



Cornell University®

Vice President and Chief Human Resources Officer
Cornell University
Ithaca & New York, NY

THE SEARCH

Cornell University (Cornell or the University) seeks a highly strategic, collaborative, and innovative leader to serve as its next Vice President and Chief Human Resources Officer (VP CHRO). Cornell University is a vibrant community of scholars, educators, students, and staff with cherished founding principles; world-class research; and curricula dedicated to preparing students to be well-educated, thoughtful citizens of the world. It is unique among its Ivy League peers as a private university with a land-grant mission, several New York State-supported colleges, and an international campus in Qatar. At this pivotal moment for American higher education—defined by financial pressures, workforce transformation, and evolving expectations of employees—the VP CHRO will guide Cornell through significant organizational change, some of which is already in process, while strengthening institutional trust, cohesion, and effectiveness.

Reporting to the President, and serving as a key leader, connector, and strategist across all of [Cornell's campuses](#), which include over [18,000 employees](#) and [11 unions](#), the VP CHRO is responsible for directing the University's overall strategic and operational human resources functions. As a trusted advisor to the President, Cabinet, Board of Trustees, and other institutional leaders, the VP CHRO will provide data-informed recommendations and pragmatic options on complex workforce, organizational, and cultural issues. Further, the VP CHRO will design, implement, and continually iterate on a change agenda that aligns with institutional priorities and capacity, while allowing flexibility for local needs and a shifting regulatory landscape.

The successful candidate will be a highly visible, engaged, and credible leader who thrives in complexity and brings tested best practices, empathy, and resolve to lead through change. They will work to elevate HR's role across the University as a strategic partner and ensure a consistent, influential presence in enterprise decision-making. Combining strategic acumen with operational depth, the VP CHRO will help Cornell balance competing priorities with clarity and decisiveness. With a deep commitment to Cornell's

mission and community, the next VP CHRO will play a vital role in shaping the University's future as an engaged employer of choice and upholding its reputation as a world-class academic institution.

Cornell University has retained Isaacson, Miller to assist with this important recruitment. All inquiries, nominations, and applications should be directed to the search firm as indicated at the end of this document.

ABOUT CORNELL UNIVERSITY

Founded in 1865, Cornell holds true to its founding principles, including Ezra Cornell's ambition to "found an institution where any person can find instruction in any study." Its faculty and students believe in the critical importance of knowledge—both theoretical and applied—as a means of improving the human condition and solving the world's problems. It embraces traditional liberal arts education, practical applications of knowledge, and interdisciplinary and collaborative approaches to research and teaching. The University's research enterprise has historically been among the best in the world and has been on a particularly impressive trajectory in recent years, capitalizing on an institutional culture that truly values interdisciplinary collaborations to fuel discovery and scholarship to improve the lives of individuals and communities at home and around the world. Among its peers, Cornell has become known as a campus that champions free and open intellectual expression and academic freedom, treats all individuals with dignity and respect, celebrates difference and diversity of viewpoints and social identities, and promotes accessibility for all.

Today, Cornell consists of [15 schools and colleges](#). Cornell's main campus is located in [Ithaca](#), a city of about 30,000 people in the heart of the Finger Lakes region of Central New York. Across the Ithaca campus, the Weill Cornell Medicine campuses in [New York City](#) and [Qatar](#), [Cornell Tech](#) in New York City, and [Cornell AgriTech](#) in Geneva, NY, the University enrolls over 16,000 undergraduates and over 10,000 graduate and professional students. Cornell employs approximately 8,400 staff, 1,700 professorial faculty members, 1,300 research, teaching, and extension faculty in Ithaca and at Cornell Tech, and an additional 5,800 staff and 1,700 faculty members at Weill Cornell Medicine in New York City. Cornell's over 18,000 faculty and staff forge novel partnerships where unexpected integrations of deep expertise point the way toward the solutions of tomorrow. The University fuels this through initiatives that elevate collaboration across disciplines and academic units. Cornell also oversees the Cornell Cooperative Extension System, which has full-time staff in every county of New York state.

Current Context

Amid great momentum and successes, Cornell also faces many of the challenges present across higher education: the weight of financial and enrollment pressures, an increasingly polarized climate, and continued questions about the role and future of American higher education in our society. Despite these challenges, Cornell has stayed true to its core values of purposeful discovery, free and open inquiry and expression, a community of belonging, exploration across boundaries, changing lives through public engagement, and respect for the natural environment. To ensure that the University can continue moving

towards a unified “One Cornell,” with greater alignment between its individual parts, the next VP CHRO will play a central role in navigating these challenges and preserving institutional values by acknowledging and honoring the changes that have been made or are currently in process while collaborating with University leadership across a range of initiatives meant to positively shape Cornell’s future.

Resilient Cornell

Resilient Cornell is a University-wide initiative to ensure Cornell’s long-term financial sustainability while reimagining how the University operates across all campuses. Rooted in Cornell’s core values and mission of teaching, research, and public engagement, this effort calls for bold, collaborative action to preserve institutional excellence and build a stronger future.

This is an all-hands-on-deck project. Leaders across academic, administrative, and enterprise units are working strategically to reduce costs and enhance revenue as faculty and staff contribute ideas through town halls, emails, feedback portals, and individual conversations. Two leadership committees are guiding the next phase, focusing on workforce design and cross-campus operations. Their work will be informed by data, campus expertise, and community input, and will reflect the collective ideas and efforts of the full University. You can read more about the Resilient Cornell efforts and the committees [here](#).

CEMI

As a leading university in the nation and the world, Cornell needs technology services that enhance the community’s pursuit of its mission “to do the greatest good.” The Cornell Experience Modernization Initiative, or CEMI (pronounced “see-me”) will unify and improve the University’s systems and processes to better serve the entire community—faculty, researchers, clinicians, students, staff, alumni, partners, and donors. By creating more efficient and user-friendly experiences, CEMI will enable community members to focus on what matters most: advancing Cornell’s mission. Part of the work of creating a seamless digital environment across Cornell will require each campus to be streamlined in a single platform, Workday. Working with Workday and a system integrator, Huron, the University is in the process of building, configuring, and designing Workday infrastructure to support this system-wide change.

You can learn more about CEMI, its projects, and impact [here](#).

University Leadership

President Michael I. Kotlikoff

Michael I. Kotlikoff is the 15th president of Cornell University and professor of molecular physiology. The Cornell Board of Trustees appointed him president on March 21, 2025, following eight months as interim president. Throughout his tenure at Cornell, President Kotlikoff has overseen numerous initiatives and landmark changes to advance the university’s excellence in teaching, scholarship, and outreach, and to enhance academic collaboration across Cornell’s disciplines, colleges, and campuses.

Previously, Kotlikoff was Cornell's longest-serving provost, holding that office from August 2015 to June 2024. Concurrently with his administrative duties as department chair, dean, and provost, Kotlikoff also oversaw an [NIH-funded laboratory](#) comprising senior scientists, postdocs, and graduate and undergraduate students, studying cardiovascular biology and heart repair. Throughout his tenure at Cornell, President Kotlikoff has overseen numerous initiatives and landmark changes to advance the university's excellence in teaching, scholarship, and outreach, and to enhance academic collaboration across Cornell's disciplines, colleges, and campuses. Under Kotlikoff's leadership as provost, Cornell created the [Ann S. Bowers College of Computing and Information Science](#), [Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy](#), and [SC Johnson College of Business](#); multi-college departments of computational biology, design technology, economics, psychology, sociology, and statistics and data science; and the cross-college Paul Rubacha Department of Real Estate.

Kotlikoff's signature strategic initiative, [Radical Collaboration](#), has enhanced Cornell's academic excellence and interdisciplinary collaborations by bringing together world-leading expertise from across widely divergent fields. The initiative has recruited faculty in artificial intelligence, design technology, digital humanities, nanoscience, sustainability, and other areas; led investments in university centers such as the Cornell High Energy Synchrotron Source, or [CHESS](#); the [Society for the Humanities](#); and the [Cornell Center for the Social Sciences](#); and given rise to the [Academic Integration](#) initiative, which deepened collaboration across the Ithaca and Weill Cornell Medicine campuses.

You can read more about President Kotlikoff and Cornell's [senior leadership team here](#).

ROLE OF THE VICE PRESIDENT AND CHIEF HUMAN RESOURCES OFFICER

Leading a team of 175 HR professionals, including 7 direct reports, the Vice President and Chief Human Resources Officer (VP CHRO) serves as Cornell University's senior-most human resources leader, responsible for shaping and advancing a comprehensive, data-driven central HR function that is informed by modern HR best practices across a complex, decentralized, and geographically diverse system. As a member of the President's senior leadership team, the VP CHRO will play a critical role in aligning Cornell's evolving people strategy with its academic, research, and clinical missions.

The central HR unit at Cornell supports faculty and staff throughout their experience at Cornell from recruitment to retirement by creating an environment that values and supports diversity; recruiting, hiring and retaining top-performing talent that support University priorities; offering a comprehensive and competitive compensation and benefits program; prioritizing continuing education, professional development, work-life balance, and organizational health; developing effective labor relations strategies; and designing and implementing policies, processes and programs in compliance with applicable laws and collective agreements. In addition to overseeing institutional HR, the VP CHRO also leads Cornell's Department of Inclusion and Belonging and Office of Civil Rights.

Across the Ithaca campus, Weill Cornell Medicine in New York City and Qatar, Cornell Tech, and numerous affiliated and extension entities, Cornell employs over 18,000 people. Given this complexity, Cornell has

a highly decentralized HR operating structure in which individual academic and operating units have HR leaders who report directly to their unit heads with a dotted line to the VP CHRO. This dual organizational structure provides Cornell's HR community with a vast breadth of information about its workforce and enables the central HR office to share knowledge and expertise, make decisions, and implement initiatives that are in the best interest of the University's large, varied population. The new VP CHRO will build and maintain strong working relationships with leaders and employees across the University to cultivate the trust and buy-in required to shape and develop the strategy, direction, policies, processes, and procedures that drive a strong HR function. Further, the VP CHRO must partner with leaders across the University to cultivate a culture of integrity, trust, and honesty, as well as support the recruitment, mentorship, and development of exceptional individuals with diverse backgrounds.

KEY OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

The next VP CHRO will be energized by and bring demonstrable success in addressing the following opportunities and challenges:

Create, set priorities for, and lead a modern and innovative enterprise-wide HR strategy

Cornell's complex and highly decentralized structure, encompassing a public-private mission, multiple campuses with distinct cultures, unionized and non-unionized employees, academic and clinical enterprises, and a growing global footprint, presents both a defining strength and a central leadership challenge. The VP CHRO must be able to navigate this complexity with political acumen, cultural sensitivity, and a nuanced understanding of how to balance enterprise-wide policy and strategy with localized flexibility. In the current structure, individual unit HR leaders report to their corresponding Dean or Business Officer and maintain a connection to the central unit through diffuse reporting lines that, if not maintained, lead to operational issues, increased service timelines, inconsistent policies, and inefficient systems. The next VP CHRO will have a unique opportunity to advance a more cohesive, innovative, and integrated HR strategy that preserves necessary local expertise and identity while establishing greater consistency, clarity, and shared service standards.

Continue to build a high-performing and connected central HR Unit

The VP CHRO will inherit a central HR team with a deep commitment to Cornell's community and a well of institutional knowledge and employee insight. Leveraging these existing strengths, the VP CHRO will foster a culture of continuous improvement and accountability, resulting in a central HR unit that is known for consistent operational excellence and high-touch service delivery. The VP CHRO will ensure that their team has the foundational skills, training, and service orientation to thrive in Cornell's modern workplace and balance the day-to-day transactional HR work with strategic thinking. With imminent retirements on the central HR team, the VP CHRO will need to account for the loss of institutional knowledge while assessing and addressing potential gaps in future succession planning. Additionally, the VP CHRO must work to create greater visibility and unity between central HR and unit HR leaders, helping each area understand their respective contexts as well as population-level HR needs. Achieving this unity will allow

the central HR team to better anticipate the unique needs within the units, be more effective at deploying system-wide HR policies and programs, and tailor them where needed.

Serve as a key advisor to leaders across Cornell

The next VP CHRO will serve as a trusted advisor to the President, bringing informed perspectives on workforce strategy, labor relations, employee relations, HR policy, organizational design, and culture to critical local and system-wide institutional decisions. In addition to advising the President, the VP CHRO will work in close collaboration with the Executive Vice President and Chief Financial Officer and other administrative and academic leaders to understand the University's financial and operational reality. In a system as complex as Cornell, this will require both deep functional HR knowledge and strong business acumen, including the ability to translate HR priorities into measurable impact. By establishing credibility as a strategic partner and contributing meaningfully to an interconnected institutional strategy, the VP CHRO will elevate the role of HR and help ensure that people continue to be central to Cornell's future success.

Be a consistent, visible presence within Cornell's communities

To be effective in a system as complex as Cornell, this leader will need to have a visible presence at the Ithaca Campus and across the other campuses in New York and abroad to intentionally build trust, credibility, and influence. Over the last year, Cornell's leadership team has been assessing and streamlining its operations and workforce to achieve greater financial stability and flexibility. In this context, the VP CHRO must serve as both a visible and empathetic leader, through authentic engagement, clear communication, and a consistent community presence. This includes attending on- and off-campus events, actively listening to employee concerns, strengthening relationships with shared governance bodies and union leadership, and demonstrating a genuine commitment to staff well-being and development.

Modernize HR systems, data, and technology

Building upon ongoing ERP and Workday efforts as part of the CEMI project, the VP CHRO will lead the continued modernization of HR systems and processes to ease administrative burden, enhance user experience, ensure compliance, and enable more strategic use of data. The VP CHRO, working in close collaboration with system-wide and local IT units, must be adept at thoughtfully leveraging technology, ensuring it aligns with the needs of Cornell's diverse populations and that it is well-supported through rigorous training and education. The incoming VP CHRO must be animated by the opportunity to tap into the knowledge of faculty and staff who are already working on ways to integrate AI and other systems into administrative processes to increase operational effectiveness.

Lead change in a complex and evolving environment

To be responsive to the changing face of higher education, Cornell has begun numerous operational change efforts across the University. Institutional leadership is capitalizing on this moment to intentionally

build a sustainable future for the University. The VP CHRO must help the institution navigate these changes and ensuing difficult decisions with honesty and integrity, deftly balancing compassion with operational realities. While these efforts create opportunities for modernization and efficiency, they have also introduced complexity and the potential for change fatigue across the system. The VP CHRO will play a critical role in managing change by coordinating, prioritizing, and advancing these initiatives as they intersect with HR with clarity and discipline. This includes providing clear roadmaps for change management, improving communication, and ensuring that changes are aligned, well-sequenced, and understood by stakeholders. To be successful in this moment, the VP CHRO must have demonstrated success leading transformation in complex environments, balancing urgency with patience, and driving progress while honoring and advancing work already underway. It will be essential that the new leader embrace the use of AI in ways that are effective and impactful as well as ethical.

Position Cornell as an engaged and transparent employer of choice

Cornell, like other higher education institutions, faces complex workforce challenges, including a desire for increased transparency, varying compensation scales and ranges across campuses, retention and morale concerns, and heightened competition for talent. While Cornell's deep connection to and impact on Ithaca's workforce and economy have their own unique considerations, other campuses face different challenges around employee engagement, compensation, recruitment, and retention. To position Cornell as an employer of choice, the VP CHRO must be mindful of these differences when creating overarching policies and programs that serve all of Cornell's employees throughout their tenure, regardless of geography. This work will require a deep understanding of the HR commonalities and nuances that exist between programs and campuses to create impactful policies and tailor solutions to address potential gaps in talent development, engagement, job architecture, compensation in a hybrid environment, and internal mobility. To be effective in such a complex system and ensure employee understanding, buy-in, and compliance, the VP CHRO must be a strong, multi-modal communicator, creating a tailored and transparent communications strategy that serves to increase engagement and provide clear rationales for decision-making and strategy.

QUALIFICATIONS AND CHARACTERISTICS

While no one person may possess all the qualities enumerated below, the ideal candidate will have many of the following professional and personal characteristics:

- A successful track record of leading complex HR operations in an organization of similar scope and scale to that of Cornell. Experience leading within a multi-site, multi-campus, or decentralized organization required. Experience with international HR preferred.
- Demonstrated leadership in HR strategy, policy development, labor relations, total rewards, talent management, and change leadership.
- Experience leading HR within a unionized environment with demonstrated success in negotiations and relationship management.

- Exceptionally high emotional intelligence, political acumen, ethical integrity, and a work style that is collaborative and collegial.
- Demonstrated competency in leveraging and implementing tech-forward solutions and operational modernization efforts. Specific experience designing or deploying AI tools in an HR context is preferred.
- Ability to thrive in a fast, high-intensity, data-driven, deadline-driven environment, dealing with multiple projects simultaneously.
- Proven ability to attract, retain, develop, and effectively mobilize a diverse group of talented employees.
- Proven success in creating, fostering, and supporting programs that address equity, inclusion, and diversity.
- Strong interpersonal and negotiation skills, with an understanding of organizational dynamics.
- Significant experience cultivating relationships with members of the university community regardless of status, and the sophistication to work at the most senior levels, including leadership and board.
- Exceptional oral and written communication skills.
- Ability to inspire and motivate HR and other colleagues with whom the individual will work from across the university.
- Prior experience in higher education, including at a major research university, is ideal, but not required. Familiarity with research and clinical operations is a plus.

COMPENSATION

The compensation for this role is set between \$515,000 and \$575,000.

APPLICATIONS, INQUIRIES, AND NOMINATIONS

Screening of complete applications will begin immediately and continue until the completion of the search process. Inquiries, nominations, referrals, and applications with resumes and cover letters should be sent via the Isaacson, Miller website [linked here](#).

Rebecca Kennedy, Managing Partner
Dan Rodas, Partner
Angelo Alexander, Senior Associate
Nicole Sancilio, Managing Search Coordinator
Isaacson, Miller

Cornell welcomes students, faculty, and staff with diverse backgrounds from across the globe to pursue world-class education and career opportunities, to further the founding principle of "... any person ... any study." No person shall be denied employment on the basis of any legally protected status or subjected to prohibited discrimination involving, but not limited to, such factors as race, ethnic or national origin,

citizenship and immigration status, color, sex, pregnancy or pregnancy-related conditions, age, creed, religion, actual or perceived disability (including persons associated with such a person), arrest and/or conviction record, military or veteran status, sexual orientation, gender expression and/or identity, an individual's genetic information, domestic violence victim status, familial status, marital status, or any other characteristic protected by applicable federal, state, or local law.

Cornell University embraces diversity in its workforce and seeks job candidates who will contribute to a climate that supports students, faculty, and staff of all identities and backgrounds. We hire based on merit and encourage people from historically underrepresented and/or marginalized identities to apply. Consistent with federal law, Cornell engages in affirmative action in employment for qualified protected veterans as defined in the Vietnam Era Veterans' Readjustment Assistance Act (VEVRA) and qualified individuals with disabilities under Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act. We also recognize a lawful preference in employment practices for Native Americans living on or near Indian reservations in accordance with applicable law.

This document has been prepared based on the information provided by Cornell University. The material presented in this leadership profile should be relied on for informational purposes only. While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of this information, the original source documents and information provided by Cornell University would supersede any conflicting information in this document.