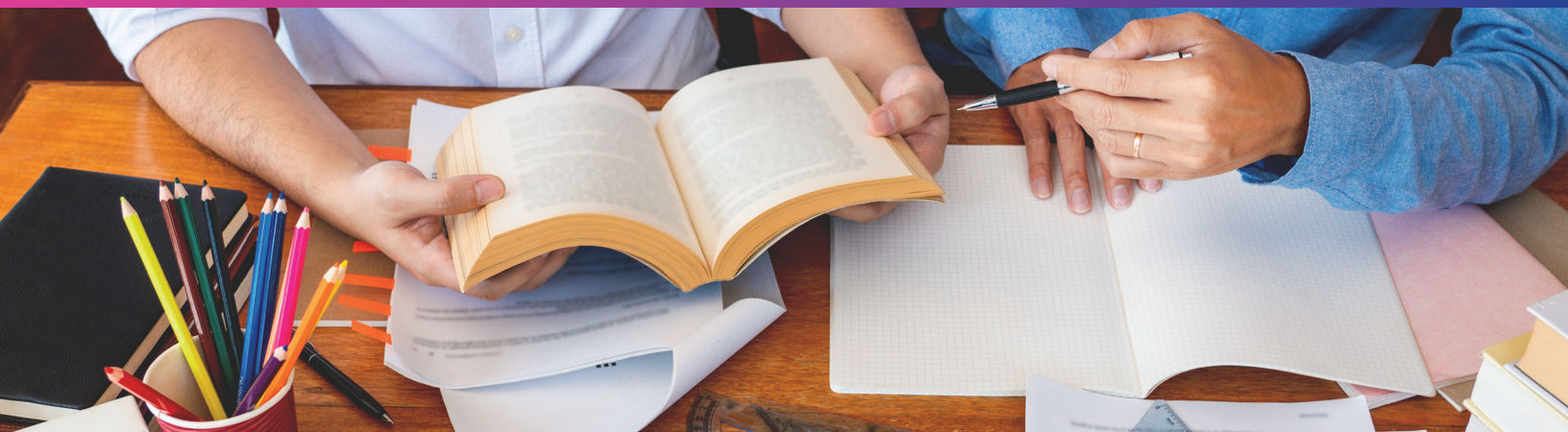
Compliance is just the starting point.

Today's HR teams are also expected to lead on communication, trust and culture, with fewer resources than ever.



STRATEGY ONE

Turn compliance into culture



When HR prioritizes values, compliance becomes a tool for culture instead of just a checklist.

Make compliance visible, not buried

People First powered by MHR supports audit-ready documentation for Title IX, FERPA and more. Its automated workflows reduce manual lift and create accessible records that reflect your institution's commitment to safety, privacy and inclusion.

Embed DEI into onboarding

Customize journeys so new faculty explore inclusive teaching practices alongside course planning. Staff learn

how their roles support students from diverse backgrounds. This transforms required training into mission-driven orientation.

Frame data privacy as community care

FERPA compliance can feel abstract, but respecting student data builds real trust. When employees see privacy as a core value, compliance deepens culture.

When reporting includes equity, engagement and access, it opens the door for deeper conversations about how well systems are serving people. And when those metrics are visible across teams, they help reinforce a shared sense of purpose.

TIP BOX #1

Mission-aligned metrics that matter:

- Representation in leadership programs
- Engagement scores by role type
- Internal mobility across employee groups
- Resolution time for policy-related concerns

Metrics are signals of what the institution values.



STRATEGY TWO

Human-centered AI, done right

AI implementation raises anxiety. Will it replace people? Will it erode trust? Higher ed HR has a chance to lead with empathy and clarity.

Start with participation, not policy

Form cross-functional committees that include faculty, staff and students. People First's sentiment analysis and check-in prompts can help identify community readiness and concerns.

Start small. Communicate often

Use AI to ease administrative burden—like benefits enrollment or interview scheduling—and build confidence before expanding. People First's hiring bias safeguards show how AI can support equity when used intentionally.

Pilot with grad student hiring

AI can screen for transferable skills across disciplines, while keeping faculty in control of final decisions. The key is clarity: show how tools augment, not override, human judgment.

What employees need to hear

Trust breaks down when people feel excluded from the process. Most employees aren't looking for deep technical detail. What's more valuable to them is clarity, plain communication and a chance to be heard. That kind of transparency creates room for thoughtful adoption and lowers the temperature around change.

“The real promise of AI lies in augmenting human capabilities—not replacing them.”

-People First eBook

TIP BOX #2

Building AI trust: what employees need to hear:

These conversation starters can help you build trust around AI tools.

“Our AI tools are here to reduce administrative tasks, so you can focus on student success—not paperwork.”

“AI supports decisions with insights, but people make the calls.”

“We’re committed to transparency, and we’ll inform you whenever AI is involved in hiring, evaluations or feedback.”

“Every application is reviewed with equity and ethics in mind. Decisions always include human oversight.”

3

STRATEGY THREE

Embed equity into every workflow



DEI works best when it's not a separate initiative, but a natural part of operations.

Use pay transparency as proof of values

New equity laws open the door to highlight fairness in compensation. Instead of just posting salary ranges, HR can showcase the why behind pay—linking compensation to role impact and mission contribution.

People First's real-time insights help HR monitor internal fairness and support leadership communication around pay decisions.

Conversations about compensation can quickly become emotional, especially when people aren't sure how decisions are made. Clarity matters, both in policies and the language used to explain them. When people feel respected in these moments, it goes a long way toward reinforcing cultural alignment.

Celebrate contributions across campus

People First's social onboarding and recognition features strengthen cross-campus relationships and reinforce diverse contributions to shared outcomes.

TIP BOX #3

Train managers to lead the conversation.
Give them language that reinforces purpose:

"We've based the salary on what's fair in the market, how the role fits into our team,
and the value it brings to the organization."

"We're always open to talking about how your experience fits into that picture."



STRATEGY FOUR

Make policy personal, not political



Political pressures may swirl, but HR can ground the conversation in values.

Keep the conversation going

Use People First's check-in tools and pulse surveys to surface feedback early. Help employees feel heard, even during policy transitions.

Equip managers for hard conversations

Middle managers need support to translate policy into culture. Provide talking points, discussion guides and space to ask questions themselves.

One well-handled conversation can do more for culture than a dozen policy memos. Employees remember how

changes were explained: who took the time, who made space for questions, who listened. That's what lingers. And it's what shapes the emotional core of institutional trust.

Mission check: Questions to ask before changing policy

- Does this support our core educational mission?
- What values does it reinforce or challenge?
- Have we engaged the right voices in shaping the rollout?
- Who may be impacted differently?
- How do we build trust while implementing this?

TIP BOX #4

Frame change through your mission.

When DEI programs evolve in response to legal shifts, focus on educational outcomes and inclusive excellence—not political talking points.

"We're updating our programming to continue preparing all students for success in diverse, global environments. These changes reflect our ongoing commitment to inclusive education."

Mission first, people always

Compliance isn't going away. Neither is change. But HR leaders in higher ed have a unique chance to transform disruption into alignment.

When you frame policies through people, and complexity through culture, you do more than just meet requirements. You strengthen your institution.

HR carries more emotional weight than most people realize. You're often the first to feel what's changing and the one asked to help everyone else make sense of it. That's real leadership. And the more support you have for the logistical work, the more energy you can invest in guiding staff through change.

People First supports this shift with audit-ready compliance, AI-powered insights and engagement tools designed for purpose-driven teams. It clears the manual clutter so you can focus on what really matters: trust, equity and community.

A framework for purpose-driven compliance

PEOPLE

Who's impacted?
What support do they need?

POLICY

What's required?
Where is there room to lead?

PURPOSE

How does this reflect and reinforce our mission?



Want to go deeper?

Explore more ways to build resilience, streamline operations and future-proof your HR strategy.

[Download our Reinventing HR eBook](#)

About People First

People First is an all-in-one HCM platform built for lean HR teams. With real-time tech, AI-powered tools and pre-configured workflows, it helps higher ed institutions manage compliance and culture in one place.



About MHR

MHR has been driving innovation across the HRIS space for over 40 years. We don't just meet the industry standard, we exceed it. Engineered by the latest SaaS technology, our product, People First enables increased employee productivity and organizational growth with a demonstrable return on investment.

People First is guided by what our customers and the market demand in a rapidly changing world.

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