

## Discussions in Diversity



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# The Chief Diversity Officer

BY DR. DAMON A. WILLIAMS AND DR. KATRINA C. WADE-GOLDEN

*Numerous institutions are moving toward the chief diversity officer model of leading and managing diversity in higher education. These officers carry formal administrative titles and ranks that range from vice president for institutional diversity to associate vice chancellor for diversity and climate and dean of diversity and academic engagement. Yet, if one asked these officers what they do, most would respond that they are the institution's "chief diversity officer," using the descriptor more commonly found in the corporate world. This article summarizes key findings from a national study of these officers and presents several concepts to assist human resource professionals and others in their efforts to design new roles, support search committees, locate the best talent and help new officers launch to a fast start.*

## Introduction

In a national study of the structure, background and key strategies of diversity capabilities, we interviewed more than 70 individuals, conducted numerous site visits, collected more than 100 hours of audio-recorded data and gathered 1,000+ documents to develop a comprehensive understanding of the roles of chief diversity officers (CDOs) in higher education and other areas of organizational life. This article summarizes key findings from our study and presents several concepts to assist human resource professionals and others in their efforts to design new roles, support search committees, locate the best talent and help new CDOs launch to a fast start.

## The CDO Trend in Organizational Life

In many respects, the development of chief diversity officer roles in higher education follows the same meteoric path that recently took place in the corporate environment and is beginning to emerge in other nonprofit sectors (Dexter 2005). During the 1990s and into the 21st century, chief diversity officers emerged at numerous Fortune 500 companies like IBM, MTV and Kraft to help them understand and capitalize upon the "business case for diversity." Where diversity issues were defined previously in terms of moral and humanitarian purposes, the new millennium corporate diversity rationale centers on retaining diverse talent, competing in a globally interconnected economy and capitalizing on the nearly \$2 trillion domestic spending power of ethnic and racially diverse groups (Thomas 2004).



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These forces and others drove the emergence of the corporate CDO, just as changing demographics, the emergence of a knowledge-based economy, a focus on the educational benefits of diversity flowing from the University of Michigan Supreme Court admissions decisions (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado & Gurin 2002), persistent societal inequities, and the corporate community calling for graduates prepared to lead and follow in a global and interconnected world provided strategic impetus for the emergence of the CDO in higher education (Williams, Berger & McClendon 2005; Williams & Clowney 2007). This point is echoed by a higher education recruiter who has conducted several prominent CDO searches in recent years: “Presidents and provosts are really trying to get out in front of diversity issues and be more strategic. They are tired of being reactionary. They want to move first and not wait for a campus incident or scenario to happen that forces them to confront diversity as a challenge. They want to confront diversity as an opportunity.”

The quickening pace of change has resulted in the University of California, Berkley; Wesleyan University; University of Nevada, Las Vegas; Xavier University; Berklee College of Music; Rochester Institute of Technology; University of Virginia; Harvard University and other institutions developing inaugural chief diversity officer roles.

## **Defining the Role of the CDO**

Where others work on issues of diversity as a matter of second or third priority, CDOs concentrate their efforts on diversity as the primary focus of their administrative practice. While the combination of titles and structures is nearly endless, coupled with the fact that many have adopted the CDO nomenclature without a clear understanding of its definition, there is little consensus regarding optimally designed CDO positions. However, our research identified the following defining characteristics across the majority of officers in our study:

***Change agents on campus.*** Chief diversity officers are “change management specialists.” Among other activities, the CDO leads campus-wide diversity planning and implementation efforts, seeds new diversity initiatives and develops diversity educational strategies for executives, faculty, staff and students.

***Point leaders on issues of diversity.*** Although duties may include affirmative action/equal employment opportunity or the constituent needs of minorities, women and other bounded social identity groups, CDOs provide point and coordinating leadership for diversity issues broadly defined to include the entire institutional community.

***Relational leaders.*** Given the complexities of campus diversity initiatives, CDOs serve as powerful integrating forces for diversity issues, collaborating and working through the lateral networks and relationships of the institution regardless of staff size.

***Rely upon status and influence to encourage and drive change.*** CDOs generally have little authority outside of their formal span of control and leadership. As a result, their source of “power” is grounded in status, persuasion and symbols (Williams & Wade-Golden 2006).

## **Organizational Design**

Organizational design is time-consuming and usually involves a number of discussions involving difficult organizational politics and questions of strategy, structure, processes and requisite skills required to perform in the role (Gailbraith 2002). Inevitably, institutional leaders begin with questions like: At what level should we rank the position? Whom will the person in the position supervise? How large should the budget be? Should we restructure any current diversity offices like women’s studies, multicultural affairs or disability services? Should the CDO have tenure and serve on the faculty? Should he or she have a legal or academic terminal degree? What duties should form the core of the CDO’s job responsibilities? These issues and others can consume senior leadership, planning teams, human resource professionals and search committees developing CDO roles at their institutions.

In a forthcoming book on executive-level diversity professionals, *The Chief Diversity Officer: Strategy, Structure and Change Management*, Williams and Wade-Golden (at press) respond to each of the above questions and the process of designing these roles in terms of the Chief Diversity Officer Development Framework and its explication of: (1) a strategic diversity platform, (2) archetypes of vertical structure, (3) the lateral diversity dynamic, (4) skills and backgrounds of officers, and (5) change management principles and strategies.

A full explanation of the framework is beyond the scope of this article; however, what follows is an overview of key design principles, institutional rank and archetypes of vertical structure which challenge human resource professionals and search committees developing these roles on campus.

### ***Institutional Rank***

A primary source of influence for chief diversity officers is their location at the presidential or provost level of formal administrative hierarchy. This positioning sends a powerful message to the entire campus community and allows CDOs to infuse diversity into highly politicized discussions. If these officers were not present, these issues may not be mentioned or understood in a manner consistent with institutional diversity goals.

Some of the most influential CDOs often have titles centered around academic affairs, student development, international affairs or faculty development in addition to their “diversity” titles. According to one officer we interviewed, the presence of a title like “vice provost for diversity and academic affairs,” in combination with a portfolio of units and responsibilities in both areas, signals that the officer is “more than simply a resource on matters of diversity and suggests a fundamental connection between diversity and academic excellence.”

One point of caution is that a simple change in title is not enough. For example, merely naming the vice president of Student Affairs as the institution’s chief diversity officer is insufficient to fully operationalize the CDO role on campus. By definition, CDOs make issues of campus climate, infusing diversity into the curriculum, faculty development and other diversity matters a top priority. A hybrid role should only be configured after an in-depth analysis determines that this is the most feasible course of action. Failure to engage in this self-study may result in a chief diversity officer in title only. If not carefully configured, a portfolio may result that is too broad and precludes the prioritization of diversity as a matter of institutional importance. Whether in a hybrid or a tailored CDO role, diversity must remain at the center of role responsibility.

Given the importance of leveraging symbols to influence campus dynamics, it is critical that the “chief diversity officer” nomenclature be used to describe campus function and not rank. Providing a formal rank such as vice president or vice provost clarifies the officer’s position in the hierarchy of the institution and provides him or her with maximum positional capital associated with operating at the highest levels of the institution. The absence of this clarity is an impediment to leading change, especially for those officers with few staff, no direct reporting units and limited resources.

### ***Three Organizational Archetypes of Vertical Structure***

The vertical authority of CDOs ranges from basic one-person offices to more complex multi-unit configurations that may include more than 20 direct reporting units and multimillion dollar budgets. Mintzberg (1979) argued that the process of designing organizations is simplified by determining organizational archetypes which categorize the basic permutations of a particular organizational role. Though many decisions are necessary to design a highly effective organization, only a few archetypes exist for most (Mintzberg 1979). Our research identified three basic archetypes of the CDO structure (*see Table 1*): the Collaborative Officer Model, the Unit-Based Model and the Portfolio Divisional Model.

Each archetype presents a general template for how an institution might design the vertical capabilities of the CDO’s role. Each model represents a general organizational type rather than a defined set of organizational mandates. In some instances, a particular unit may not easily fit into one category and may possess hybrid characteristics of multiple models.

**Table 1. Archetypes of CDO Vertical Structure**

Archetype	Key Characteristics	Sample Institutions <sup>i</sup>	
Collaborative Officer Model	Limited human resources characterize this model as officers may only have administrative and student support in their immediate span of control. In the absence of a staff, high-ranking titles, charismatic leadership and the ability to negotiate with financial resources become even more important.	Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute	Vice Provost for Institute Diversity
		Miami University	Associate Vice President for Institutional Diversity
		Berkeley College of Music	Vice Provost for Cultural Diversity
		Xavier University	Vice Provost for Institutional Diversity
Unit-Based Model	This model requires the same type of leadership as the Collaborative Officer Model but is distinguished by the presence of a central CDO staff of administrative support professionals, programming and/or research professionals and/or other diversity officers of lesser rank.	University of Denver	Associate Provost for Multicultural Excellence
		University of South Florida	Associate Vice President for Diversity & Equity
		Trinity College	Dean of Multicultural Affairs & Affirmative Action & Equity
		Wesleyan University	Dean of Diversity & Academic Advancement
Portfolio Divisional Model	This model is characterized by aspects of both the Collaborative Officer and Unit-Based Models. It is distinguished by the presence of several direct reporting units in a vertically integrated portfolio.	University of Connecticut	Vice Provost for Multicultural & International Affairs
		Indiana University	Vice President for Student Development & Diversity
		University of Michigan	Senior Vice Provost for Academic Affairs
		University of Washington	Vice President for Minority Affairs & Associate Provost for Diversity

<sup>i</sup> Note that these institutions were selected as examples of vertical structure, not to illustrate optimal or suboptimal design. Comments noted in the text of each archetype description are not necessarily attributed to these institutions, as several institutions which do not appear in this example set were included in the study.

### *Collaborative Officer Model*

By definition, individuals operating in the Collaborative Officer Model may have little formal power in terms of possessing staff, units and direct supervising authority over others (Galbraith 2002). Generally, officers in this model have a small support staff, commonly defined by administrative personnel, student employees and perhaps a special assistant. Projects and initiatives are implemented nearly exclusively through collaborative relationships and lateral coordination.

Because of limited human resources, these officers have a restricted ability to independently implement programs and initiatives through their formal authority as executive officers of the institution. The only notable exception is when the officer controls a sizeable budget and is able to temporarily outsource services and support for events and initiatives implemented through his or her office. Successful officers in this model rely nearly exclusively on the reflective power of senior leadership, the ability to influence change through personal charisma and the ability to leverage relationships and offer financial resources to broker new alliances. These officers commonly led campus-wide diversity planning committees and task forces.

These officers mentioned being stretched thin because of their non-existent staff and the requests to participate in every initiative, committee, banquet, search and conference. In response to the environmental press for their involvement, it may be important to narrowly define the area of responsibility for officers operating in this model. A number of officers in this model focused on a narrow span of priorities like diversity faculty recruitment or infusing diversity into the curriculum. Typically, they coordinated information and were not involved at the ground-level of executing campus diversity initiatives and projects.



Although officers operating in the Collaborative Officer Model clearly felt they were effective, they did find it paradoxical to be high-ranking officers with no staff or direct reporting units. When lower-ranking diversity officials exist in academic, student and administrative affairs and the CDO has no formal authority over these areas, institutions may experience organizational dissonance and a strategic misalignment of dedicated diversity capabilities. This is particularly true when institutions use nebulous language like “the CDO will coordinate the work of diversity offices across campus to ensure that their work is consistent with the institution’s overall vision for diversity.” Similar statements often appear in job descriptions describing the relationship of Collaborative Officer Model CDOs and other diversity units on campus.

How does one coordinate the work of others if they are not in that person’s administrative portfolio? What happens when existing diversity units resist a new vision calling upon them to develop new programs and initiatives designed to impact all students, and not just students of color? How do CDOs convince areas like ethnic and gender studies that these academic diversity capabilities must be closely aligned with the work of the CDO and may operate in a more powerful manner by collaborating with one another? These are the questions that institutional leaders must ask themselves when developing the Collaborative Officer Model CDO structure. Otherwise, campus diversity units may at minimum not align with the CDO, and even worse, operate at cross-purposes when their relationship to the CDO is nebulous.

#### *Unit-Based Model*

The Unit-Based Model is characterized by a more robust vertical capability than the Collaborative Officer Model. Officers in this model have a central staff that may include other diversity officers at a lesser rank, administrative support staff and perhaps program and/or technical specialists. A number of officers in this model serve as the institution’s affirmative action officer or have undergone a reframing of their roles in recent years to elevate the position and make it more relevant. For example, at the University of Denver (DU), the Office of Minority Affairs was reframed into the Center for Multicultural Excellence, and the CDO position was titled at the associate provost level.

The mission of the unit also evolved to focus on inter-group relations and dialogue, faculty diversity recruitment and retention and the academic success of historically underrepresented students. This solution allowed DU to reframe current diversity capabilities in order to tackle the most difficult diversity issues, build on current diversity budgets and staff and immediately provide the new officer with a structure to guide institutional diversity efforts. The budget for the office was consistently increased and new staff added as its efforts affected the entire institutional community.

#### *Portfolio Divisional Model*

The Portfolio Divisional Model is the most vertically integrated of the three archetypes and includes characteristics of the Collaborative Officer and Unit-Based Models in addition to a compendium of direct reporting units.

As outlined in Table 2, our research identified 10 potential units located under the direct supervision of the CDO: (1) minority and multicultural affairs, (2) cultural centers, (3) ethnic and gender studies, (4) retention and pipeline initiatives, (5) community outreach, (6) affirmative action and equity, (7) training and development, (8) student support services (e.g. admissions), (9) research centers and institutes, and (10) international affairs.

**Table 2. Chief Diversity Officer Responding Unit Framework**

Category	Description	Sample Units
Multicultural & Minority Affairs Offices	Multifaceted offices focusing broadly on diversity issues and combining a number of goals in their mission including issues of campus climate, retention, student programming, academic support and student outreach. The primary thrust of programming is centered on students of color and/or speakers and lecture series for the broader campus community.	Office of Minority Affairs; Office of Multicultural Affairs; Office of Academic Multicultural Initiatives; Office of Racial & Ethnic Student Affairs
Cultural Centers	May or may not focus on a particular cultural group and tend to be free standing with space for student meetings, programs, social events and computer usage.	Latino Cultural Center; Rainbow Center; Asian Cultural Center; Women's Center; Resource Center for Persons With Disabilities; International Student Center; Multicultural Resource Center
Ethnic & Gender Studies	Dedicated to advancing knowledge in a particular area of race, culture, gender or ethnicity and may offer a major/minor, courses, colloquium and other initiatives for the campus community.	Institute for African American Studies; Institute for Asian American Studies; Center for Institutional Diversity; Women's Studies
Retention & Pipeline Initiatives	Focuses on retention and academic success activities. May include units with special admissions programs for capable but under-prepared students, as well as government programs intended to build the pipeline of talented youth into higher education.	Student Support Services Program; Upward Bound; Academic Support Center; Educational & Support Services; Strategic Faculty Hiring Office
Community Outreach	Provide opportunities for students to engage in service learning activities and community service.	Community & School Partnership Program; Service Learning Center
Affirmative Action & Equity Compliance	Affirmative action and equal opportunity offices that have responsibility for discriminatory investigation, the government affirmative action plan and assuring compliance with all federal and state regulations during faculty/staff search processes. The ombudsmen role may be housed in this area of units.	Office of Affirmative Action; Office of Diversity and Equity; Office of Institutional Diversity
Training & Development	Centers for teaching and learning, offices of faculty development, diversity training units and more recently intergroup relation programs are housed in this general area.	Center For Research on Learning & Teaching; Intergroup Dialogue Programs; Diversity Education
Student Services	Units not typically associated with diversity and multicultural affairs focusing on enhancing and supporting the undergraduate experience, oftentimes irrespective of traditional diversity related identities.	Office of Undergraduate Admissions; Office of New Student Programs; Office of the Registrar; Counseling Center; Scholarship Services
Research Centers & Institutes	Centers and institutes dedicated to researching and exploring issues of diversity, community and difference.	University of Michigan National Center for Institutional Diversity; Indiana University Center on Diversity; Office of Institutional Research
International Affairs	Areas dedicated to studying international issues and providing students with study-abroad activities.	International Affairs; English Language Proficiency Offices; International Student Center

More than any other model, the Portfolio Divisional Model involves a reframing of previous assumptions regarding the institution's current organizational structure. Institutions interested in reorganizing in this way should take caution that institutional politics and entrenched histories may result in organizational backlash.

The development of this type of archetype of structure parallels other administrative reorganizations, but some may argue that it "ghettoizes diversity" and "removes campus responsibility for others to become involved with diversity work." To the contrary, when viewed through an organizational rather than symbolic lens, this archetype presents a number of key benefits including: (1) creating a consistent diversity leadership structure, (2) generating synergy between relevant diversity units, (3) enhancing financial efficiencies and achieving economies of scale, (4) extending the academic and administrative diversities capabilities of the institution, and (5) perhaps bringing together domestic and international diversity capabilities under the same organizational structure.

Some CDOs began in one model and evolved over time. For example, at the University of Michigan, the CDO initially had oversight for only one unit — minority affairs. Over time, the divisional portfolio grew as new units were integrated into this officer's span of control. Similarly, the University of Connecticut CDO assumed oversight for international affairs after nearly five years of providing leadership to a combination of cultural centers, ethnic studies institutes and other units.

## Finding the Right CDO

When an institution decides to hire a CDO, great care must be given to finding the right candidate. This task can be difficult and is especially relevant for human resource professionals assisting with the search process. Our research suggests that applicant pools may yield up to 150 applicants and include faculty members with a diversity research agenda, lawyers well versed in affirmative action law, student development diversity specialists, diversity officers from the corporate community, higher education executive-level diversity professionals and others.

In preparing a search, a number of tough issues often are discussed regarding the abilities that define a qualified candidate. These issues include whether the individual should possess a Ph.D. or other terminal degree, qualify for tenure, have a legal background and experience with compliance issues, and whether the person should be a member of a minority group. While these issues remain the source of debate, the ultimate decision must be determined by the institutional context and predicated on factors such as core job responsibilities, span of offices the CDO may supervise and the degree to which the officer intersects with issues unique to higher education, such as tenure and promotion. To say that a person is qualified simply because he or she is a Latino and a tenured member of the faculty in music theory is flawed.

The superordinate goals of providing leadership for diversity and guiding change must direct the selection of the candidate, or institutions run the risk of hiring individuals that are woefully under prepared for the demands of such a complex, high-profile and politically charged position. Although the exact mixture is hard to define, we believe that the most successful officers will illustrate seven key attributes regardless of academic and administrative background:

- (1) ***Technical mastery of diversity issues.*** The CDO should have an excellent command of all aspects of diversity issues in higher education, including faculty recruitment and retention issues, identity development, access and equity, diversifying the curriculum, assessing the educational impact of diversity, measuring the campus climate and the policy and legal dynamics of affirmative action and diversity in higher education.
- (2) ***Political savvy.*** The CDO must be particularly astute at navigating an institution's political landscape, responding well to politically charged or politically sensitive situations. They must possess an ability and willingness to find win-win solutions when contentious circumstances arise and know how to build consensus, accrue buy-in and work through competing interests.



- (3) ***Ability to cultivate a common vision.*** The CDO must be able to resonate with students, faculty, staff and administrators, and be committed to working collaboratively with other senior executives to build a common vision and direction for the institution.
- (4) ***In-depth perspective on organizational change.*** The CDO should possess an outstanding command of the dynamics of organizational change and have relevant experience leading large-scale change projects.
- (5) ***Sophisticated relational abilities.*** The CDO must possess a high degree of emotional intelligence, charisma and communication abilities. Given that much of the work will be accomplished through lateral coordination, a CDO must have the ability to cross numerous organizational boundaries with fluidity and adapt language and styles to different audiences.
- (6) ***Understanding of the culture of higher education.*** The CDO should possess in-depth knowledge and experience regarding the culture of the academy. Colleges and universities are different from any other type of organization, and to achieve success, the CDO must understand the culture of shared governance, tenure and promotion, multiple and competing goals, decentralized campus politics and the unique needs of all involved with respect to diversity.
- (7) ***Results orientation.*** Although not singularly responsible for diversity outcomes, the CDO must be results-oriented and committed to encouraging the change agenda to achieve significant results. Consequently, it is fundamental that he or she illustrate how diversity is an integral component to the successful fulfillment of the institutional mission and a fundamental aspect of academic excellence in the 21st century.

### **Action Steps for a Powerful CDO Launch**

Implementing the CDO capability requires a consistent commitment to supporting campus diversity and the work of this office. Numerous internal and external stakeholders will challenge the validity of the office, its worth to the institution and the resources expended to hire top-tier talent. This is to be expected, as many view the CDO role with skepticism. To ensure that the CDO is successful in overcoming these challenges and others, we offer several recommendations.

***Educate the campus community throughout the search process*** to counter flawed assumptions that this new officer will “operate as the campus police telling people what to do.” Unfortunately, these mental models exist because of the compliance and punitive orientation of affirmative action offices historically. Faculty, administrators and staff should broadly understand that the new officer is being hired to enable the institution, not to serve as a “diversity watchdog.”

***Develop a first-year budget and list of resources before hiring the officer to ensure adequate funds are in place to launch the new unit.*** This allows the officer to mobilize consultants, visit benchmark institutions, acquire new resources, hire phase-one staff and attend relevant conferences. One of the strongest criticisms of numerous search processes was a lack of clarity regarding the current and potential resource base of the position. By developing a phase-one budget, institutions illustrate a solid commitment that will aid in recruiting the most talented and experienced diversity officers.

***Establish a transition team to assist the new officer*** with meeting key stakeholders, understanding the institutional culture of inclusion and exclusion and developing a better sense of institutional norms. This type of insight will accelerate the new officer's ability to add value on campus by more quickly sensitizing them to the current reality and needs of the institution.

***Immediately charge the CDO to generate a strategic vision*** illustrating a general framework or template for how the position might evolve, major initiatives that he or she plans to undertake and resources required to accomplish the work. This is an important part of the officer's first 90 days so that momentum associated with the new hire can be quickly integrated into institutional budget priorities and activities on campus.

***The president and/or provost should remain open to a CDO-led institutional assessment*** to determine the optimal vertical structure and mission/priorities of his or her unit. Indeed, this assessment may be a part of the initial strategic vision and part of a broad diversity capabilities audit which identifies existing campus diversity resources and opportunity areas to create new efficiencies and impact.

***The president and/or provost should identify the key lateral relationships in which the CDO must engage*** to accomplish his or her work, and notify these individuals of the important role they will play in enabling the work of the institution's newest executive. This might involve having these individuals allocate someone from their staffs as a liaison to the officer with a percentage of time dedicated to institutional diversity matters. One best practice at a large institution in the Northeast involved a staff person in the development office having a dedicated responsibility to work with the CDO. This person was charged with developing new grant-funded projects and initiatives to accelerate the work of diversity on campus.

## **Conclusion**

In the 21st century, institutions will need an evolved and more powerful ability to engage institutional diversity initiatives. Changing demographics, the need to educate all students to lead and follow in a diverse world, and a continually evolving diversity paradigm indicates that top diversity executives will be in high demand as the CDO movement continues.

To create educational and professional environments of the new millennium requires a shift in the organizational culture of colleges and universities. Although no single individual can transform an institution alone, the CDO can play a key role highlighting the priorities of the campus and incrementally moving it toward a long-range vision of inclusive excellence. Successful institutions will design the CDO role as part of a broad system of diversity strategies (Williams & Clowney 2007) and hire officers with a commitment to "interrupting the usual" (Smith, Turner, Osei-Kofi & Richards 2004) and serving as "tempered radicals" (Meyerson 2001).

Though the challenges may be great, the time has come to take this courageous step and develop executive-level diversity roles that are more than symbolic. Diversity professionals have come a long way in the last 30 years and in the new millennium, chief diversity officers will increasingly become an important part of an institution's standard for excellence.

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