

# Chief Marketing and Communication Officers in Higher Education

To better understand the chief marketing and communication officer ("CMCO") role in higher education, Russell Reynolds Associates analyzed the backgrounds, profiles and career paths of CMCOs at U.S. News and World Report's Top 100 National Universities. To complement our quantitative analysis, we interviewed a group of high-performing and well-respected CMCOs to test this data against the on-the-ground reality of the evolution of the role and profiles of high-performing leaders.

## The higher education CMCO role is rapidly changing ...

Higher education is an increasingly competitive, complex and scrutinized environment; crises are more frequent, the demand for transparency is at an all-time high and university leaders - at all levels - are expected to effectively represent institutions. Thus, the CMCO's role as a visionary, strategic counselor and functional expert is more important than ever.



Increasingly strategic, in both functionally specific and enterprise-wide capacities



Need for more proactive, authentic communication given the proliferation of channels and platforms



CMCOs most typically report to the president/chancellor, providing more access, insight and influence



Integrated internal and external stakeholder engagement is now a must-have

*"Institutional leaders are under tremendous pressure, and from incredibly varied stakeholders. The board wants one thing, the faculty another, and students and alumni something entirely different. The CMCO needs to balance that while enhancing the sophistication and impact of a function."*

## ... and with that, the professional profile must evolve to keep up.

Russell Reynolds has witnessed this shift firsthand, recently conducting 25+ CMCO searches for public and private institutions. We advocate for diverse slates and push for consideration of "unconventional" profiles. The sector is trending in the right direction but continues to lag in gender, racial and ethnic diversity, which is a serious liability considering the increasingly diverse stakeholder base that higher education institutions need to authentically engage with and represent.

### Demographics

61%

39%



Just more than one-third of CMCOs are women, which represents an improvement but still falls short of gender parity.



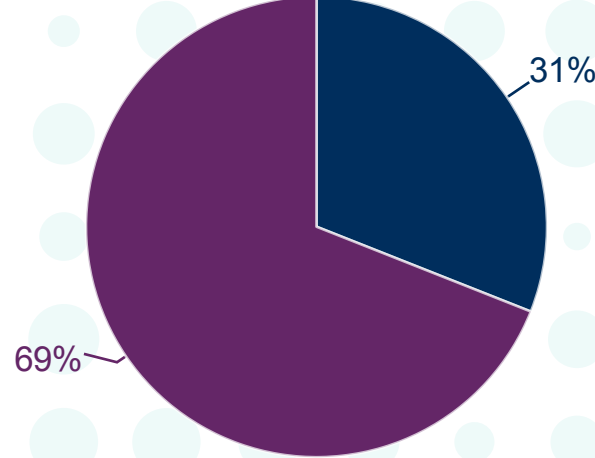
White Non-White

93% of CMCOs are white, suggesting that while laudable efforts have been made to diversify teams this has not yet reached the senior-most levels.

*"I see an implication with these statistics: We clearly need to push diverse slates when conducting external searches, and define diversity broadly, without losing a focus on gender, racial and ethnic diversity. It's not enough to say that we have candidates from 'varied backgrounds' if that doesn't include demographics."*

### Type of Appointment

The majority of CMCOs are hired externally, showing that succession planning processes have room for improvement and that hires are often seen as an opportunity to mark or drive change regarding an institution's approach. Moreover, these changes often come following a retirement or a high-profile issue, which can exacerbate the desire for an individual who represents a "change."



Internal Appointment External Hire

*"I am not surprised most appointments are external. I see an external bias, university stakeholders expect someone from the outside to come in, create a buzz, bring new contacts and do something new and exciting."*

#### Advantages of Internal Candidates

- Familiarity with the campus, stakeholders and culture, a "known quantity"
- Team engagement; continuity of operations, seamless fit and improved morale
- Have existing and engrained relationships with key stakeholders

#### Advantages of External Candidates

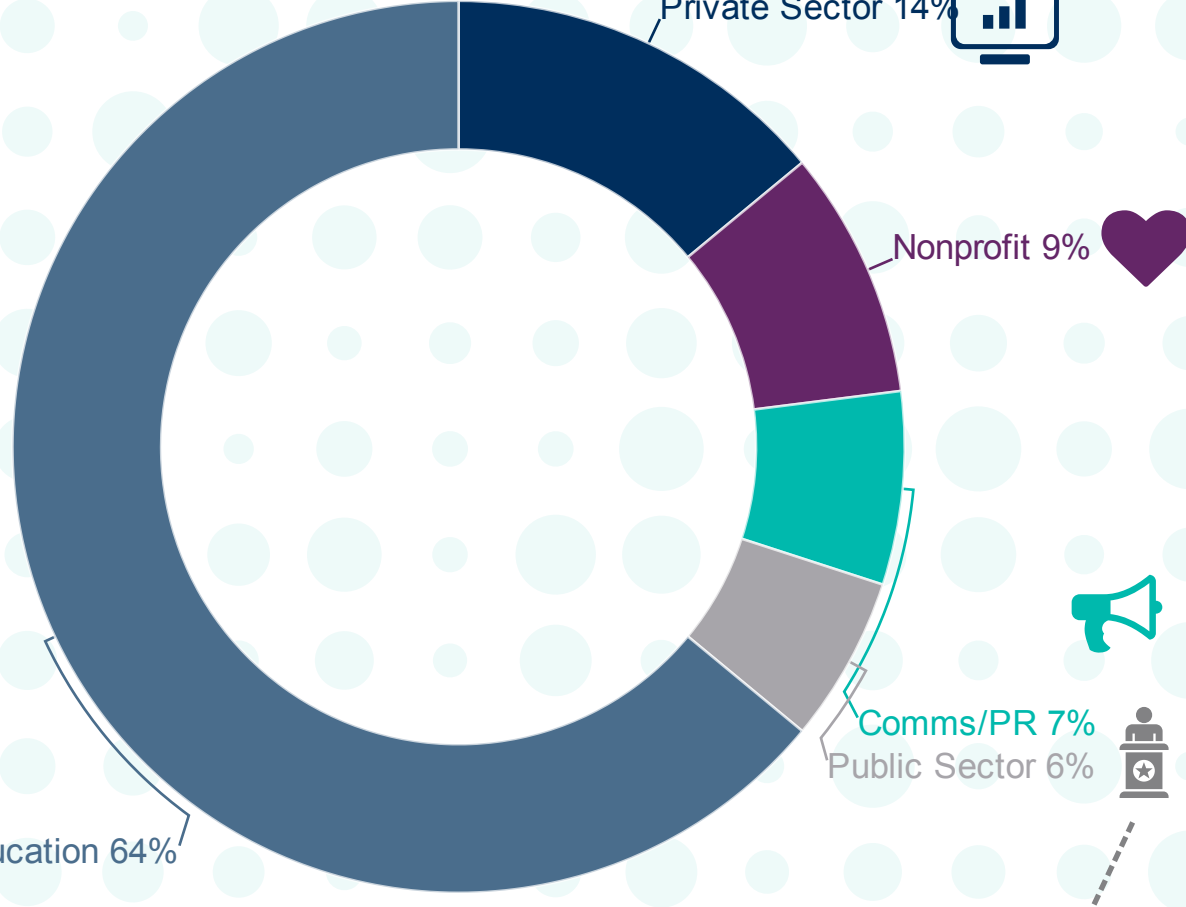
- Offer a fresh perspective on the university and its communication/marketing functions
- Bring in new methods that can challenge previous university habits
- Have acquired skills that compliment those of current staff of the university

### Immediate Prior Industry

Unsurprisingly, most CMCOs come directly from higher education. However, in the past few years we have seen an increase in the number of successful candidates coming from other settings, most notably including the public sector. We feel strongly that, when hiring externally, candidates with a diverse blend of experience are particularly well suited for higher education; having a wide range of experiences to pull from mitigates the risk of a CMCO being unprepared to handle the myriad challenges that face higher education institutions. Moreover, we advocate for individuals with public sector experience. This is particularly so for public institutions, where the state government is often an important stakeholder. but it also holds true universally given the analogous nature of communications in governmental settings.

- ✓ 29% of CMCOs have prior experience as a CMCO
- ✓ 34% of CMCOs previously were an associate or deputy CMCO

*"Is the most crucial for a crossover external candidate to 'learn the language' and the culture. Stepping into higher education is like going back to college; it's an opportunity to learn, engage and be enthusiastic about a mission-oriented role. This is not a 9-5 job."*

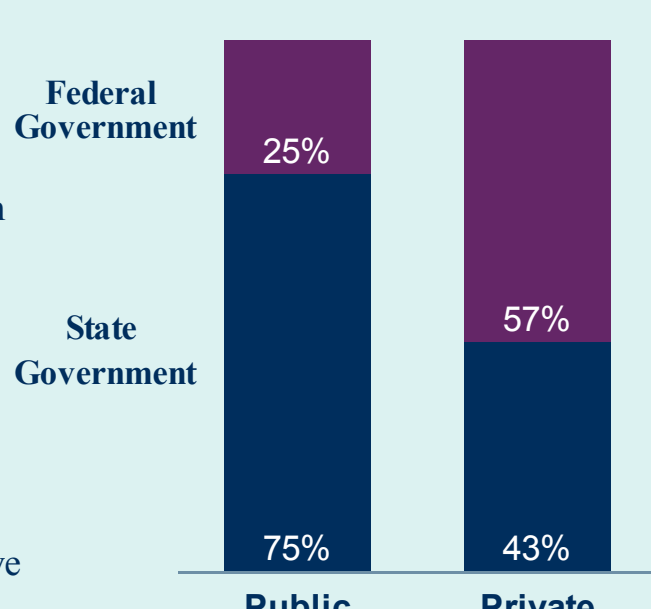


### Public Sector Breakdown

The skills and experiences gained through public sector experience can translate well to higher education. There are existing examples of this working well, and we believe this to be an increasingly important pool to pull from for the CMCO role.

- **Analogous Traits:** Profile, skills and competencies are more analogous to higher education than private sector.
- **Strategic Role:** In the past, the CMCO in higher education was seen as a university administrative support function. However, following similar trends in the public sector, the CMCO is now becoming a more forward-facing, strategic role with broader influence.
- **Persuasion Model:** Both the public and higher education sectors rely on persuasion and influence to effect change. Additionally, those coming from the public sector may have had direct experience lobbying on behalf of education.
- **Stakeholders:** The cultures of both settings require an ability to engage a broad range of stakeholders and balance competing interests, both of which manifest themselves in a multi-stakeholder experience.

*"Candidates with governmental backgrounds can be great; universities tend to have 'campaign' cycles, are a multi-stakeholder setting and require the level of persuasion - versus coercion - that these former governmental leaders are accustomed to."*



Public universities, which are more reliant on state governments for funding and support, are more inclined toward federal experience.

### Benefits and Trade-Offs of These Profiles

While no CMCO profile and background is universally better than another, we have seen three main profiles emerge, each with its own benefits and challenges regarding experience, competencies and approach:

*"Regardless of the type of profile someone has, you need to mind the gap. No one checks every single box."*



#### Private Sector Profile

Leader transitioning from the private sector directly to a CMCO role in higher education



#### Higher Education Profile

Leader from within higher education being promoted into the CMCO role at the same or different institution



#### Public Sector Profile

Leader transitioning from the public sector directly to a CMCO role in higher education

- ✓ Business acumen and bottom-line results orientation
- ✓ Strong strategic communications skills
- ✓ Experience driving action in urgent, fast-moving, scrutinized settings
- ? May lack educational insight and mission orientation

- ✓ Experience and understanding balancing strategic priorities within academia
- ✓ Credibility with faculty and staff given academic credentials
- ? May lack perspective on best practice outside of higher education, which tends to be more forward leaning

- ✓ Strong experience crafting and articulating messages for a diverse set of stakeholders
- ✓ Well versed in crisis communications
- ✓ Campaign skills
- ? May lack business acumen and academic knowledge

### Implications

Higher education leaders need to be thoughtful about the CMCO role, ensuring that this person serves as an organizational stakeholder, cultural ambassador and functional expert to promote the institution, mitigate risk and engage the entire spectrum of stakeholders. At Russell Reynolds, because of our track record in this space and in this functional area, we believe deeply in the necessity and impact of the CMCO as an integral leader for colleges and universities. With this enhanced importance also comes an increased imperative to get these hires right. We are proud to partner with our higher education clients, helping them get these hires right with the diverse, talented leaders they need in their CMCO position.



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