

# Chief Diversity Officers Assume Larger Leadership Role

Summer 2011

Fifteen years ago, David A. Thomas and Robin J. Ely published an article in the *Harvard Business Review* entitled "Making Differences Matter: A New Paradigm for Managing Diversity" (September 1996). Based on six years of research into a number of companies on the changing nature of the workforce, the article suggests that organizations that do not truly engage their own pluralism are at a competitive disadvantage. The authors concluded that the key to understanding, managing and capitalizing on diversity is high-level commitment by leadership to a purposeful vision for diversity.

The field of diversity leadership in higher education has come a long way since then. Leaders know that vision is one thing; strategy and action are another. At Witt/Kieffer, we see more positions within our client organizations, increasingly at or near the C-suite level, responsible for carrying out the institution's strategic vision for diversity. While a number of higher education publications have reported a continuing increase in the number of institutions creating these positions nationwide, a May 2010 article by Reginald Stuart in *Diverse Issues in Higher Education* also reports a "... slowly spreading trend in most parts of the country ... toward expanding management and planning to include chief diversity officers or some variation thereof." In other words, the role is changing and being filled by a new breed of leaders.

The increase in chief diversity officer searches, as well as the changing nature of the role, especially among private colleges and universities, led us to seek feedback from professionals in the field on the nature and structure of the position, tenure, skills and experience required for success. In March 2011, Witt/Kieffer conducted a national survey of over 1,800 chief diversity officers (CDO). Ninety four (94) individuals responded, representing a 5 percent response rate. Respondents represented both public and private institutions.

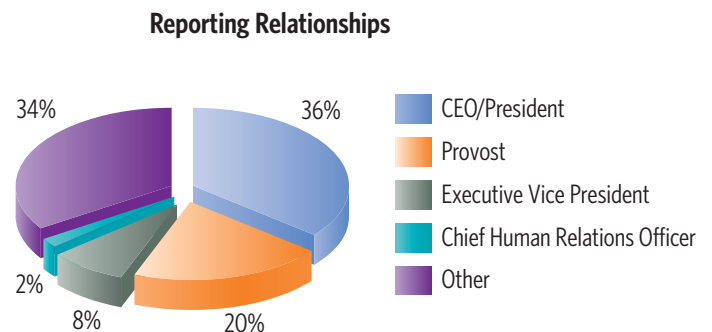
The responses provide a baseline of data regarding these positions, including what institutions can expect to see as they seek talented, skilled, experienced professionals to fill these important senior leadership roles.

## CDO titles and reporting relationships vary from institution to institution

Over half (54 percent) of the respondents are members of their institution's leadership team. A female CEO expresses the importance of serving on the leadership team: "What has been accomplished is the result of sitting at the table and expressing a position." Thirty-six (36) percent report to the president and 20 percent report to the provost. Thirty-four (34) percent report to other positions, including dean, chancellor and vice provost.

The majority (69 percent) say that their presidents are engaged in their institution's diversity strategic planning processes and diversity initiatives.

The survey also revealed that colleges and universities use a variety of titles for the CDO position. Twenty (20) percent hold an "assistant" title, such as assistant vice president, assistant dean or assistant provost. Eighteen (18) percent hold director titles and 14 percent are vice chancellor or vice president. Almost



half of the respondents (48 percent) hold other titles, including associate chancellor, assistant chancellor or associate or assistant vice president.

Many organizations are elevating this office to a senior level, but reporting lines range from the executive suite to academic affairs, student affairs and human resources. Some larger universities have diversity officers based in individual schools and colleges.

Finally, the word “diversity” is increasingly being replaced with “multicultural” on many campuses, reflecting a broader definition of inclusion and diversity that recognizes a more global society.

## Chief Diversity Officers represent a range of backgrounds, responsibilities

Sitting CDOs come from a broad range of backgrounds and career tracks. Within the academy, they include human resources, EEO and AA offices, student affairs, faculty, academic administration and enrollment/admissions. Other backgrounds include diversity positions in health care or the corporate sector, leadership consulting, diversity training, ministry and more.

Responsibilities and functions assigned to today’s CDO include:

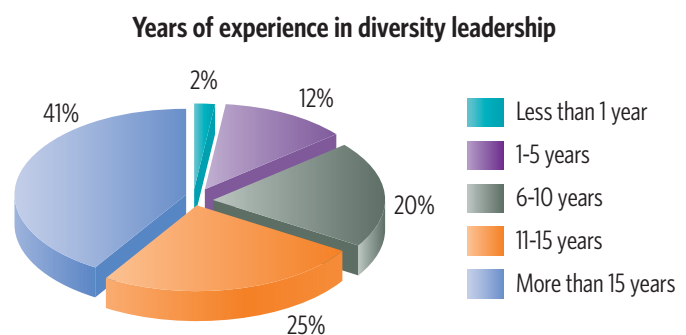
- Diversity strategic planning
- Diversity training
- Institutional research and/or campus climate surveys
- Multicultural student recruitment and financial aid policy
- Student programming
- Faculty recruitment and retention consulting and support
- Curriculum review
- HR and Affirmative Action policies
- Diverse alumni relations

## The field is rich with experienced professionals, varying levels of resources

A large portion of current CDOs at colleges and universities were pioneers in the field; over 43 percent of respondents were the first to hold the CDO title at their institution and helped establish both the office and the position. While still relatively new, the profession is approaching a generational shift, as almost 40 percent reported more than 15 years of experience in the field.

Seventy-two (72) percent have been in their position more than three years. Over 75 percent have terminal degrees (Ph.D., Ed.D. or J.D.). Anecdotally, a number of sitting CDOs shared with us that academic credentials are highly desirable as they help establish bona fides on campus, particularly with faculty colleagues.

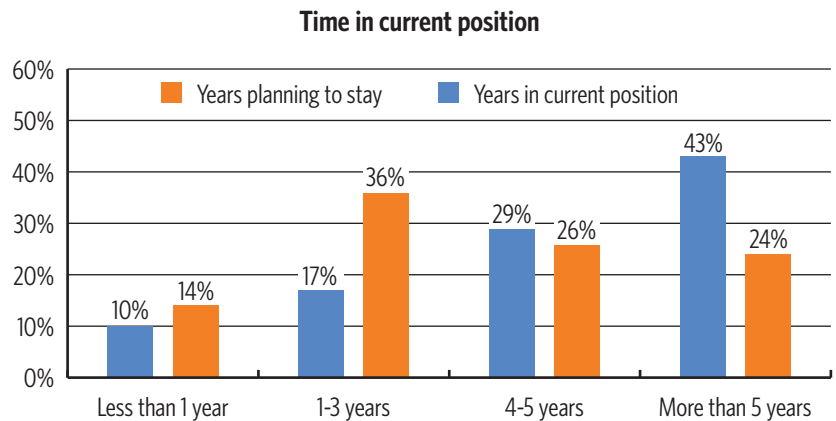
Just over half (51 percent) of respondents reported having annual budgets over \$300,000; 18 percent have budgets under \$100,000. Twenty-one (21) percent have budgets in the \$100,000 to \$200,000 range with the remaining 10 percent in the \$200,000 to \$300,000 range.



## Strategic opportunities drive chief diversity officer career decisions

The work of today's chief diversity officer is much more strategic and policy-oriented when compared to the profession's genesis. Early positions focused on programming in student affairs, student recruitment or employment and affirmative action policies. Today's universities increasingly recognize the strategic importance of a broadly inclusive campus community, facilitated by a leader who is a member of the senior management team. Accordingly, 80 percent of the respondents said they would leave their current position if it afforded them an opportunity to move to a position on a senior management team. Seventy-nine (79) percent would move for an expanded role and greater support within the institutional culture and 76 percent would move for the opportunity to realize greater integration of the diversity plan within the administrative structure.

Survey respondents also indicate significant turnover. Half of respondents plan to leave their current position within three years. Nearly one-third anticipate leaving for another leadership role within the field but about 28 percent would leave for another opportunity beyond the diversity field.



## Successful CDOs possess specialized skill sets

In order to be effective, the chief diversity officer works across the entire institution with students, faculty and staff within all schools and departments on campus. More often than not, the CDO also has few, if any, direct reports and must work through negotiation, diplomacy and persuasion to achieve goals. One female president adds, "Credibility and eloquence are important components of the skill set required to engage the discussion of diversity." The survey revealed a number of skills as important attributes a chief diversity officer must possess:

- the ability to influence the strategic plan of their institution (100 percent)
- the ability to engage senior administrative staff (99 percent)
- organizational leadership skills (99 percent)
- strategic planning and implementation (99 percent)
- public relations and communication skills (98 percent)

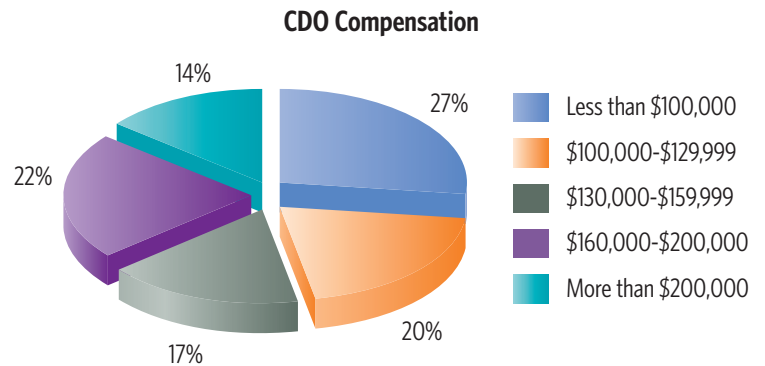
Anecdotally, Witt/Kieffer has also found that the ability to utilize data and metrics to establish goals and track progress is another essential skill among chief diversity officers.

## Implementing accountability and reporting system tops the list of CDO challenges

Eighty-five (85) percent reported that implementation of an institution-wide accountability and reporting system as the top obstacle to success. More than three-quarters (79 percent) of survey respondents cited obtaining institution wide buy-in as a major challenge to developing and implementing successful diversity initiatives. Lack of resources is a challenge for 76 percent of respondents.

## CDO compensation varies

Similar to the variety of titles for the Chief Diversity Officer role within an institution, the range of compensation also varies considerably. Twenty-seven (27) percent of survey respondents report that their income was below \$100,000 per year while 14 percent report annual income above \$200,000. Twenty-two (22) percent have an annual income in the \$160,000 to \$200,000 range and the majority (37 percent) report annual income in the \$100,000 to \$159,000 range.



## A broader, strategic role in diversity leadership

The Chief Diversity Officer at today's college and university is more likely than not to have been at the forefront of establishing this profession. In the course of less than two decades, these groundbreakers have worked with senior leadership across a broad range of constituents to move the role from tactical to strategic. Responses indicate that the individuals in these roles continue to seek broader engagement and influence on their institutions' strategic plans. A sophisticated set of negotiation, diplomatic, communication and analytical skills will be required to be successful, regardless of the CDO's educational credentials and background. This survey shows a lot of opportunity for growth in the field, but as a male foundation president sums it up: "There is still much work to be done in addressing issues related to diversity as a part of one's career."

For more information, please contact Lucy Leske, vice president and education practice co-leader, at 508-680-1268 or Oliver Tomlin, vice president, at 215-568-2160.

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