

What Is a Chief Diversity Officer? By

Dr. Damon A. Williams & Dr. Katrina C. Wade-Golden

To meet the needs of increasingly diverse campuses, many institutions have developed executive positions to guide their diversity agendas. In many instances, these individuals and their units are the “face” of diversity efforts and carry formal administrative titles like vice provost, vice chancellor, associate provost, vice president, assistant provost, dean, or special assistant to the president for multicultural, international, equity, diversity, and inclusion — to cite only a few of the most frequently used titles.

Yet despite so many different monikers, if you ask most officers what they do, they often respond in a remarkably similar manner, noting that they are the institution’s “chief diversity officer” (or CDO, as many say), using the title more commonly found among their counterparts in the corporate world. We’ve just finished a national study of these positions: why these roles are emerging, their main characteristics, and the key knowledge, skills, and abilities that institutions should seek when searching for a new officer.

In the last five years, no fewer than 30 institutions have created these new roles. A review of recent higher education job listings illustrates the scope of this phenomenon, as institutions moving towards the CDO are swelling in number and differ by type, control, size, and geographic location. Institutions like the Berklee College of Music, Oklahoma State University, Harvard University, Xavier University, Miami University, Marquette University, Washington State University, and the University of Virginia, have recently hired inaugural officers. These roles have been constructed in an effort to build diversity capabilities similar to those found at institutions like the University of Michigan, University of Connecticut, Indiana University, the University of Washington, Brown University, the University of Denver, and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, to name a few of the places that have had these positions for some time.

The emergence of these offices in higher education is not without historical precedence, as some institutions had “vice president for minority affairs” roles in the 1970s, when the first large group of African Americans enrolled at what were nearly all-white colleges and universities. These early units were often criticized as a symbolic appeasement to protesting minority groups and others demanding infrastructure for newly admitted minority populations and campus change.

While these positions have been consistently mentioned in diversity plans, senior leadership and others were often resistant, falsely criticizing these roles as “ghettoizing diversity” by putting the full burden on the shoulders of one person, and creating a campus police officer who would “tell people what to do.” Additionally, many individuals believed that these officers would simply be “student development specialist” or “affirmative action officers” in new clothing.

What distinguishes the current executive diversity officer from its historical predecessors is the functional definition of diversity as a resource that can be leveraged to enhance the learning of all students and is fundamental to institutional excellence, in addition to its historic definition as the presence of individuals that differ by race, gender, or some other social identity characteristic.

The most influential of these officers is also distinguished by ability to infuse diversity into the most important academic issues of the institution. For example, the chief diversity officer may collaborate with the academic senate to develop a general education diversity distribution requirement; lead international negotiations for establishing a sister campus in Dubai; or develop incentives to develop new programs and initiatives that infuse diversity into the curriculum and co-curriculum. These types of initiatives are distinct from the traditional responsibilities of affirmative action officers, although chief diversity officers may play a key role in resolving sexual harassment and workplace discrimination complaints, or supervising the unit that performs this function.

Defining the CDO Role

Where others work on issues of diversity as a matter of second or third priority, chief diversity officers engage matters of diversity as a matter of first-priority. Although the structures and vertical portfolios of the CDO range from basic one-person offices, to more complex multi-unit configurations, a number of threads define this emerging administrative role across all areas of corporate, higher education, health administration, non-profit and other areas of organizational life.

A Functional Approach: Chief diversity officers have responsibility for guiding efforts to conceptualize, define, assess, nurture, and cultivate diversity as an institutional and educational resource. Although duties may include affirmative action/equal employment opportunity, or the constituent needs of minorities, women, and other bounded social identity groups, chief diversity officers define their mission as providing point and coordinating leadership for diversity issues institution-wide.

Building a robust chief diversity officer capability insures that the institution has expertise on diversity related matters and infusing this understanding throughout the campus environment. For instance, at the University of Connecticut, the Office of the Vice Provost for Multicultural & International Affairs leads the execution of a five-year board-sponsored strategic plan for diversity and provides key input and leadership to several committees focused on minority faculty mentoring, undergraduate student retention, and increasing the number of historically underrepresented students of color and women studying in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics areas. Moreover, members of the office's senior leadership team participate in many of the most substantive non-diversity centered committees at the university, ranging from information technology usage, to space allocations, to athletics.

Collaboration: Given complexities like infusing diversity into the curriculum, enhancing

the compositional diversity profile of students, faculty, and staff, and developing policies designed to improve the campus climate, the challenge of diversity is beyond the capabilities of any one individual, division, or team. Hence, chief diversity officers serve as powerful integrating forces for diversity issues, collaborating and working through the lateral networks of the institution no matter how large or small their staffs.

Like comparable roles in other administrative areas, such as the “chief financial officer” or “chief technology officer,” the work of the chief diversity officer does not fit into a traditional administrative box. Like diversity, the role of the chief diversity officer spans the boundaries of the institution as officers and their units collaborate with areas like admissions, human resources, faculty development, marketing and communication, academic deans, and institutional advancement in an effort to enhance diversity up, down, and across the institution.

Collaboration is often achieved through consultative relationships. Many officers regularly co-author, write letters of support, and build relationships with community colleges and historically minority serving institutions to support and strengthen the grant writing efforts of faculty members interested in obtaining National Science Foundation and National Institute of Health awards that often emphasize diversity and collaborative relationships. Others work closely with their development offices, playing a key role in identifying prospective donors, cultivating new relationships, and securing resources to fund everything from scholarships, to study abroad opportunities in developing nations.

Because of the boundary spanning nature of the chief diversity officer role, the types of possible relationships is nearly endless. Consequently, these officers must be malleable, innovative, and committed to fluidly adding value in areas outside of their core area of expertise and experience.

Leading Through Status and Influence: Chief diversity officers generally have no formal authority to command, reward, or punish individuals outside of their formal span of control and leadership. As a result, their source of “power” is often grounded in status, persuasion, and symbols. For example, no chief diversity officer has the authority to hire faculty members without support of the academic department or dean, even if they have the resources to provide a portion or all of the salary necessary for the position. Nevertheless, some officers can persuade department chairs to pool resources and hire a potentially high caliber diversity candidate by offering these resources as a start-up incentive. This is one of the main reasons that it is important for chief diversity officers to have resources allowing them to encourage behavior that advances the diversity goals of the institution.

Another primary source of power for these officers is their location at the presidential or provost level of formal administrative hierarchy. Participation in the executive cabinet of the institution insures that the position has visibility, access, and symbolic impact. For that reason, chief diversity officers can infuse diversity into highly politicized discussions about budget allocations, new initiatives, and future priorities of the institution. If these officers were not present, these issues may not be mentioned, nor understood in a

manner consistent with diversity goals so often mentioned in institutional academic plans, websites, and marketing materials.

By titling officers at the vice or associate vice president, provost, or chancellor level, a powerful symbolic message is sent to the entire campus community regarding the important role of the CDO and diversity on campus. Some of the most influential officers often have a dual title like academic affairs, student development, international affairs, or faculty development, in addition to their “diversity” title. According to one officer that 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.”

Promoting Change: Chief diversity officers are best defined as “change management specialists” because of the importance that they place on strategies designed to intentionally move the culture of their institutions. At least at the surface, no CDO is hired to maintain the status quo, although some institutions are not serious about change and extend only superficial support to the efforts of the officer.

Nevertheless, change is a fundamental aspect of the chief diversity officer role leading campus-wide diversity planning and implementation efforts, seeding new diversity initiatives to create bubble-up energy and involve others in change projects, developing diversity training and educational strategies for executives, faculty, staff, and students to shift their mental models and skills regarding diversity, developing high profile and symbolic campus diversity events to suggest diversity’s relationship to institutional excellence, and creating new systems to insure that faculty and staff search committees cast a broad hiring net. Although diversity is the targeted domain area, each of these initiatives and projects is intended to affect some type of intentional change in the systems, structure, and culture of the institution.

The Making of a Good Higher Education CDO

When a higher education institution specifically decides to hire a CDO and develop this new capability, great care must be given to finding the right candidate. This task can be difficult with applicant pools that regularly yield between 120 and 150 persons, and include faculty members with a diversity research agenda, lawyers well-versed in affirmative action law, student development specialists, individuals from the corporate community, and others.

In gearing up for a search, a number of tough issues are often bantered by senior administrators and others designing the position and thinking about the type of knowledge, skills, and abilities that define a qualified candidate. These issues include whether the individual should possess a Ph.D. or other terminal degree; qualify for tenure in an academic department; have a legal background and experience with federal and state compliance issues; and whether or not the person charged to do the work must be a member of an ethnic, racial, gender, or other minority group, to name a

few of the most common challenging topics for discussion.

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 units and offices that the chief diversity officer may supervise, and the degree to which the officer intersects with issues such as tenure, promotion, faculty hiring, and curriculum development. To say that a person is qualified simply because he or she is an African American and a tenured member of the faculty in art history, for example, is as inaccurate as rendering an Irish American, with expertise in botany qualified to serve as the department chair for European Studies or as the vice president for information technology. The superordinate goals of providing leadership for diversity and guiding change must guide 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 of degrees, experiences, and qualifications is hard to define, we believe that the most successful officers will illustrate seven key attributes regardless of academic and administrative background:

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. Furthermore, a CDO must be comfortable leveraging the social justice, educational benefits, and business case rationales for discussing diversity's importance.

Political Savvy: The CDO must be particularly astute at navigating an institution's political landscape; responding well to politically charged or politically sensitive situations. He or she 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.

Ability to Cultivate a Common Vision: The CDO must be able to develop and cultivate a collaborative vision of diversity on campus. This requires resonating as authentic with students, faculty, staff, and administrators, and being committed to working collaboratively with other senior executives to build positive vision, direction, and results through strategic initiatives that holistically impact diversity.

In-Depth Perspective on Organizational Change: The CDO should possess an outstanding command of the elements and dynamics of organizational change, and also have entrenched experiences having led or been involved with these efforts in the past. Change is rarely easy, and given the inherent difficulties embedded in this often politicized process, the CDO must have a commitment to see the change process through its challenges and rough spaces to effect deep structural change. They must exhibit passion and patience, realizing that change does not happen quickly, and

oversee the organizational change process from a holistic point of view — guiding the design, implementation, assessment, and evolution of key milestones over time.

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 ability to cross numerous organizational boundaries with a fluid ability to adapt language and styles to different audiences.

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 than 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 students, faculty, staff, and executives with respect to diversity.

Results Orientation: Although not singularly responsible for results, the CDO must be results oriented and committed to encouraging the change agenda along to achieve significant results. Consequently, it is fundamental that they 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.

As more institutions grapple with the challenge of building diversity capacity, changing demographics and ever broadening definitions of diversity, these positions will become even more a part of the educational landscape in higher education. Understanding the role and skills necessary to accomplish the job can help higher education institutions insure that diversity units are populated by leaders that have the best chance of supporting the organization, and helping it to obtain its long range diversity goals.

Dr. Damon A. Williams is assistant vice provost for multicultural and international affairs at the University of Connecticut. Dr. Katrina C. Wade-Golden is a senior research specialist in the Office of Academic Multicultural Initiatives at the University of Michigan. They are co-principal investigators for the “Diversity Officer Study.” An earlier version of this article appeared at www.insidehighered.com. Please contact Dr. Damon A. Williams at damon.Williams@uconn.edu with questions or comments.