

## Leader Profile



### Karla Hughes, PhD

Chancellor,  
University of Arkansas at  
Monticello



Leadership is a process and  
learning is continuous.

- Dr. Karla Hughes



Witt/Kieffer is proud to have served the  
University of Arkansas at Monticello in the  
recruitment of its chancellor.

### A Story of Preparedness, Perseverance and Passion

Karla Hughes brings a wealth of experience to her role as chancellor at the University of Arkansas at Monticello – the first female to lead a four-year university in that state’s system. She previously held the position of executive vice president and provost of the University of Louisiana system, and administrative and tenured academic positions at a host of other leading institutions. Throughout her personal rise she has embraced and tackled issues related to women’s leadership, organizational change, community engagement, and student graduation and success. Her successes are noteworthy for someone who at a young age was not destined for higher education.

#### Q: How did you become a leader?

**Hughes:** No one expected or encouraged me to go to college, and quite frankly, I did not have the self-confidence to believe that I would be successful. However, three women changed my life. First was my high school home economics teacher. She decided that all of her students should at least experience being on a campus and had a required field trip to the Kansas State University Open House. That day changed everything for me. Once at KSU, I was selected for a pilot project for first generation students. The Dean of Women headed up the project that was designed to help us navigate campus, establish a network, and encourage us to believe in ourselves. And, finally, the Dean of the College of Home Economics was the kind of leader who was visible, involved with students, and motivated those around her to do their best.

I still remember the day that I decided that I wanted to be a dean, and I went to work learning everything I could about higher education and leadership. Of course, I did the traditional things like get involved and volunteer for projects that put me in leadership roles. However, I think that I began the process of being a leader as I watched other leaders – good and bad – impact organizations and people.

#### Q: How then would you describe your recipe for professional success?

**Hughes:** My recipe for professional success is to understand that leadership is a process and learning is continuous. Success comes from never being satisfied with the status quo and always looking within to become better than I am today.

#### Q: Do academic leaders who thrive in state systems need different or additional qualities than those who thrive on independent campuses? What defines good system leadership today?

**Hughes:** State systems require an understanding of group dynamics, the power of leverage, and how to work as a team – in other words, great things can be accomplished if you do not care who gets the credit. It is easier for those on independent campuses to lose sight of the power of collaboration and the issues all of higher education face. I believe this is partly because an independent campus is generally governed by a Board that focuses on that campus only, whereas state systems are governed by a Board responsible for multiple campuses.

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Good system leadership is defined by an understanding of the political environment and the state of higher education today. In addition, an effective system leader focuses on why higher education is critical in today's society and works toward that end.

**Q:** What is your take on the state of women's leadership in higher education, and what advice do you have for women whom you mentor?

**Hughes:** While there are many more women in leadership roles in higher education, there is still the initial assumption that men are better as chief executive officers "just because." And, even when women are placed in leadership positions, many stand back and question their decisions and actions in a way that is not done with men in leadership roles.

Therefore, it is important for a woman in higher education leadership to know that attitudes and assumptions are still alive and well while using all of their innate talents, knowledge, and experience to move the institution forward. A woman leader must be thoughtful and strategic but cannot waste time second-guessing herself.

The advice I give to women that I mentor is to acquire knowledge vigorously and gain a broad range of experiences to expand leadership opportunities. I also tell them to know themselves well – know what you need to keep your balance and understand how you work so that you surround yourself with the right people and remain calm in any crisis.

I also encourage women to find at least one trustworthy person who complements their strengths and weaknesses. If possible, create the opportunity to work with that person through promotions and/or institutional changes in a mentoring relationship. I have done this with my Chief of Staff and we have created a team that operates efficiently and effectively.

And, finally, I would tell them to look to those who have a deep understanding of the issue of women and leadership. One of the best resources is *Women and Leadership in Higher Education* by Longman and Madsen. I am a believer that the more we know and understand, the better we are able to work with or within any situation.

**Q:** What is the best career advice you've ever gotten?

**Hughes:** How a leader reacts in a crisis sets the tone for the rest of the organization; therefore, you need to develop a sense of calm while addressing the issue.

This advice has served me well as I have advanced in higher education leadership because I have been involved in reorganization and institutional change that tends to upset everyone. As long as I could set the tone, over-reaction and anxiety were minimized.

**Q:** Finally, please complete the following phrase: "Good leadership requires . . ."

**Hughes:** Personal integrity, perseverance, and passion.

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