The Emergence of the Chief Diversity Officer Role in Higher Education
Executive summary

Chief diversity officers have become increasingly common across leading institutions of higher education, driven by the push to create more diverse, inclusive and equitable environments for the benefit of all members of the community. While much has been written on the evolution of the mandate and remit of this role, relatively little data exists to identify the common profiles and reporting structures into which these roles fit.

To address this gap, Russell Reynolds Associates combined our proprietary database of candidates from recent chief diversity officer (CDO) searches we have conducted with publicly available information to identify 60 CDOs from major research universities and liberal arts colleges. We reviewed the profiles, backgrounds and reporting structures and spoke separately with more than a dozen sitting chief diversity officers and university presidents to understand the unique context and challenges of this role.

Our findings indicate that, while specific needs and priorities will vary by institution, several broad conclusions can be drawn about the effective CDO.

THE EFFECTIVE HIGHER ED CDO DEMONSTRATES

- Capacity for strategic leadership of change management initiatives
- Ability to effectively persuade and influence stakeholders
- Data-savvy storytelling skills
- Effective external engagement
- Personal motivation and resilience
- Domain expertise and an understanding of higher education culture

THE EFFECTIVE HIGHER ED CDO IS SET UP FOR SUCCESS WHEN S/HE

- Is empowered within the organizational structure by reporting to either the president or provost
- Has a clearly articulated mandate with agreed-upon metrics for success that recognize both the tangible and intangible impacts of the function
- Is supported by an institution that views diversity as a resource to be leveraged rather than a compliance exercise
Evolution of the chief diversity officer role

As of 2016, more than two-thirds of major US universities had appointed a chief diversity officer or executive-level equivalent,1 with at least 30 institutions having created the role in the last five years alone.2 The growth of this role builds upon the historical trend toward promoting diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I) in higher education that began with the creation of “minority affairs” roles, which first began appearing at universities in the 1970s.3 Primarily oriented toward compliance or risk-mitigation, including issues related to workplace discrimination, affirmative action and accessibility, these roles were typically located at the department level or within a division of student services, rather than at the executive level or within the president’s cabinet. While undoubtedly integral in moving the overall conversation regarding campus diversity forward, these roles were often criticized as purely symbolic or insufficient appeasement to minority and underrepresented groups who felt their needs were not being properly addressed.

Over the course of the early 2000s, understanding and conceptualization of diversity began to shift, with many pointing to a series of Supreme Court rulings, most notably related to the University of Michigan’s affirmative action admissions policy,4 as being instrumental in shifting universities away from a legalistic and mechanical view of diversity and toward a more holistic understanding of how diversity in all forms can benefit learning environments.5 Rather than being defined simply as the presence of individuals that differ by ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or some other social identity, diversity is now seen as a resource that can be leveraged to enhance the learning of all students and is, therefore, fundamental to institutional excellence.6

Accordingly, the mandate and expectations of the CDO role have also evolved, with many universities now positioning the function as integral to the strategic direction and success of the institution. While specific mandates vary by institution, effective CDOs are now distinguished by their ability to infuse diversity into all aspects of university life, including:

Enhancing compositional diversity of students, faculty and staff
Spearheading culture change to promote inclusive learning environments
Promoting a diversity of topics and perspectives into curriculum
Helping the broader community, including alumni, to engage with diversity-related issues

1 National Bureau of Economic Research. The Impact of Chief Diversity Officers on Diverse Faculty Hiring. NBER Working Paper 24969, August 2018. Based upon review of 462 R1, R2 or M1 institutions with a population of 4,000 or more.
3 Ibid.
4 In a 2003 landmark decision, the Supreme Court upheld the University of Michigan’s affirmative action admissions policy, determining that a narrowly tailored use of race in admissions decisions furthered the school’s “compelling interest in obtaining the educational benefits that flow from a diverse student body.” This was a major affirmation of the idea that diversity promotes educational benefits for the broader campus community.
6 Williams and Wade-Golden. “What Is a Chief Diversity Officer?”
**Key competencies of the chief diversity officer**

While the specific attributes and types of expertise needed in a chief diversity officer will vary according to the particular mandate of the role, there are several key competencies that differentiate the most successful CDOs and enable them to collaborate and extend their influence across the institution. In addition to foundational competencies such as setting strategy, executing for results, leading teams and building relationships, best-in-class CDOs are defined by a track record and expertise in the following areas:

**Able to develop a vision that inspires and galvanizes others into action.**

**Systems-level thinker, with ability to build and lead comprehensive organizational change initiatives, not just single programs.**

**Strong execution skills, including the ability to manage teams and budgets.**

**Seeks and analyzes data from a variety of sources to inform and support decisions and to align others with the organization’s overall strategy.**

**Able to take a metrics-driven approach to DE&I and establish key performance indicators (KPIs) and accountability mechanisms to keep the institution focused on its goals.**

**At the same time, understands the limitations of quantitative data in telling the “diversity story” and is able to use qualitative data and other tools to make the case.**

**Convener and community builder, with the ability to achieve results through influence, force of intellect and dynamism of personality.**

**Ability and willingness to build consensus and work through competing interests to identify win-win solutions.**

**Ability to adapt language and styles to different audiences and work across organizational boundaries to build buy-in.**

**Particularly astute at navigating an institution’s political landscape, as well as responding to politically sensitive situations.**

**Builds relationships with internal partners to identify opportunities to bring a diversity lens to other functions beyond admissions, including advancement, communications and external affairs.**

**Ability to partner well with external constituents, particularly in complex environments.**

**Ability to serve as a highly visible spokesperson for the institution to a range of audiences.**

**Track record of productive collaboration with external partners, including state legislatures, community-based organizations and other external entities.**

**Excellent command of diversity issues as they pertain to higher education, including issues related to student and faculty recruitment and retention, diversifying the curriculum, assessing the impacts of diversity, measuring campus climate, and legal requirements and liabilities.**

**Possesses in-depth knowledge and experience of the culture of the academy, including issues related to shared governance, tenure and promotion, and decentralized campus politics.**
The profile of the chief diversity officer

Our analysis of the backgrounds of 60 CDOs from leading US universities identifies several key commonalities in the profile and “route to the top”:

- **57%** of CDOs are female
- **3.5 years** average tenure
- **43%** appointed in last 2 years

More than half of CDOs possess a PhD, with JD being the second most common terminal degree. More than 90% of CDOs worked at a university in their immediate prior role, with 4 in 10 doing so in a diversity-related function.

External hires are significantly more likely to come from a diversity-related immediate prior role, whereas internal promotes typically come from faculty. This suggests that a lack of diversity experience may be compensated for by deep understanding of faculty needs, higher ed context or academic content.

### Immediate Prior Role of External vs. Internal CDOs (% CDOS)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INTERNAL</th>
<th>56%</th>
<th>19%</th>
<th>22%</th>
<th>4%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTERNAL CDOs typically come from faculty</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EXTERNAL</th>
<th>12%</th>
<th>15%</th>
<th>58%</th>
<th>15%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>External CDOs are most likely to come from another diversity role in academia</td>
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Terminal Degree (% CDOS)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>Terminal Degree</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JD</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EdD</td>
<td>12%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>57%</td>
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<tr>
<td>MD</td>
<td>12%</td>
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<tr>
<td>BA</td>
<td>15%</td>
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Immediate Prior Role (% CDOS)

<table>
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<th>Role</th>
<th>Immediate Prior Role</th>
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<tr>
<td>Higher Ed - Diversity</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher Ed - Administrative</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher Ed - Academic</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>33%</td>
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Internally Promoted

- **2.6 years** average tenure as CDO
- **45%**

Externally Appointed

- **4.2 years** average tenure as CDO
- **55%**
Historically, diversity professionals often came to the role from either an HR or other compliance-focused background, indicative of the narrow scope usually afforded to the function. As the mandate and complexity of the role have expanded, so too has the range of profiles that have become relevant. Our analysis revealed four “archetypes” of CDOs among today’s diversity leaders, representing the most common current pathways to the CDO role.

**DIVERSITY ADMINISTRATOR**

- Proven track record of functional diversity (possibly even CDO) roles
- Passion for diversity – thought leader, well-networked individual within diversity conferences, platforms and events
- Clear understanding of how diversity initiatives can be integrated into and impact the organization

- May not have deep understanding of issues facing faculty
- May not be deeply connected to student body

65% of sample

**UNIVERSITY FACULTY MEMBER**

- Sound understanding of the university’s culture and hurdles that need tackling
- Likely to have strong credibility internally given their record of scholarship, particularly among faculty
- May elevate the university’s view of diversity efforts by connecting them with a respected scholar

- May not have requisite knowledge of diversity best practices
- May not have requisite “touch”
- May not know how to navigate working with administration

45% of sample

**STUDENT AFFAIRS LEADER**

- Strong programmatic leader with experience building an inclusive community within the student body
- Experience working directly with multicultural and student affinity groups across campus

- May not have deep understanding of issues facing faculty, compromising credibility

25% of sample

**LEGAL EXPERT**

- Thorough understanding of the legal requirements and liability issues related to federal and state legislation
- May possess expertise and understanding of D&I best practices and lessons learned from other industries

- May not have sufficient understanding of higher ed culture and context
- May not have deep understanding of issues facing faculty
- May come across as too focused on compliance or risk-mitigation rather than deep cultural change

17% of sample

Note: Numbers do not sum to 100% as CDOs may fit more than one profile

“It’s important for [the chief diversity officer] to be proactive and to be someone that students, faculty and staff are comfortable and confident seeking out.”

President of Top 60 National University
Chief diversity officer reporting structures

Almost four in five chief diversity officers in our sample report either to the president or chancellor, reflecting the clear prioritization in recent years of this role as part of the president's cabinet. Notably, externally appointed CDOs were significantly more likely to report to the president or chancellor compared to internal promotes (94 percent vs. 58 percent). This discrepancy may be a result of institutions using a senior reporting structure as an incentive to entice high-caliber external talent or of those institutions that recognize genuine strategic value of the role being more likely to launch a national search to surface external candidates.

Locating the CDO directly below the president, chancellor or provost significantly increases their ability to effect change at the highest levels, given the increased visibility, access and symbolic impact of these senior positions. Through their participation in cabinet meetings or other campus-wide decision-making processes, CDOs are able to infuse DE&I considerations into important conversations about budgeting, new initiatives and strategic planning.

Roughly one in six CDOs holds a dual title, most often serving as both CDO and as their institution’s primary faculty development leader or head of strategic planning. These dual roles can be useful in suffusing diversity issues across a wider swath of university operations but should be approached with caution. Hybrid roles can also result in a portfolio that is too broad for one position or in a de-prioritization of diversity as a matter of institutional importance.

“Our chief diversity officer used to report to the provost; however, this signaled, especially to minority staff members, that what they were telling us didn’t matter. The CDO now reports directly to me, which we hoped would send a message—students didn’t necessarily understand it, but it meant something to faculty and staff.”

President of Top 25 National University
Among those reporting to the CDO, there is significant variability in team size. The median number of direct reports to the CDO in our sample was three, with public institutions having a higher median of six and private institutions having a median of two. This variability by institution type makes sense given that public institutions tend to be much larger and therefore their DE&I teams need to serve a larger number of students, faculty and other stakeholders.

"It’s important for [the chief diversity officer] to be proactive and to be someone that students, faculty and staff are comfortable and confident seeking out."

President of Top 60 National University
RRA advice to leadership

**Align on the core DE&I mandate:** Whether it’s student or faculty diversity metrics, institutional culture or inclusive curriculum, most universities have a pressing need that drives them to seek a CDO. Defining this need will determine the scope of the role and the best CDO profile to tap.

**Get buy-in from most senior leadership:** Regardless of what the core issues are, the president, provost, board of trustees and any other senior leadership must be convinced of the rationale and value proposition for the role. Without clear commitment and support from the top, a new CDO is unlikely to succeed.

**Assess the readiness for change:** Acknowledge that a healthy appetite for change, backed by top leadership, is required for the CDO to be successful.

**Resource:** Adequately resource the chief diversity officer based on their skills, remit and institutional needs.

**Position:** Ensure that the chief diversity officer has regular exposure to the highest levels of the university and that there is a structure in place to support this.

**Educate:** Facilitate knowledge sharing among institutional leadership and stakeholders to ensure that the chief diversity officer gains a deep understanding of the institution and its unique challenges.

**Define/Measure:** Define and align on what long-term success looks like. Ensure the chief diversity officer is genuinely empowered to effect change in those areas.

**Accountability:** Ensure the right measures are in place to hold the leadership team accountable to DE&I goals (e.g., leadership scorecards, KPIs, etc.), recognizing that DE&I must be measured through both quantitative and qualitative metrics.

**Training:** Coach inclusive leadership skills at all levels of the organization so people have the language and skills to meet those goals.

“*I attribute my success to the senior leadership here. They really get this work; they value the importance of it as well as the nuances and challenges that come with it. We don’t throw any of it under the rug; we really talk out in the open about it. ... Most importantly, they support us when we have to make a tough decision.*”

Chief Diversity Officer of Top 25 National University
Representative leadership: another driver of diversity?

As part of the analysis for this research, we examined the relationship between the existence of a chief diversity officer and the gender and ethnic diversity of an institution’s academic and administrative leadership (e.g., deans and vice presidents). While we did not find evidence that the existence of a CDO correlated to higher rates of leadership diversity, we did find another statistically significant relationship: Presidents and provosts who are female and/or visible ethnic minorities have overwhelmingly higher rates of diversity among the senior leaders that report to them.

Female presidents are supported by a cabinet of administrative leadership that includes, on average, 42 percent more women than their male president counterparts. Similarly, female provosts oversee academic leadership that includes, on average, 75 percent more women than their male provost counterparts.

Similar but even more significant results hold for the ethnic diversity of academic and administrative leadership: Non-white presidents are supported by an administrative cabinet that includes, on average, 164 percent more non-white VPs, while non-white provosts oversee academic leadership that includes, on average, 218 percent more non-white deans.

While not conclusive of a causal relationship, these data support the finding that strategies to promote campus diversity must be holistic and consider the range of drivers of diversity, equity and inclusion beyond the existence of a formal DE&I function or senior leader.
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About Russell Reynolds Associates

Russell Reynolds Associates is a global leadership advisory and search firm. Our 425+ consultants in 46 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.

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