Introduction

As universities seek to leverage technology to improve all facets of operations from student experience to new revenue streams, the chief information officer (CIO) role has quickly evolved from that of a peripheral service provider to integral strategic leader. Information Technology is no longer a siloed function within a university, but rather a source of strategic differentiation that must be integrated across all aspects of a university’s operations in order to drive educational outcomes and achieve institutional goals. Experienced and talented CIOs act as collaborative partners, working with academic and administrative leaders to plan and ensure the most effective use of institutional resources. Today, the role of the CIO is no longer primarily about keeping the computing “lights on,” but rather leveraging technology to differentiate an institution’s offerings, and promote collaboration, innovation, security and accessibility for faculty, students and staff.

In order to understand the typical pathways to success for the CIO role in higher education, Russell Reynolds Associates analyzed the backgrounds, profiles and career paths of the CIOs at U.S. News and World Report’s Top 100 National Universities. Factors examined included tenure, previous work experience, educational background, gender and racial diversity, as well as whether the CIOs were internally promoted or externally hired. We also spoke with several hiring managers (whether president, provost or executive vice president) who oversee these CIOs, giving us deeper insight into the hiring strategies and perspectives of university leadership. Together, these inputs helped us identify several surprising trends in the makeup and profile of the CIOs in top-ranked universities in the United States.
Despite efforts to improve diversity throughout higher education, CIOs at the Top 100 institutions remain demographically homogeneous. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the CIO role remains overwhelmingly homogeneous: 79% of the top universities’ CIOs are male and 93% are white. Public universities tend to be slightly more diverse, with 24% of public school CIOs being female versus 19% at private schools and 10% from ethnic minorities versus 5% at private schools. Our data also suggest that women and minorities are more likely to be hired via external search processes: 26% of externally hired CIOs were female versus 13% who were promoted internally, while 9% of externally hired CIOs were non-white compared to only 3% of internal hires. External searches, which are often conducted with the help of a third-party search firm, often prioritize diversity, resulting in a wider variety of candidates than internal pools can provide.

A majority of CIOs are hired externally, suggesting that succession planning processes have room for improvement. While external searches appear to improve candidate diversity, the choice to hire an external candidate in 68% of the CIO roles that we analyzed suggests that succession planning processes may not exist at most universities or are at best failing to yield the desired results. Among the 100 institutions we reviewed, only 38 have an official deputy CIO role. It may come as no surprise that succession planning within academia is behind the curve when compared to its corporate counterparts.

Over the course of our experience recruiting for and advising a wide variety of higher education institutions, we have observed a tendency within the academic community to assume that competitor schools are further ahead in building out certain organizational functions, resulting in a reflexive decision to conduct an external search in the hopes of yielding a higher caliber of talent. Universities with strong IT leadership could benefit from adopting the same orientation toward succession planning that has proven successful in the corporate world, enabling them to develop the caliber of talent they require while retaining the significant institutional memory that comes with an internally promoted candidate. In addition to saving the time and money that would otherwise be invested in an external search, succession planning offers several other long-
lasting and strategic benefits, including the ability to maintain continuity of strategy and execution in the event of an unexpected departure, the opportunity to formally recognize up-and-comers who may be “waiting in the wings” and the chance to structure mentorship and the handover of responsibilities in a more thoughtful manner. Moreover, succession planning exercises can be useful in revealing gaps in a team’s composition or skill set that can be addressed prior to a leadership departure and often serve as a morale booster for employees who want to understand how they fit into the long-term plan for the department.

**Nearly two in three CIOs have worked only in academia, with another quarter coming from a hybrid background that includes work outside academia.**

Almost two of every three (62%) CIOs have worked only in academia, while 27% have a hybrid background. Nearly a fifth of externally hired CIOs have worked only outside of academia, with private schools demonstrating a greater likelihood to consider these non-traditional candidates: 21% of private university CIOs come from outside the academy, compared to 12% of public university CIOs.

It was a shock to the system, a bit of feather rustling at the beginning. He brought a business mentality to the operation, and it didn’t take long for the organization to say, ‘Wow, this is pretty good. We know where we sit. We know what we’re measuring. We have more pride.’ People were really delighted.” Another hiring manager stated, “Our new CIO [from the private sector] was a perfect fit intellectually, culturally, emotionally. So insightful about understanding the issues I was talking about—decentralized organizations, integrating medical centers. He was very service-oriented coming from outside—surprisingly more service-oriented than what I think you grow inside.”

CIOs from outside academia may also bring other positive cultural priorities from the corporate world, including an increased appreciation for and focus on diversity in hiring. Remarked one hiring manager who recruited his CIO from the private sector, “Corporate America is so far ahead on diversity initiatives. They get that this is critical to serving shareholders and society. [The CIO] recognizes how important diversity is, it’s just natural to him. You look at the teams he builds—they are diverse across nationalities, race, religion and gender.”

**More than half of current CIOs have prior experience as a CIO or deputy or interim CIO, but few have faculty experience.**

Two-fifths of CIOs have prior experience in the role, with an additional 15% having previously served as a deputy or interim CIO in academia and 16% coming from a university-wide IT-related role, such as associate vice
president for IT client services or senior vice provost for analytics and technologies. Almost 30% of current CIOs previously held other IT leadership roles, most within a specific school or college of a university, such as CIO of the faculty of arts and sciences or dean of computing and information services, suggesting that serving as a CIO within a college or school can serve as a solid pathway to the university-wide CIO role.

Only 15% of the CIOs in our analysis have prior faculty experience, with the majority of those having served in tenure-track roles. While not a prerequisite, CIOs with faculty experience often have a deeper understanding of and passion for research computing, which resonates with faculty in a university environment. Furthermore, faculty-member CIOs may also garner respect more easily from other faculty, given their common credentials. That being said, CIOs with faculty experience typically try to solve problems using their academic tool set, which may fail when applied to solving business problems.

Just over half of CIOs have a master’s degree, while 23% have a PhD. MBAs are more common among private university CIOs (25% vs. 10%), perhaps because private institutions are more likely to hire CIOs from the corporate world. Conversely, PhDs are more common among public university CIOs (32% vs. 20%). Some public institutions require the CIO to have a PhD in hopes that s/he will also teach. In addition, a PhD can help to justify a more competitive salary for public institution CIOs. CIOs hired externally are slightly more likely to have a PhD (27% vs. 20%), perhaps due to the highly competitive nature of national searches.

Reporting structures do not vary meaningfully between public and private institutions. A higher proportion of external candidates report to the president than to the provost.

Among the universities we analyzed, reporting structures vary considerably with no clear consensus, as a plurality of 47% report to the provost, while 29% report to the president and 24% report to another leadership role, such as an executive vice president or chief operating officer. Although there are no meaningful differences in reporting structures between public and private institutions, there is a slight difference in reporting structures between candidate types: 33% of external candidates report to the president versus 21% of internal candidates. This discrepancy may result from the sense that a higher caliber of talent will be attracted to a role that reports to the president, making it an appealing “carrot” to offer external candidates.
Given that the CIO role has evolved from that of a peripheral service provider to integral strategic partner, institutions may wish to consider having the CIO serve on the president’s cabinet. As one private university leader who reorganized the CIO role to report directly to him remarked, “You might embed [the CIO] in the provost area or under the COO. But I didn’t see academic institutions saying, ‘IT is critical.’ I was firmly committed to trying something different in the CIO model. The academy wasn’t developing the model I wanted.”

The average tenure for CIOs is 5.8 years, but varies dramatically by gender, institution type and reporting structure.

Surprisingly, the most significant differentiator of tenure is gender: female CIOs have an average tenure of 8.3 years, 63% longer than their male counterparts, who average 5.1 years on the job. This trend aligns with patterns across the labor force; according to a recent study published in the *American Sociological Review*, average job tenure for women across industries has risen 19% since 1983, while average tenure for men has decreased 11%.¹ CIOs reporting to the provost also have longer average tenures (6.5 years) than those reporting to the president (5.2 years) or other leadership role, such as an executive vice president (5.7 years).² Private university CIOs average 6.4 years in the role, 25% longer than public school CIOs, who stay on average 5.1 years, potentially attributable to the traditionally higher compensation and fewer resource constraints within private institutions. Similarly, CIOs at private universities may encounter less bureaucracy, making it easier to drive change and therefore creating a particularly rewarding professional environment.

---


² It is worth noting that 9 of the CIOs who report to the president have been appointed within the last year, potentially skewing overall tenure figures.
Best practices for schools anticipating a CIO search

1. **Committee composition must balance efficiency with efficacy.** Search committees should be large enough that various stakeholder perspectives are sufficiently represented, but small enough that decision-making processes are efficient. While smaller committees are more efficient, a committee of 12 allows for representation of the many stakeholders who have a vested interest in university IT. Only in the rarest of circumstances should a committee exceed 15 members.

2. **Look beyond the academy.** Committees should consider candidates from both within and outside the world of higher education, including those from corporate, nonprofit and public sector backgrounds. While the transition to academia may require some adjustment, a number of non-traditional candidates have been extremely successful in a university environment. These crossover candidates can bring significant value, providing the university with an opportunity to leverage skills and practices from other industries that can drive innovation and growth.

3. **Don’t focus excessively on the brand.** CIO skills are highly transferable, and exceptional talent can be found at many different types of institutions. Committees that focus only on “brand name” schools as sources of talent are likely to overlook some excellent candidates.

4. **Search confidentiality is critical.** A lack of confidentiality can affect candidates’ willingness to engage. Members of the search committee should never share the names of candidates with anyone outside of the committee, and referencing should be conducted by the hiring manager or the search firm, later in the process. Search committee members should not reach out to colleagues at other institutions to inquire about any candidate. Such inquiries can adversely impact a candidate’s situation at their home institution and can damage the outcome of the search.
JETT PIHAKIS, PhD is a Consultant for the Nonprofit practice, focusing on higher education. Based in Washington, DC, he focuses on identifying senior academic and functional leaders within colleges and universities.

ERIC SIGURDSON co-leads RRA’s Technology Officers practice. Based in Chicago, he has recruited CIOs across all industries globally for companies ranging in size from $500 million to $50 billion in revenue.

EMILY MENNEER is the Global Knowledge Leader for the Nonprofit practice. She is based in Boston.

KATIE WHITTUM is a Knowledge Analyst for the Nonprofit practice. She is based in Washington, DC.

Russell Reynolds Associates is a global search and leadership advisory firm. Our 400+ consultants in 47 offices work with public, private and nonprofit organizations across all industries and regions. We help our clients build teams of transformational leaders who can meet today’s challenges and anticipate the digital, economic and political trends that are reshaping the global business environment. From helping boards with their structure, culture and effectiveness to identifying, assessing and defining the best leadership for organizations – our teams bring their decades of expertise to help clients solve their most complex leadership issues. Find out more at www.russellreynolds.com. Follow us on Twitter: @RRAonLeadership

© Copyright 2017, Russell Reynolds Associates. All rights reserved.