



# Keystone Partners

**Recorded Message:** The Hennessy Report from Keystone Partners. A free flowing conversation with leaders in the HR community talking about themselves, the industry, and their work. Brought to you in cooperation with NEHRA, the Northeast Human Resources Association.

**Dave Hennessy:** Welcome to The Hennessy Report. I'm Dave Hennessy, and today's guest is Danielle Stanton, the chief human resources officer at SNHU. One of the fastest growing universities in the country, with now over 135,000 students.

Danielle shares their core value of doing the right thing as they support all of their students and employees during this health crisis. Also, she talks about another core value is challenging the status quo, and this organization that's been around almost a hundred years, about a decade ago, doubled down on online learning with the goal of making education accessible and affordable for everyone. Probably never so important as it is right now. She also shares how they've updated and scaled their operational model to make way for this rapid growth. I think you'll enjoy this episode.

Looking forward on the podcast. We have Toni Canada, the head of HR at the American Medical Association, also talking about COVID-19 and how they're supporting their members on the frontline of this battle. The shout out to my Keystone Partners colleague in Chicago, Paul Schneider, who made the introduction to Toni.

And now our conversation with Danielle Stanton.

Danielle, welcome to the podcast.

**Danielle Stanton:** Thank you, David. I'm happy to be here.

**Dave:** I got introduced to you from my cousin and your colleague at SNHU, Lisa Jennings, and also Carol Sabia. There were two people that said you have to interview Danielle for this project.

**Danielle:** That's right, that's right. Two wonderful people, for sure.

**Dave:** Absolutely. Before we get into so many topics, and there's a lot more to cover than when we first met this winter, obviously the world has changed so much. We always like to start the podcast learning a little bit about our guests. Could you share a defining moment earlier in your career that defines your work today?

**Danielle:** I think that most of us can think about mentors. Immediately out of college I decided I wanted to work in HR. I did really well in finance, but thought, oh, numbers are boring. I'm definitely going to dive right into human resources. Early on, had a mentor that really challenged every aspect of my work. Everything I would get back would have red marker or red lines or edits. I remember early on thinking, "What the heck?" As time went by, one day I got something back and there was nothing written on it at all. And I remember thinking, "Well, clearly she didn't see it." She had. I think back to that mentor, and what that person taught me, and really instilled in me a passion for excellence in whatever the work is that you're doing and putting out there.



## Keystone Partners

Then early on in my career, I had an opportunity to work with somebody who was in a more senior HR leadership role. They were mentoring me and bringing me along. It was an experience that I would say really shaped me, and not from an experience that was necessarily positive. I think it really had me question whether I wanted to work in HR, because what I was seeing exhibited was an HR type of behavior that's more punitive in nature. Punitive, policy-driven and not really about the people or partnership or the business. I didn't know it at the time that it was a defining moment, but I always think back about that moment now, because I made a decision to say, "What can I learn from this experience?"

Instead of approaching that, as I'm going to learn what to do, I learned what not to do, and how I was going to shape the values that I bring to the work. It was a very early experience, but that has taught me many years later, any interaction that I have with partners, colleagues, employees, it's always about treating people with respect and dignity. I don't care what the situation is. I don't think it was ever intended to be a major life lesson in emotional intelligence, but that it was.

**Dave:** Those are great examples. Thank you. Before we get into all of the things you're doing in HR, and what's going on with COVID-19 and how you're reacting to that, maybe you could just give us a little bit about SNHU. It's an amazing story, and I think if you could spend a couple of minutes just talking about the evolution of SNHU.

**Danielle:** It's ironic if you think about our current economic state, which to your point, who would have known when you and I met back in January, that this would be our new world. But if you go back to the financial crisis in 2008 SNHU had an online program, but they made a decision in 2009, even though they were a struggling institution, to really double down in the online world. It was looking at where are they going to place their bets to take the online offerings we had nationally to the next level. It was the right time. There was a great need in the country. You think back on that point in time, there were over 15 million people without a job that were looking to improve skills, and looking to educate themselves in an accessible, affordable way. SNHU came to the table with that solution.

I wasn't here at that point in time, but I don't think that anybody knew the degree to which we would...

**Dave:** Pun intended.

**Danielle:** Yes.

**Dave:** Sorry.

**Danielle:** But maybe back in 2009, we had just under 2,000 employees, probably about 12,000 students. Today we have over 11,000 employees over 150,000 learners. It has been a wild, wild ride. I came on just as the rocket ship, if you will, was beginning to take off in 2013. From an HR standpoint, in 2013, if you go back to our strategic plan at that point in time, it was really around one thing and one thing only, which was how do we make this business scalable? Nobody ever sent a memo and said, "Hey SNHU, get ready, because you're going to multiply in size times six."



# Keystone Partners

**Dave:** It sounds like times 12 now.

**Danielle:** Exactly. There were some functions, HR, finance, IT that were still operating in these models that were made for a much smaller business, or a business that wasn't seeing the week-to-week rapid growth. Then over time we really looked at how are we adding value, and how do we look at the human capital needs for this booming, growing organization?

**Dave:** That's amazing. Why do you call them learners not students?

**Danielle:** Learning should be ongoing for all phases of life.

**Dave:** I see. Can you tell us about the scale compared to other higher learning institutions? I don't know many colleges and universities that have 150,000 students.

**Danielle:** We're definitely one of the largest, although that's not our goal. We don't sit in leadership meetings and think, "Who is the largest? Who has the most students?" We're really focused on what is *our* mission and how do we bring *our* mission to life? You can't walk around today because there's nobody in our offices. But if you walked around, David, to any one of our offices and talked to people about the SNHU mission, our employees can tell you what it is. They can tell you why they're there. They can tell you how their job supports that, which is to transform the lives of our learners.

For us, it's not about a magic number about being the biggest, the best. It's about how do we continue to bring that mission to life and have the greatest impact we can on learners across the nation and across the world.

**Dave:** Maybe you could just talk a little bit about how SNHU is operating as an organization, how you're supporting students, professors, colleagues, during COVID-19. I imagine you might have more tools in your toolbox than some other organizations, based on the online learning component and the way you're used to working remotely.

**Danielle:** It's been a wild ride. For us in some ways, how do you support students was not a major challenge because we already support our learners on a daily basis in an online capacity. To us it's what we do every day, it's kind of in our DNA. For those traditional campus-based students, it was quickly looking at how do we take those programs that they're in and turn them over into an online capacity?

A large part of our workforce is already remote, but a lot of our frontline student service, learner service teams are based in New Hampshire or our satellite operations center that we opened this year in Tucson. Overnight we had to look at how do we mobilize this workforce and get these folks all working from home. I think that we have the technology, we had the resources. That piece was fairly easy to be able to make that transition for folks.

I think that when the challenge really came into play was then you get people working from home. Now all of a sudden, they have their children who are no longer in school. Now they are trying to manage their job and the requirements they have for their students, or their learners, or their role at SNHU, and



## Keystone Partners

they're trying to manage teaching a third grader, or a fifth grader, or a two year old who no longer has childcare. That is really where managing some of those challenges comes into play.

We've done that by number one: being as flexible as possible. A workday might not necessarily be eight to five, as it might have been when you came into the office. Maybe folks need to work different set of hours. Maybe they're flexing time with their partner to figure out who's taking care of children, or who's homeschooling, or who's on baby duty.

Another unique thing that we have put in place is we implemented a benefit called SNHU Time, and SNHU Time is a way for employees to have access to a bank of time to utilize if they or a family member gets sick with the illness, which we're hoping and praying that's not the case. But that's so they don't have to tap into paid time off or other benefits to get that coverage. It also allows those parents who are working from home, who need to be able to balance meeting the childcare needs. It allows them access to some time to allocate every week, to be able to balance those two and not have to, again, dip into their PTO time.

Another really critical item is communication. Some people might look and say we over-communicate. Our president, every week, he does a video for all employees. He is receiving questions on a weekly basis, where he is going face-to-face with all of our employees and answering every single question that comes in. We are meeting as a leadership team multiple times a week to assess where are we at? What are we hearing? What are the needs of employees? What are the needs of learners? How do we make sure that we're doing everything in our power to protect our people, protect jobs in this time of economic uncertainty. Making sure we're doing everything we can to also preserve cash and make sure that we're being really smart about where we invest and why.

**Dave:** Interesting. You mentioned at the very beginning of this, how you're supporting the on-campus students. I saw a news story, I think it was just a few days ago, did you lower tuition for your on-campus students?

**Danielle:** It's actually really exciting. We have been looking at, for some time, campus-based higher education models. In the fact that they're simply just not affordable, and students graduate as you know, David, with high levels of debt that become quite a burden over their lifetime. Our goal at SNHU is to make education accessible and affordable. We had been challenging ourselves for some time. How do you take that campus-based coming of age learner experience and make it affordable? Our current reality with this pandemic and this economic conditions of the world right now really made us push the gas pedal down on this work that was already underway in looking at how do we reimagine the future of higher education.

For those incoming freshmen for that coming of age experience, they're actually going to participate in online classes, because they're coming in and they're going to be helping us test out these different scenarios and programs. They will receive a scholarship for their first year's tuition, with the thought process and the model that their subsequent following years of tuition, we are committed to getting the tuition costs down to \$10,000 a year for any person looking for that campus-based coming of age



## Keystone Partners

experience. So that we can do our part to make education affordable and accessible to those who might not otherwise have that opportunity.

Right now, there's innovation teams that are working with our campus-based faculty and staff to look at developing the new models so that our academic year '21, we will be ready to launch.

**Dave:** That's great. You mentioned your innovation, and I was struck just visiting you that day and getting a tour, your corporate headquarters in Manchester. There were parts of it that felt like the tech companies that I'm used to going into in Cambridge or Boston. It's not a traditional higher learning ivory tower feeling at SNHU. Can you talk a little bit about that innovative culture that you've created?

**Danielle:** If you look at our core values, one of those core values is challenge the status quo. We pride ourselves in being innovative. At any one point in time, there might be many different experiments going on. We have R&D teams. We have people testing all different scenarios and programs. I think that the unique thing about that is you need to be able to take risks and you need to be able to allow for failure. You also need to be able to know when to walk away from things. I think that's what really has led to a great deal of our success.

I think on the tech side, I think it's never resting. You could talk to our CIO, who's also responsible for our transformation. The job is never done. We have made a significant investment in our IT structure, and that is continuously ongoing.

It's great if we have our learning right now, that's on a platform, but how do we get that to a mobile platform? How do we get that so that everything can be done in short bursts, in a mobile way, in meeting learners and students with where they're at? It's a constant evolution and we need to be in the forefront of that if we're going to be able to meet the needs of the learners of 2030, for instance. We have teams of people that spend time assessing what is the learner of 2030 going to look like? What's the technology going to be that we're going to need to have in place to be competitive?

**Dave:** There's an acceleration of the technology that's available.

**Danielle:** Sure. Yeah.

**Dave:** Well, let's talk about the HR evolution. Can you talk about maybe some of the first things you did when you arrived at SNHU?

**Danielle:** If I go back to 2013, one of the first things we needed to do is to get the HR infrastructure into the 21st century. I really came in and created a Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. What's the first thing we need to do? There was a lot of work to be done. Nobody cares about what type of leadership development you're going to be put in place if we can't get people paid and we can't get them on benefits. We really started off at the foundation. We were doing what I would consider to be a small acquisition on a weekly basis. Bringing in 50 new hires a week was pretty common at that point in time, but we didn't have a formal talent acquisition function. That was the first thing we did.



## Keystone Partners

So, by 2014, we had completely converted all of our systems from an HRES standpoint, over to Workday. Then over time, it's been interesting to watch our strategic plans evolve. If you go back to 2013, it's about scalability. It's about how do we have technology that can give us the foundation in the business processes to move us into the future? If you look at our 2013 strategic plan, which we publish, it's out there for anybody to see, the University really made five commitments in that strategic plan. Commitment number three is all about people. Commitment three across the University is how are we going to attract, retain, empower, and develop our talent? There's lots of work that we have done in that commitment three that centers around engagement. How do we engage employees? How do we survey our employees to know what the pain points are? We have spent a lot of time and done a lot of work in the diversity and inclusion space.

In development, going back to 2013, there really wasn't a formal employee development program. Today we have competencies mapped out for every level of employee. We have programs that are mapped out for every level of employee as well to support their ongoing development.

There's still always work to be done, and there's always room for improvement, but it's been exciting to look at the accomplishments this team has created. In seven years, from an HR standpoint, our team has grown from, I think 11 people to today we're probably around 75. It has been a team effort, no doubt. We've really brought HR to be a partner to the business and to really understand what are the business needs, and how do we support that from a people and a human capital standpoint.

**Dave:** That's leading to my next question. How is what you do in your department connected and integrated with the strategy of SNHU?

**Danielle:** I am on the leadership team within the University. I don't look at my role within that team as the HR person. I look at myself as a leader of the University who is a partner. We outlined what are the strategic initiatives that the University has in place for priorities at any given point in time or any given year. Then every team needs to look at what are they doing to support those? What is the work that the HR team, whether it is the benefits team or the folks focused in engagement, or development, what is the role that they have and making sure that they're supporting the strategy and the key initiatives of the University?

**Dave:** You're obviously an employer of choice. How do you go about communicating that message and attracting top talent to Manchester, and to other regions where you operate?

**Danielle:** It's interesting to look at how that dynamic has changed over the past 45 days. First of all, we work really hard to be an employer of choice. We have a core value that says, do the right thing. You see that core value applied in every decision that's made across the University. If it's a decision on what's in the best interest from a learner or for a student, you see our employees who are frontline service, that's what they use as their guiding principle. If I look within HR and leaders across the University, when there's a decision to be made, we come back to what's the right thing to do for employees. I think having that foundation really leads us to making decisions that put us in a place to be an employer of choice.



## Keystone Partners

We care greatly about engagement. We participate in a great college to workforce survey. We also have a monthly pulse survey where we always perform well beyond benchmark, but even though we're well above benchmark in those places, we still dive into where are the areas we can improve? How are we going to improve upon it? How are we going to establish those goals? How are we going to measure success, to make sure that we are in that place where people want to come and work for us.

If we go back in time, we're really looking at how do we make sure we're able to bring on employees in a place where New Hampshire had the lowest unemployment rate in the Continental United States. Having that good reputation and treating people internally well and getting the word out there, that SNHU is a great place to work was critically important.

Opening an operation in Tucson was really to make sure we were expanding access to a new talent pool, and also gaining some time on having a West Coast office that could service our students coast to coast.

**Dave:** The history of online learning maybe started more out West. So, you probably had some more talent on the ground out there.

I'm curious, people that were thinking about traditional on-campus universities all around the country might start thinking about, in the next year or two, SNHU might be a better place.

**Danielle:** Especially whether campuses open or not in the fall for those universities that are traditionally solely face-to-face campus-based. Some schools are having trouble making that transition. You might see students and parents that think, "You know what, it's too much of a risk next year." You might see a greater push to online schools, or taking a year off. I think we are optimistic, but like any organization, I think that we are being very mindful. We are, for all intents and purposes, entering or in a recession.

We need to be smart about the choices that we make so that we can ensure that we're protecting our people, protecting jobs, preserving cash, while also investing in innovation in the future, and also being optimistic. If we go back to the financial crisis in 2008, that's what really led SNHU to the dramatic growth that we experienced. Could our current state today lead to that? We look at what the data tells us on a day-to-day basis, but it feels a bit like a roller coaster most days. Just waiting to see where that rollercoaster stops, I guess...

**Dave:** Are you seeing any indications, like your people that deal with applicants? Are there any early indications?

**Danielle:** I think that we are seeing that people want to do something constructive with this time. People that might be unemployed are looking for ways that they can use the time to benefit. I think that we're also seeing and hearing that people are feeling like they have a whole bunch to juggle. Generally in a recession, you would see people looking to go back to school, to take on new learning, to increase their skill. This is an entirely different situation. It is too much of an unknown. None of us have ever lived through a pandemic. I would say, David, that we're optimistic that with the unemployment rate as high as it will that people will be in a position that they will need to and want to increase their skill, continue their education. We're optimistic that SNHU will be a place that makes sense.





# Keystone Partners

**Dave:** You have to prepare for furthering a more accelerated growth, but you just don't know.

**Danielle:** Yeah.

**Dave:** One of the things you and I talked about when we were together is how you make teams really effective inside SNHU, and I'm curious, how do you make that happen? How do you reinforce it? And also how do you do it now in this environment?

**Danielle:** You cannot be an innovative organization without having effective teams. I think that starts at our core, as you look at our core competencies that we have set in place, from individual contributor to a senior leader. The common themes that run through those competencies that all lead up to having effective collaborative interdependent teams, such as instilling trust, valuing differences, being a collaborative partner, building high performing teams. Then all of our development programs are built off of those competencies. We're developing people on those competencies, and then we're evaluating people on those competencies. I think everything that we're doing from a talent management standpoint, reinforces those competencies that are all driving to how do we be a collaborative interdependent, innovative organization.

For some of us, for me I'll say, it's certainly easier to do that face-to-face with a whiteboard. I lasted four days working from home without a whiteboard before I broke down and made the Amazon purchase. For us, RingCentral has become our life. We are continuing to connect even while we're in this social distancing phase. I will say that we are getting a whole bunch done. We're being more productive than ever, and it's working out.

**Dave:** That's good. That's good.

Keystone produces this podcast in cooperation with the Northeast Human Resources Association with, and Meghan's part of the emerging HR professionals. Meghan, our producer has the NEHRA question of the podcast for you.

**Meghan Mandino:** I see a lot of parallels between the terminologies of emerging professionals on NEHRA's side and your learners, because it's people from all walks of life. How can emerging professionals in this really turbulent time take the opportunity to develop themselves for future opportunities? If you had any HR-targeted courses or learning objectives that they could seek out?

**Danielle:** Whether it's HR or any other area, I would first recommend that somebody make sure that they are participating in learning that aligns with their interests, and what they're passionate about. If you are an emerging leader in HR, or you're looking to build a career in HR, sometimes folks think if I want to work in HR, I need to know about compensation. I need to know about benefits, and you do those are important. But you need to know how a business operates. You need to know financial terms. You need to be able to read a balance sheet. You need to be able to know about economic challenges. That would be my recommendation to somebody in HR and somebody out. I think it's really about being resourceful, taking initiative. That's really, I think, what sets folks apart.





# Keystone Partners

**Dave:** That's a really good answer. It reminds me about how you partner with corporate to help organizations develop their own talent inside.

**Danielle:** We have a few different partnerships. Internally, we have a group called Workforce Partners that partners with businesses to help educate their employees. If you're an organization that generally provides a tuition benefit, you can partner with SNHU as a way to provide that benefit to your employees, enroll them in SNHU programs. It's a great benefit to offer.

That group also works at doing lots of different specialized programs to meet the needs of whatever partner it is they're dealing with. It might be generic plans, or it might be more of a specialized program, depending on the needs of that partner.

We also have a partnership with Guild who brings learning to lots of large employers, such as Walmart, where SNHU can be the deliverer of education to their employees, and be able to help those organizations propel their employees and helping increase skill set, and get folks to the next level.

**Dave:** Do you teach in other languages as well?

**Danielle:** Well, we have partnerships to bring our programs to different areas that we're expanding into. We support refugees in Rwanda and a few other places right now, nationally. We have our competency-based programs that are actually in refugee camps today, which is pretty cool. It's a great way to give back and have an impact on the world.

**Dave:** We have another question for you. This comes from our HR leader at Keystone, Julie Burke.

**Meghan:** Julie was really excited to get some input with there being so many opinions on what is the right time to return to work, how are you anticipating balancing the needs of employees with the needs of the business when starting the process of bringing people back in from remote work?

**Danielle:** That's a question we grapple with every day. Safety is going to be first for us, and that will guide all of the decisions that we make. We're not going to put ourselves in a position where we are putting the health and wellbeing of our employees or their families at risk. I will tell you right now, we are at a work-from-home world, if you will, until June 8th. Then we're going to reassess as May approaches and see what does June bring to us. I imagine whenever the date comes, that it'll probably be a slow roll. I don't think that we're going to land in a place where we're going to bring back 1,500 people into one of our larger office locations at Manchester where everybody, and I mean, everybody is in a cubicle. We will look at how do we bring folks back and still make sure we're practicing a degree of social distancing? I also think we're contemplating and thinking through how is this experience going to dramatically change what it means to work from home?

We had already been running some test pilots on moving to a more remote work-from-home distributed workforce environment. I suspect that what we are all living through today are going to lead even more and more organizations to embrace more fully distributed workforces and work from home policies for the long term for sure.



# Keystone Partners

I think we're always going to need a place to come together. I think that there is great work that can get done when people come together and can innovate and can brainstorm. But I think that for folks who are not normally comfortable working from home, boy, did they get pushed into a place pretty quick, where you need to get comfortable and get on board. I think that that has made a whole population of people comfortable with this new reality and embracing it.

**Dave:** Not only for SNHU, but for the whole world. I think we're going to be thinking differently about workspace...

**Danielle:** Absolutely.

**Dave:** ...you've been doing it. You probably are a little bit ahead of the game than some other organizations.

**Danielle:** And we have not seen a decline in productivity, which is refreshing. I think everybody's doing their part to make sure that we're getting done everything we need to get done. That also invites more opportunity to look at how we can expand that.

**Meghan:** I don't know if you've heard the recent stories, with so many more people using Zoom, and it goes from YouTubers to actual crimes happening, but people logging into other Zoom meetings. A lot of classrooms are experiencing that with teachers who weren't sure how to properly secure themselves, and the response to security protocols when it comes to remote work.

**Danielle:** It's scary. One of my close colleagues experienced that in a workshop she was in on a Zoom meeting that got hijacked and completely inappropriate, unexpected. Nobody knew what the heck was going on. I think it definitely highlights an opportunity for Zoom and for other like products, there needs to be a way to have those items more secure, especially if this is going to become more and more the way of the future.

Even for students and we're talking about workers, but how does this impact the future of students? I think Meghan, that's a great point and a huge need to make sure that those items are secure.

**Dave:** All right, Danielle. Here's a question we ask everybody. If you could write a letter, professional advice, career advice to your 30 year old self. Dear Danielle.

**Danielle:** I think I would just say stay true to yourself, follow your gut and just stay focused on doing the right thing, and everything will fall into place.

**Dave:** Something interesting about you that we wouldn't find on your SNHU bio or on your LinkedIn?

**Danielle:** What you wouldn't see is that there was a point in my life where I was determined to be an actress on Broadway. Instead I gave that all up for a career in HR.

**Dave:** Well, that leads to my next question. What's the greatest performance you have ever seen?



# Keystone Partners

**Danielle:** It's got to be Garth Brooks. I wish I could come up with something more culturally artistic, but it's got to be hands down, Garth Brooks with his guitar in Vegas. And that's it. It was phenomenal. I wish he would do it again. I'd recommend you all go.

**Dave:** Well, Danielle has been great having you on our podcast. Thank you for making the time in this very chaotic environment we're all living in. It sounds like you're preparing the best you can to deal with it.

**Danielle:** Yeah. Thanks for taking the time. I wish the best to everybody else, helping to sort out these challenging times, and especially challenging times for their employees and making sure we're doing everything we can to help folks.

**Dave:** Thank you, Danielle. So nice to have some time with you again.

**Danielle:** All right guys. Take care.

**Meghan:** Bye, Danielle.

**Recorded Message:** Thank you for listening to The Hennessy Report from Keystone Partners. Be sure to subscribe to listen to all of our conversations with leaders in HR. Go to [keystonepartners.com](http://keystonepartners.com) and click on the podcast button.

The information, opinions, and content presented in this podcast are for general information only. Views, thoughts, and opinions expressed in the podcast belong solely to the speaker, and not necessarily to the speaker's employer, organization, committee or other group or individual.

Keystone Partners assumes no responsibility or liability for any errors or omissions in the content of this transcription. The information contained herein is provided on an "as is" basis with no guarantees of completeness, accuracy, usefulness or timeliness.

© Keystone Partners and The Hennessy Report. 2020. All Rights Reserved.

All other trade names or company names referenced herein are used for identification purposes only and are the property of their respective owners.