

Tackling Inequities and Fostering Inclusion:  
The Challenges and Opportunities Facing Chief Diversity Officers in Higher Education

Lizz Elvira

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Dr. Richard Gatteau

**Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the role and efficacy of the CDO in higher education institutions. By researching the history of the role and how it has been shaped by diversifying student populations and the socio-political climate, the author explores the challenges and opportunities the CDO encounters in supporting DEI policies, procedures, and practices.

Recommendations are made to invest in further research regarding the impact of effective CDOs on campus climate and to accord CDOs more authority in developing and executing the strategic plan of the institution. The author also suggests that appointment of an empowered, skilled CDO is best practice in advancing a DEI mission.

## **Tackling Inequities and Fostering Inclusion:**

### **The Challenges and Opportunities Facing Chief Diversity Officers in Higher Education**

Integrating diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) into academic affairs, student affairs, and all other aspects of higher education has become the mission of many colleges and universities. College leadership, faculty, staff, and students recognize the need for systemic change in order to better foster diverse, equitable, and inclusive campuses as well as produce graduates who are culturally competent and globally conscious. Faced with the challenges of an increasingly diverse student body, an expanding definition of diversity, and a need to address the current socio-political context, it has become incumbent upon senior leadership to identify key institutional players to manage and promote DEI initiatives. In order to confront these issues, many institutions have employed a chief diversity officer (CDO).

The role of CDO is a relatively emergent position in higher education institutions (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007; Wilson, 2013). According to the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education (NADOHE), CDOs are charged with shouldering the “work to dismantle structural racism and its impact through changes in policies, procedures, practices, teaching, research, and service” (Russell, 2021, para. 4). Engaging a CDO can begin to ameliorate DEI issues; however, leadership must ensure that the CDO is given the resources to succeed and is not hindered in promoting DEI excellence.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the role and efficacy of the CDO in higher education institutions. By researching the history of the role and how it has been shaped by diversifying student populations and the socio-political climate, the author explores the challenges and opportunities the CDO encounters in supporting DEI policies, procedures, and practices. Recommendations are made to invest in further research regarding the impact of

effective CDOs on campus climate and to accord CDOs more authority in developing and executing the strategic plan of the institution. The author also suggests that appointment of an empowered, skilled CDO is best practice in advancing a DEI mission.

This paper explores the following research questions:

- What is the history of chief diversity officers (CDOs) in higher education and how has that role developed and expanded?
- What skills and competencies must CDOs possess in order to serve effectively?
- What are the signs of a successful CDO and DEI plan?
- What challenges and opportunities impact the efficacy of the CDO?

## **Literature Review**

### **History of CDOs in Higher Education**

In order to assess the success as well as the obstacles of the role, researchers must first look at the history of CDOs and of DEI objectives in higher education. While faculty and staff would eventually become part of the discussion as well, the origins of diversity work in higher education arose due to diversifying student populations and issues of institutional access. The discussion initially derived from recognition that a college education was developed to serve white, male students and that women and people of color, enrolling in higher numbers, required different services and resources (Smith, 2016). Serving as a guide for minoritized and underserved students has been key to diversity work from the beginning. Arguably, researchers could trace the role of CDO back to college administrative positions as early as the 19th century, such as deans of women whose responsibilities were to “advise, assist, and counsel the new ‘minority’ population on campus, female students” (Schwartz, 1997, p. 504). Later legislation

such as Title IX, as part of the Education Amendments of 1972, continued to focus higher education diversity work on providing pathways for women (Thelin, 2011).

The civil rights activism and legislation from the 1950s through the 1970s also had a direct impact on the expansion of DEI principles in higher education. The first Black Student Union on a college campus was founded at San Francisco State University in 1966 (Pennamon, 2017). Developed in part due to student activism, this initiative motivated DEI dialogues and resulted in the eventual creation of “an institutional role that could prioritize diversity and inclusion at the administrative level” (Pennamon, 2017, p. 17). The CDO role also has a historical connection with affirmative action, a relationship that has continued in the DEI work on many college campuses today. Beginning with JFK’s executive order in 1961, affirmative action was originally a mandate for corporations and contractors to increase opportunities for underrepresented employees (Aja & Bustillo, 2015). This legislation was quickly used to advise higher education policy as well. Some CDOs have adopted affirmative action as a crucial part of their functional model with a specific focus on avoiding, reducing, and rejecting discriminatory behaviors, policies, and procedures in higher education (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007).

While affirmative action has a strong connection to DEI work, its reputation can cause complications when adopted as a key tenet of a CDO’s efforts. Despite affirmative action’s positive impact on expanding opportunities for disenfranchised, minoritized, and underserved students, some argue that these policies no longer have a place in what they consider to be a “post-racial” society (Aja & Bustillo, 2015, p. 38). This belief has impacted the development of the CDO role and support for DEI strategies on campus. Due to its historically contested nature, affirmative action “has increased higher education’s reluctance to promote diversity,” adding a complicated obstacle for CDOs to overcome (Aguirre & Martinez, 2002, p. 56). Additionally,

affirmative action policies historically addressed diversity in admissions and improving compositional diversity, but not crafting changes to the larger campus culture that would improve equity and a sense of belonging (Williams & Clowney, 2007).

The concept of diversity work looking inward became more prevalent in the 1970s as institutions sought to determine their capacity “to educate a diversity of students for success” (Smith, 2016, p. 378). During this time, college populations became increasingly racially, ethnically, and socio-economically diverse. In response, institutions sought to support enrollment of students of color, especially African American students, by creating cultural, multicultural, and minority affairs offices (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007; Parker, 2020). This shift in practice was inspired by “nationalist cultural movements” and pursued student success by providing “culturally aligned services, programs, initiatives, and offices designed to nurture student success on campus” (Williams & Clowney, 2007, p. 6). By establishing these offices and services, institutions generated the need for an administrator to oversee DEI matters.

While the first senior level diversity leaders appeared in higher education in the 1970s, the actual role of CDO was not adopted until the 1990s. Much as with affirmative action, higher education was inspired to create the CDO position by the example set by large corporations, including IBM, MTV, and Kraft (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007). Unfortunately, higher education CDOs encountered similar stigmas and initial complications as corporate CDOs. The most common, pervasive perception was that CDOs were symbolic roles or figureheads, engaged to respond to specific diversity transgressions and conflicts (Alvarez, 2020; Parker, 2020). Although the role of the CDO was built on the long history of diversity work in higher education, these misconceptions led to a lack of a cohesive job description or set of responsibilities for leaders in the position. Researchers agree that the history of diversity offices and officers has left

them “unsystematically structured” and “separate from conversations of institutional excellence” (Williams & Clowney, 2007, p. 2; Parker, 2020, para. 10).

Despite these challenges, the number of campuses with CDOs increased quickly in the early 2000s, slowed due to the recession, and then began to surge again in the 2010s (Cooper, 2014). CDO positions had become prevalent enough in colleges and universities to lead to the establishment of the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education (NADOHE), a professional organization for CDOs, in 2006 (NADOHE, 2021). This important development added to the professionalization of this sometimes contentious role. While more higher education institutions are appointing CDOs, the role and the officers themselves are still relatively new. One 2007 study discovered that “over 50 percent of the CDO positions...were created within the last five years, and only 17 percent of CDO roles at the vice level have existed for more than 10 years” (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007, p. 16). By recognizing that the CDO role is still evolving and armed with an understanding of the history of the position, institutions have an opportunity to create a cohesive description of the job that improves the campus-wide impact of the role. As Arnold and Kowalski-Braun (2012) argue, the institution’s responsibility is not solely in creating the position, but also requires “a great deal of consideration, preparation, and ‘buy-in’ at all levels before the position is created and filled” (p. 28).

### **Skills and Competencies of Effective CDOs**

Institutions must work to create job descriptions and recruitment plans that seek CDOs with the appropriate knowledge and skill set to effectively execute DEI agendas and strategies. The number of CDOs in higher education is steadily increasing and, although the professionalization of the role is new in comparison with other higher education officer roles,

researchers agree that certain skills, competencies, and backgrounds are more suited for success in the CDO role.

Institutions must consider the background of the CDO candidate and how it will fit with the institutional structure and mission. As with other senior appointments within the institution, leadership must determine if a specific educational background is required for their CDO. A 2007 study of 110 CDOs found that 63% held PhD or EdD terminal degrees and only 9% held a law degree (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007). A study a little over a decade later presented similar findings, reporting 57% of the 60 CDOs surveyed possessed a PhD, 12% an EdD, and 15% a JD (Pihakis, Paikeday, Armstrong, & Meneer, 2019). These surveys indicate the importance of graduate-level education in a CDO's experience and certainly suggest an institutional preference for an officer with advanced degrees. Not everyone agrees with this statistical evidence, however. Dr. Judith Clarke, Vice President for Equity and Inclusion and CDO at Stony Brook University, asserts that the degree attained is less important than the background of the CDO and that background should include experience outside of higher education (personal communication, February 10, 2021). Indeed, the aforementioned surveys do report CDOs with master's and even bachelor's degrees, so graduate degrees as a precedent, while prevalent, are not a requirement (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007; Pihakis, Paikeday, Armstrong, & Meneer, 2019).

Regardless of variations in formal education, researchers agree that certain skills and competencies are crucial for CDO success. First and perhaps most obviously is the importance of both knowledge and understanding of higher education culture, history, and climate (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007). CDOs appointed without this insight lack the understanding of the obstacles to DEI progress specific to the higher education arena. One might also argue that those

without higher education experience will struggle to connect with and inspire change in faculty who are at times less trusting of non-academic administrators (Pihakis, Paikeday, Armstrong, & Meneer, 2019). In fact, some argue that CDOs should have as much expertise in higher education as anyone else in a senior-level position and should be capable of transitioning to a “senior executive administration” role if required (Cooper, 2014, p. 28). This concept elevates the role of CDO from a perceived figurehead position to one equivalent with other vice presidents and chief officers in the institution.

CDOs would also benefit from a general knowledge of student development theory related to identity development and intersectionality. These theories are useful for the creation of student specific programming as well as in training faculty, staff, and administrators to tackle DEI issues. Specifically useful to DEI policies and practice is Critical Race Theory which “emphasizes the centrality of race and racism and challenges white supremacy in the law, education, politics, and other social systems” (Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016, p. 26-27). Acknowledgement of white supremacy and its impact on higher education provides a framework for the CDO’s initiatives. CDOs can also employ Tara Yosso’s Community Cultural Wealth Model to explore the social and cultural richness students of color and low-income students possess that can support their academic careers (Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016, p. 253-255). Knowledge of Yosso’s model can serve as a way of leveraging alternate forms of capital to support student recruitment, success programming, and can likewise be applied to faculty and staff recruitment. Dr. Clarke believes that CDOs should evaluate current recruitment requirements to determine how we may be excluding diverse candidates with more varied life experience (personal communication, February 10, 2021). By utilizing Yosso’s model, CDOs

can identify the different forms of capital that diverse candidates may bring to various positions whose experience falls outside of typical academic career paths.

In addition to higher education experience, the most successful CDOs are those with a deep understanding of DEI issues, solutions, and best practices (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007). The NADOHE Standards of Professional Practice for CDOs, originally established in 2014 and updated in 2020, recommend that CDOs are proficient in “drawing from existing scholarship and using evidence-based practices...in advancing equity, diversity, and inclusion” (Worthington, Stanley, & Smith, 2020, p. 11). This suggests not only an expertise in general DEI issues, but also a willingness to continue to train and develop this knowledge to respond to current DEI concerns with appropriate interventions. CDOs with a knowledge base deeply entrenched in DEI issues will also have a strong grasp of DEI vocabulary. This means understanding the difference between diversity, equity, and inclusion and identifying how each concept has a different impact on the campus community (Parker, 2020; J. Clarke, personal communication, February 10, 2021). CDOs must recognize and utilize current terminology relating to various identities in order to support the creation of safe, inclusive campuses. NADOHE stresses the importance of utilizing “definitions that are inclusive with respect to a wide range of identities, differentiated in terms of how they address unique identity issues and complex in terms of intersectionality and context” (Worthington, Stanley, & Smith, 2020, p. 7).

Another area of practical knowledge that will serve CDOs is a strong command of national and regional laws and how they impact and protect higher education and DEI policies (Arnold & Kowalski-Braun, 2012; Cooper, 2014; Parker, 2020). For example, affirmative action and Title IX can both impact the CDO’s work and DEI initiatives on campus and are also strongly linked to specific legal statutes. The CDO has a responsibility to comprehend the history

of DEI legislation as it applies to higher education and keep abreast of newly ratified rulings.

Effective CDOs recognize their obligation to ensure institutional compliance “pursuant to local, state, and federal laws and regulations” (Worthington, Stanley, & Smith, 2020, p. 17).

Understanding how legislation is connected to DEI work is not only useful, but also crucial to avoid legal action against members of the campus community and the institution itself.

In addition to specific knowledge requirements, CDOs should also possess strength in key competencies. For CDOs, specific measurable competencies seem applicable regardless of the type or size of institution. Researchers agree that the most successful CDOs are those with a high degree of emotional intelligence (Williams & Clowney, 2007; Parker, 2020; J. Clarke, personal communication, February 10, 2021). A CDO with emotional intelligence is empathetic and has strong interpersonal skills, both competencies that can help garner support in promoting DEI initiatives. Impactful CDOs should also be strong communicators, adept at building bridges across the institution. This competency, in conjunction with emotional intelligence, contributes to the CDO’s ability to work and communicate with diverse stakeholders presenting a variety of needs, concerns, and levels of privilege or oppression (Cooper, 2014). In order to galvanize others into creating DEI change on campus, the CDO must be able to “operate in a boundary-spanning way to work with others” (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007, p. 10). Effective communicators have the capacity to create relationships and partnerships with members of the campus community as well as local businesses and community groups that can be leveraged to improve equity and inclusion on campus (Arnold & Kowalski-Braun, 2012).

Paralleling the competency of effective communication, successful CDOs should have an aptitude for educating. This skill is so important because in their role, CDOs design and execute programming for faculty, students, and staff. Being a proficient educator supports a CDO’s

ability to “facilitate new skills, abilities, and understanding in faculty, staff, and administrators” (Williams & Clowney, 2007, p. 12). This skill does not indicate, however, that CDOs can or should only be faculty. In fact, some believe that faculty members becoming CDOs could be ineffective for furthering DEI objectives. Dr. Clarke cautioned that faculty promoted to CDO without holding previous administrative roles or obtaining leadership training could reduce the position to solely faculty perspectives and outcomes (J. Clarke, personal communication, February 10, 2021).

CDOs must actively pursue cultural competence for themselves and endeavor to instill cultural competence in the faculty, staff, students, and administrators. Montgomery College in Maryland frames cultural competence through four main areas: “awareness of one’s own cultural worldview; recognition of one’s attitudes towards cultural differences; realization of different cultural practices and worldviews; and thoughtfulness in cross-cultural interaction” (Pennamon, 2017, p. 18). Development of cultural competence requires CDOs to self-analyze and recognize and counter their own bias and privilege (Ortiz & Patton; 2012; Alvarez, 2020). Arguably, the process of gaining for oneself and guiding others to seek cultural competence can be uncomfortable as it requires facing prejudice, privilege, and power structures. However, CDOs must be “willing to have proactive conversations...with honesty and understanding and courage” (Hobson, 2014, 07:22). This discomfort is representative of growth that, for a CDO, is a lifelong and career-long journey. Cultural competency is a continually developing skill with “no final destination because diversity, equity and inclusion will continuously evolve” (Willis, 2018, stay committed section).

Finally, effective CDOs are good storytellers. They must convince various stakeholders why the DEI work is crucial to the health and operation of the college. CDOs must be able to

translate both quantitative and qualitative data to explain DEI work to various constituencies. To do this, CDOs must be skilled in telling “the diversity story” (Pihakis, Paikeday, Armstrong, & Meneer, 2019, key competencies section). According to Dr. Clarke, “diversity is the basic pillars which can be explained with quantitative data, but the story represents the qualitative data. The story focuses more directly on the issues of equity and inclusion” (personal communication, February 10, 2021).

When institutions incorporate fundamental skills and competencies into the CDO recruitment process, candidates are more likely to serve a more comprehensive DEI mission. Hiring a CDO with these proficiencies is an excellent first step in applying a DEI charge to institutional mission. The next step is to determine the measures and metrics of success for both the CDO and the grander DEI strategy.

### **Signs, Indications, and Outcomes of a Successful CDO and DEI Plan**

Today’s higher education students are engaging in activism, championing DEI issues that impact the campus culture and the students’ educations (Willis, 2018). Those student activists encounter and expose individual injustices committed by faculty and staff members as well as larger issues of systemic inequity. While the skills and competencies of the CDO are crucial to an institution’s successful DEI efforts, markers of a strong DEI strategy and achievement are observed through the support of the executive leadership and a shift in institutional culture.

The role of executive leadership in reinforcing DEI initiatives cannot be overstated. Without senior leadership encouragement and resource allocation, CDOs cannot create the policies, programming, and procedures essential to creating equitable and inclusive campuses. Executive leaders must work to endorse DEI as an institutional directive and “develop a campus-wide infrastructure” in order to avoid DEI programming that is narrowly focused on only one

area or type of diversity (Patton, 2017, flexible programs section). By working to integrate DEI into all aspects of the college culture, executive leaders demonstrate the importance of DEI to the values and outcomes of the institution. This responsibility is not solely delegated to the president of the college. The vice presidents, other executive-level leaders, and even the Board of Trustees must support and publicly endorse the work of the CDO from the CDO recruitment process onward (Arnold & Kowalski-Braun, 2012). Additionally, senior leadership advocacy for an integrative DEI strategy requires more than solely redistributing human and fiscal resources. In her dissertation, Nixon (2013) notes that executive leaders must exhibit willingness to “engage in courageous conversations about the historical and ongoing effects of racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, and other forms of oppression” (p. 156). This indicates willingness to participate fully in DEI work and models best behavior for the rest of the community.

Executive leadership can also signal the strength of a DEI plan and legitimize the CDO’s work by appointing the CDO to the President’s Cabinet. When CDOs have a seat on the Cabinet, they are provided access to the macro-level challenges and prospects that impact institutional operations and objectives. This elevates CDO to the level of other members of the executive team, including the provost and president (Cooper, 2014). In 2020, SUNY Purchase appointed a new president, Milagros Peña, and high on her priority list was “creating a culture where the vision, mission, and values policy statements are applied to real everyday life on campus” (personal communication, October 7, 2020). One of her first acts as president was to add the CDO to her cabinet, elevating DEI work to an executive level undertaking. To members of the campus community, this act represented a shift in focus that highlights DEI work as a more formally recognized priority.

Executive leaders are situated in a position that allows them to promote DEI programming in national educational conferences and other interactions with their peers. This collaboration allows for open dialogue, idea and resource sharing, and an opportunity to learn from one another's missteps in creating more inclusive campuses. Harris, Barone, and Patton Davis (2015) see this coaction as key to acknowledging and appreciating "the connection between diversity and educational excellence" (p. 29). By utilizing their professional networks, executive leaders continue to develop additional support for and provide legitimacy to DEI work at higher education institutions.

A final sign of executive support for a comprehensive DEI plan is providing leadership training for the CDO and other institutional executives in leadership styles that encourage equity and inclusion. Some researchers value the development of relational leadership proficiency in those engaged in diversity work as it emphasizes the importance of developing and maintaining valuable internal and external networks (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007; Parker 2020). Other experts value training in transformational leadership as these skills mobilize constituencies for change using positive, individualized motivations (Aguirre & Martinez, 2002; Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007). Finally, even skilled CDOs can benefit from training in inclusive leadership with a focus on traits of commitment, courage, cognizance of bias, curiosity, cultural intelligence, and collaboration (Bourke & Dillon, 2016). Executive staff can support and encourage the development of these leadership skills by integrating them into practice and by finding means to "reward leaders who role-model inclusive behaviors" (Bourke & Dillon, 2016, "What can organizations do?" section). By investing in the professional development of CDOs and other leaders, executive leadership indicate to the campus and larger communities that

keeping their staff current on DEI issues, vocabulary, and competencies is an important aspect of the institution's principles.

In addition to the role of executive leadership, the institutional culture and how it realizes DEI values and practice is indicative of the DEI plan's effectiveness. As has been discussed, a successful DEI strategy is one integrated into the operations of the institution. One way the institution can achieve this integration is by developing mission, vision, and value statements recognizing DEI as key to the institutional health and success (Williams & Clowney, 2007; Arnold & Kowalski-Braun, 2012). These statements are intended to be closely tied to the functions of every department, faculty, and staff member and serve as a public facing explanation of the purpose of the institution. By incorporating DEI into the institutional mission as a key principle and goal, the institution is signaling its commitment to pursuing excellence through equity and inclusion initiatives. Some caution is required, however, to avoid establishing DEI mission statements that function as "token gestures," resulting in little significant change (Harris, Barone, & Patton Davis, 2015, p. 27). Missions or visions without actionable steps and quantifiable outcomes are representative of an unsuccessful or stalled DEI program. To better establish the value of DEI as an institutional commitment, the CDO should also be a significant participant in development of the strategic plan. Having a diversity perspective emphasized in strategic planning deliberations elevates DEI as integral to the institution's goals. By "embedding...diversity values into the strategic core of institutional life," institutions can make DEI an indicator of institutional excellence (Williams & Clowney, 2007, p. 14).

Another marker of a successful DEI strategy requires acknowledgement of how an oppressive culture and unbalanced power structure impacts student success. Members of the campus community must recognize that the system of higher education has historically been and

remains complicit in maintaining an inequitable culture (Alvarez, 2020). Acceptance is key, but must also be met with a commitment to change and improve institutional culture. This is likely uncomfortable for those who have been privileged by higher education and may collude with the system or those who have been oppressed by higher education and fear reprisal (Nixon, 2013; J. Clarke, personal communication, February 10, 2021). A talented, effective CDO can guide the campus community to find techniques for toppling the oppressive culture and strengthen the DEI mission.

A productive CDO and DEI approach also illustrate the fact that an equitable and inclusive campus is not just beneficial for minoritized and underserved students, faculty, and staff, but for all members of the campus community. This concept can be traced back to the deans of women whose work, although technically focused on female student success, “contributed greatly to the success of modern higher education in many ways for both male and female students” (Schwartz, 1997, p. 518). The CDO’s role is in identifying areas that undermine the DEI mission and collaborating with faculty, staff, and students to resolve them. One technique that improves the campus climate for all constituencies is active anti-racist workshops, especially those recognizing and countering implicit bias (Patton, 2017; Alvarez, 2020). By creating and promoting this type of training program, CDOs demonstrate the positive impacts of DEI work to internal and external stakeholders and create a sense of accountability for all members of the campus community.

While rectifying larger structural biases, successful CDOs must also ensure that they do not neglect to resolve everyday issues as they arise. These conflicts, microaggressions, and harassment can have a direct impact on student, faculty, and staff feelings of inclusion. A campus culture that does not resolve smaller DEI offenses will impact community members’

“feelings of belonging” which, in addition to larger cultural inequities, can be just as damaging to student, faculty, and staff satisfaction and retention (J. Clarke, personal communication, February 10, 2021). Some find discomfort in addressing microaggressions and other DEI issues because they require confrontation of one’s peers or directors, which can have “potential political consequences” (Nixon, 2013, p. 101). However, for CDOs to be productive, they must exhibit dedication to oppose behaviors that threaten inclusion and equity.

An effective DEI plan must be designed with a strong, responsive process of assessment. This assessment should include the development of a rubric with clear benchmarks to evaluate the DEI efficacy in various areas and departments (Zalaznick, 2020). Calculating diversity may prove the easiest of the three to assess as diversity can be measured quantitatively. In many colleges, the institutional research staff collect and report on demographics which form the data needed to evaluate compositional diversity. The perhaps more complicated to capture data are equity and inclusion as these are more subjective and would likely require qualitative measurement. Successful DEI plans include techniques for collecting data on equity and inclusion as well as diversity because, as Dr. Clarke explains, “just because I count you doesn’t mean you feel embraced, that you feel like you belong” (J. Clarke, personal communication, February 10, 2021). In order to have a complete DEI strategy, assessment must investigate feelings of belonging which have direct correlations to retention and success. Finally, a CDO must be willing to engage an outside consultant to identify equity and inclusion issues on campus and make recommendations for improvement (Pennamon, 2017). Consultants can provide an objective perspective that offers valuable data on the strengths and weaknesses of the DEI plan.

Finally, an effective DEI process is one in which the CDO is given the authority to make changes to the culture, policy, procedures, and practices of the institution. Researchers agree that

CDOs must be agents of change who recognize that the status quo must be disrupted in order to combat inequity on a grander scale (Wilson, 2013; Alvarez, 2020). The executive leadership and campus as a whole must recognize the CDO's authority to institute change and alter longstanding, no longer beneficial methods. A strong DEI plan is one in which change is broad-reaching, focusing not only on increasing numbers, but equally on truly assisting and guiding those populations admitted to the college. As Alvarez (2020) expounded,

to become a Hispanic-serving institution, you have to hit 25 percent and stay there. That's not Hispanic serving; that's Hispanic enrolling. That's the job of the CDO -- to shift that discourse from enrolling African Americans, enrolling Latinx students, to serving them. (para. 22)

Constructive DEI strategies are not static, but shift and adapt with changing demographics, world events, campus incidents, and more. Inflexible DEI programs run the risk of being “labeled as just another traditional human resources program, quickly losing their appeal, value and effectiveness among your workforce” (Patton, 2017, p. 20). This type of effort is short-lived and does not indicate DEI initiative nor CDO accomplishment. An additional requirement for an efficacious DEI design is ensuring that oppressive policies and procedures actually change. Otherwise, institutions run the risk of interest convergence wherein “inclusion initiatives emerge with great intentions and expectations, but do not end with the actualization of equity” (Harris, Barone, & Patton Davis, 2015, p. 23). Lack of action will not strengthen the work of the CDO nor improve the institution's DEI reputation. It is crucial to the success of DEI work that the CDO is empowered to create meaningful, measurable change.

Recognition of what is required to create and sustain a DEI strategy is an important first step for senior leaders and the institution as a whole. CDOs with this support are more likely to

successfully develop more inclusive and equitable campuses. However, it is also important to identify the challenges and opportunities that CDOs face that have the potential to create obstacles or advantages for DEI success.

### **Challenges and Opportunities Impacting the Efficacy of the CDO**

CDOs are charged with navigating the complex social and political landscape of a college campus while also advancing a comprehensive DEI plan design. While specific campus dynamics and access to resources vary, higher education CDOs encounter many of the same challenges to and opportunities for success. Institutions dedicated to DEI integration in all areas must determine ways to mitigate impediments and foster the resources and relationships that impact CDO accomplishment.

One major challenge is the perception of the CDO role by members of the campus community. As has been discussed, a common preconception regarding the CDO position is that it is a figurehead or serving to check diversity boxes. This assessment relegates the CDO role to purely symbolic and eliminates influence in executing DEI initiatives. In addition, some assume the CDO role has been created in response to a national crisis or specific college incident. The CDO then appears to be a situational role rather than a strategic one which does not indicate a sustained mission of DEI improvement (Parker, 2020). This can be especially complicated if a specific event or circumstance initiated the search for a CDO rather than having recruitment occur as one tactic in a larger, intentional process.

When CDOs are viewed as symbolic, they are more likely to become “stuck in the aspirational piece” of DEI design (Zalaznick, 2020, p. 25). This can create scenarios in which the CDO leads and attends meetings and conversations about loftier concepts that do not result in establishing a plan for action. CDOs in this situation may be required to produce idealistic or

impractical DEI objectives and outcomes. According to CDOs surveyed regarding their first year in the position, 48% responded that the expectations of them in their first year were neither realistic nor achievable (WittKieffer, 2017). Facing goals that are impossible to achieve will impact CDO morale and DEI progress while also influencing the institution's impression of the office's success.

When a CDO is perceived to be a nominal leader, this interpretation can challenge the CDO's authority to execute DEI programming, policies, and procedures. One 2007 study found that, of CDOs surveyed, 45% were afforded "limited ability to hire, terminate, supervise, and evaluate the performance of others" and were not provided the "formal authority to independently implement programs and initiatives" (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007, p. 19). These tasks typically fall under the expected responsibilities and general prerogative of most executive-level officers. If CDOs are not granted the same power as their peers, the institution again implies that they are symbolic in nature rather than the executive-level leaders they actually are. By diminishing their authority in this way, institutions make CDOs less capable of successfully shifting the DEI climate on campus. Additionally, while researchers agree that the role of CDO should be an executive and cabinet level position, some colleges offer diversity leaders a subordinate status. A 2014 assessment of diversity professionals discovered that many were not senior staff at all and instead were designated as assistant deans or directors (Cooper, 2014). By essentially demoting diversity professionals, institutions are signaling to the community and the professionals themselves that DEI is not a priority and consequently further undermines the authority of the CDO.

Members of the campus community can also hinder the CDO's efficacy by providing resistance to the DEI plan. In interviews, both CDOs and affirmative action officers

communicate concerns that DEI work does not have general, authentic support from the institutional community (Chun & Evans, 2011). Many CDOs confront campus community refusal to “abide by and comply with the policies and initiatives generated out of the diversity office” (Wilson, 2013, p. 433). This disinclination to act in accordance with the CDO’s proposals could be a direct response to the perceived absence of authority of the diversity office. However, it is also plausible that a hostile resistance to DEI efforts derives from defensiveness. Some feel a need to protect the institution of academia from DEI initiatives that appear to propose changes to the institutional culture (Williams & Clowney, 2007). Others may justify their opposition by asserting that “little, if any, problems related to diversity exist at the institution; therefore, a CDO, let alone any new diversity policy, is unnecessary” (Wilson, 2013, p. 433). In both cases, defensive faculty and staff are applying misinformation to the situation when they could, in fact, benefit from the CDO’s knowledge about DEI and higher education. Their opinions, however misguided, could lead to faculty, staff, and students failing to benefit from the opportunity of DEI programming and policies. By obstructing the CDO’s policies and programming, the campus constituencies can have a direct and enduring impact on DEI success.

Because diversity can be a fraught issue and due to an absence of authority and support, CDOs tend to encounter both professional and psychological stress and fatigue (Wilson, 2013; Alvarez, 2020). The CDO is often exclusively responsible for both convincing stakeholders to fund and support the realization of DEI goals as well as crafting the response to DEI situations as they arise. Many CDOs face these challenges alone without the support of a diverse, balanced staff or team of collaborators (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007; Wilson, 2013; Willis, 2018; Alvarez, 2020). Because of this, the CDO role is one predisposed to burnout and attrition, arguably more than other executive-level roles (Chun & Evans, 2011; Wilson, 2013). A 2011

WittKieffer survey found the startling statistic that, of 94 CDOs interviewed, half “plan to leave their positions within three years” (Jaschik, 2011, para. 1). CDO turnover is detrimental to the legitimacy of the role and the persistence of DEI initiatives on campus.

Diversity offices also suffer a deficit of resources, both human and financial, required to effectively achieve their goals. A 2017 Witt Kieffer survey found that 53% of respondents did not feel that their work was adequately resourced (WittKieffer, 2017). Without appropriate resources, a department is unlikely to be able to successfully accomplish goals and institute campus-wide changes. For the CDO, still a comparatively new position on many campuses, the ability to build a brand new department is impossible without a significant allocation of resources. Without adequate financing or personnel, a diversity office’s initial goals could be delayed or discontinued altogether. A lack of resources does not just underfund the creation of new programming, but also the ability to hire and retain a support staff. According to one survey, 38% of CDOs interviewed reported only 1-3 support staff members and 11% had no direct reports whatsoever (Pihakis, Paikeday, Armstrong, & Meneer, 2019). This is significant considering that the number of staff reporting to other executive-level officers is generally higher, creating a disparity in the success of each area to accomplish their goals (Anonymous, personal communication, March 4, 2021).

Another challenge facing CDOs is how their various identities impact their work with DEI. According to a 2007 survey of 110 CDOs, 74% identified as African American or Black and 58% identified as female (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007). This statistic informs only about racial and gender identities but does not account for the variety of other social identities with which CDOs identify. CDO identity, especially when representative of a minoritized group, will have an influence on how the CDO approaches DEI work. For women and BIPOC CDOs,

they have the additional challenge of determining how “to counter perceptions of them based on race and gender” (Nixon, 2013, p. 133). According to one CDO, this can even mean evaluating how one speaks as “to some, it doesn’t sound professional enough to talk with your normal accent unless you can back it up with what can be considered more sophisticated vocabulary” (Anonymous, personal communication, March 4, 2021). Having to balance others’ opinions of one’s identity with the work of creating balanced DEI initiatives is an obstacle over which CDOs have little control. As a member of certain identity groups, CDOs find that balancing the influence of their role with their various identities can impact relationships both with those who share their identities and those who do not (J. Clarke, personal communication, February 10, 2021; Anonymous, personal communication, March 4, 2021). For those who are part of minoritized identity groups, the threat of retaliation, stereotyping, microaggressions, and various forms of subtle and overt discrimination by members of privileged groups can challenge how CDOs approach and resolve DEI issues on campus (Chun & Evans, 2011; Nixon, 2013). CDOs with underrepresented identities, along with other minoritized members of the campus community, are also at risk of cultural taxation. Cultural taxation is the expectation that staff, faculty, and administrators of color will serve on DEI committees and panels and mentor other BIPOC faculty and staff members outside of their performance program and without compensation (Gewin, 2020). While still focused on DEI on campus, cultural taxation can hinder CDOs from accomplishing the objectives set by their office and the strategic plan.

The inventory of CDO challenges can appear daunting; however, there are opportunities that will foster both CDO and DEI strategic success. Although they manifest in different ways, the predominant theme of these opportunities is collaboration. Researchers agree that collaboration and fostering and maintaining a strong network is crucial to both the CDO and DEI

effectiveness and accomplishment (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007; Arnold & Kowalski-Braun, 2012; Worthington, Stanley, & Smith, 2020). With separate goals and a dearth of resources, many college units find themselves functioning in isolation in a manner that hinders productivity and cooperation. By embracing collaboration, CDOs have the opportunity to “create a broad equity agenda that creates networking across disconnected processes and siloes” (J. Clarke, personal communication, February 10, 2021)

As has been discussed, involving the CDO in all strategic planning and mission, vision, and values statement creation integrates DEI ideas and ideals into the broader objectives and outcomes of the institution. Similarly, by collaborating with all functional units in designing and deploying programming, the CDO can identify potential issues of inequity or exclusivity during the planning stages and address them before they impact student learning and experience (Alvarez, 2020). CDOs can leverage institutional relationships to collaborate across departments and units on campus to further DEI initiatives.

Engaging members of the campus community in DEI planning, policy, and program development relieves the pressure of the CDO being the sole advocate for this work. As Dr. Damon Williams affirms, CDOs “are not islands to themselves...Diversity work will not go very far if it rests on the shoulders of one man or one woman” (Cooper, 2014, p. 29). Institutions dedicated to DEI success will find opportunities to foster this collaboration on a larger scale by offering training, convening campus-wide meetings, and developing task forces to approach DEI matters collectively (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007).

Another collaborative opportunity comes from partnering with faculty, staff, students, and other administrators to develop comprehensive definitions of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

By developing a shared vocabulary in conjunction with the campus community, the CDO begins the process of gaining the constituencies' acceptance and approval of DEI proposals on campus. Expanded definitions of DEI offer room for creative development of interventions, resources, and services (Wilson, 2013). Researchers agree that the process of creating collective definitions of important DEI terms is a way to engage the campus community in expanding inclusive and equitable behaviors on campus (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007; Worthington, Stanley, & Smith, 2020)

In the pursuit of collaboration and to relieve the CDO from bearing sole responsibility for DEI initiatives, institutions can enhance pre-existing administrative roles in other departments by adding DEI efforts to the job descriptions. At Stony Brook University, for example, several department staff members have DEI obligations in addition to their other student affairs or administrative work (J. Clarke, personal communication, February 10, 2021). While their college does not utilize this model, another CDO believes that such practice would be beneficial, allowing them to “share the load that historically falls on the [diversity] office” (Anonymous, personal communication, March 4, 2021). This process offers the potential to provide support for DEI work cross-departmentally and create a network of peers with whom the CDO can develop additional DEI proposals and best practice.

An important group with whom the CDO can collaborate on DEI initiatives is the student body. By correlating student experience with DEI strategies, CDOs find methods to support student equity and inclusion beyond the recruitment process (Alvarez, 2020). Additionally, contemporary students are invested in creating DEI campuses and are willing to spearhead various projects that pursue this objective. By engaging with students, CDOs offer them a sense of ownership and empower them to consider how a DEI plan can be developed and executed in

ways meaningful to their ambitions and values (Alvarez, 2020). Students who engage in DEI work will be more culturally and globally competent while also developing the skills to observe “how they work across groups and ally with each other” (Zalaznick, 2020, p. 24).

By identifying the challenges and opportunities that CDOs encounter, experts can evaluate the obstacles and possibilities inherent in DEI work. Many of the challenges occur due to preconceived notions or lack of community support for the DEI plan and the opportunities are contingent on engaging with and developing a strong rapport with the campus community.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the experiences of current and former CDOs and the data collected regarding successful DEI strategies on college campuses, several recommendations can be made for continued and improved effectiveness of the CDO role. Further research must be performed to evaluate the manner in which obstacles prevent CDOs from fostering a more robust DEI campus. Researchers will need to assess how CDOs function within the campus hierarchy and what resources and relationships they can leverage to effectively encourage institutional inclusive excellence. Additionally, because the CDO role is still emergent, researchers must focus on identifying additional areas of support that nurture CDO success and retention, such as mentorship and a strong professional network.

One of the challenges in researching and assessing the CDO role is in how the position and its functions can vary based on the institution type, size, and authority afforded the role. In order to facilitate a less ambiguous dialogue about the future of the field, diversity professionals should work to develop a more consistent set of guidelines for the responsibilities, skills, and competencies necessary for CDO success (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007; Parker, 2020). These principles can be utilized from the start of the CDO recruitment process through the

implementation of DEI programs and policies (Arnold & Kowalski-Braun, 2012). By essentially creating a single CDO job description, diversity professionals can develop an improved, empowered status for the position.

In addressing CDO stress and attrition, researchers must also explore the value of dividing the CDO role with other work on campus. Many CDOs are assigned to additional campus functions, such as human resources, student affairs, affirmative action, or other responsibilities (Cooper, 2014). Advocates believe that this role distribution will integrate DEI more fully into the everyday operations of the institution and develop a more “fundamental connection between diversity and academic excellence” (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007, p. 16; Pihakis, Paikeday, Armstrong, & Meneer, 2019). However, creating a shared role can compromise the focus and efficacy of the role with the potential for DEI to become the lesser priority (J. Clarke, personal communication, February 10, 2021; Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007; Pihakis, Paikeday, Armstrong, & Meneer, 2019). Researchers and diversity professionals must strive to clarify and justify the importance of DEI policies, procedures, and practices so that the CDO role is not lost in the institutional structure.

### **Conclusion**

Modern higher education institutions are enrolling an increasingly diverse student body and engaging diverse faculty and staff to the benefit of student learning outcomes, especially those dedicated to intercultural competence and examining and challenging issues of inequity and exclusion in academia and local and global communities. As the definition of diversity continues to develop and institutions seek techniques for recruiting, retaining and supporting diverse faculty, staff, and students, the importance of an effective, transformational CDO

becomes more apparent. In fact, appointing a CDO is best practice for advancing DEI initiatives on college campuses.

While CDOs' backgrounds and education may vary, the development of certain skills and competencies will enhance DEI success. Institutions truly invested in integrating DEI into their key mission, vision, and values must recognize the significance of a talented CDO's contributions to all major strategic plans and curricular and co-curricular program design. Crucial to an efficacious CDO and progressive DEI strategy is an acknowledgment of the barriers to and avenues for success facing the diversity office. Once these challenges and opportunities have been identified, it is the work of a DEI driven institution to support the CDO's efforts through funding, resources, willingness to assess and change, and empowerment. By arming the CDO with the tools and staff necessary for DEI plan success, the institution is amplifying the idea of equity and inclusion as essential to institutional excellence.

Robert M. Sellers, the Vice Provost for Equity and Inclusion and CDO at the University of Michigan, recommends philosophically reframing DEI discussions on campus. For Sellers, DEI and the work of the CDO should be focused on "love, not charity" (Alvarez, 2020, para. 37). This distinction proposes a more holistic view of the diverse members of the community and appreciation of the capital they offer to the institution rather than just perceiving the work of DEI as problems to be resolved. By embracing love, successful CDOs can galvanize the campus community to identify and confront inequity in an effort to cultivate a more inclusive institution for the benefit of students, faculty, staff, and the larger community.

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