Developing the Next Generation of Chief Diversity Officers in Higher Education

A Witt/Kieffer Survey

October 2014

The role of the chief diversity officer is growing in stature across higher education. CDOs now claim a seat at the table for key decision-making at most institutions, and many successful diversity executives are hired into presidential and other prominent positions. While CDOs are succeeding and moving up and out of their roles quickly, little attention has been paid to building a robust talent pipeline for the next generation of diversity professionals, according to a recent Witt/Kieffer survey. This report provides a thorough summary of the survey results and suggests that CDOs can and must do more to pave the way for future leaders and ensure the sustainability of their profession.
## Contents

- Introduction ......................................................... 1
- Current Trends in CDO Succession Planning .................. 2
- How CDOs Develop Themselves ................................. 4
- What Do CDOs Think of the Future of the Diversity Field? 5
- The Future of CDO Succession Planning ....................... 6
- How Necessary is the CDO Position? ......................... 7
- CDO Development Resources ................................. 8
- About the Authors .................................................. 9
Developing the Next Generation of Chief Diversity Officers in Higher Education

Introduction
In 2011, Witt/Kieffer published a report following our national survey of chief diversity officers (CDOs) from both public and private higher education institutions. The report titled, *Chief Diversity Officers Assume Larger Leadership Role*, addressed the changing role of CDOs and provided a baseline of data regarding these positions.

As a follow-up, we recently conducted another survey of CDO leadership — this time with a focus on CDO succession planning. Sixty-nine chief diversity executives responded to the survey. We asked specific questions about whether chief diversity officers and their organizations were grooming successors and taking the necessary steps to ensure continuity upon the CDO’s eventual departure. Our findings are summarized here and offer higher education leaders compelling reasons to explore whether their institutions are adequately supporting diversity leaders of the future.

The Need for CDO Succession Planning
Over the past two decades the roles of CDOs have changed significantly. Chief diversity officers in the past focused primarily on programming in student affairs, student recruitment or employment and affirmative action policies. Today’s universities have expanded the CDO role to support the strategic importance of a broadly inclusive campus community, and consequently CDOs have become facilitators of that strategy while becoming members of the senior management team. In short, the role has gone from being a primarily tactical position to a strategic one, requiring a much more multifaceted skill set than in the past.

The role has become increasingly important, and at the same time turnover has become more commonplace. In our 2011 survey, 80 percent of respondents said they would leave their current position if it afforded them an opportunity to move to a position on a senior management team; 79 percent would move for an expanded role and greater support within the institutional culture; and half of respondents planned to leave their current position within three years. One reason is that CDOs are attractive candidates to move up in the administrative ranks, even into presidential and provost positions.

As the CDO position becomes fundamental to an institution’s strategic vision, it follows that there should be a greater emphasis on succession planning—that is, ensuring continuity in the role so that, if one CDO leaves, the successor is prepared to hit the ground running and build upon previous successes.
Current Trends in CDO Succession Planning

Succession planning is the process of identifying one or more successors for executive suite roles, as well as the onboarding activities to prepare the recruitments for their new roles. Succession planning expresses the organization’s big picture, long-term strategic vision. When approached thoughtfully and incorporated formally, succession planning becomes a critical part of comprehensive strategic planning.

Furthermore, succession planning is an ongoing activity that not only prepares the next generation of executives but also answers questions such as: How will the institution sustain its culture and operations during leadership changes? Has the institution planned ahead to make sure that major transitions—planned or unplanned—are seamless and continue periods of productivity? How can the institution show appreciation for retiring leaders while allowing new ones to immediately engage in their new role?

Our recent survey suggests that succession planning for the CDO role may not be receiving the appropriate level of attention to ensure smooth, seamless transitions from one CDO to the next.

Fewer than half of the respondents to the question “What is your institution doing to ensure the continuity of the role of the CDO?” indicated that succession planning methods are in place at their institutions. Methods such as mentoring relationships, leadership development training, and successor identification are happening, but at most institutions potential successors to the CDO role are identified on an ad hoc basis, whether through an informal internal process or through external recruitment, rather than a formal process. Only a few respondents (12%) suggested that CDO successors were identified formally, as part of institutional succession planning.
Developing the Next Generation of Chief Diversity Officers in Higher Education

Are CDOs themselves doing enough to nurture the next generation? The results suggest that mentoring and other critical activities are indeed taking place, though they can certainly be increased across the board. Of the responses to the question “What are you personally doing to educate and transfer knowledge to the next generation of CDOs?” the majority of respondents indicated that they are engaged in some form of mentoring and making efforts to grow internal resources. Approximately half of the respondents included practices such as partnering with organizations that build talent pipelines, or promoting thought leadership and speaking at events that address diversity issues.

Respondents to the question “How are potential successors to the CDO role identified at your institution?” offered further indication that succession planning is approached on an informal, as-needed basis. Formal efforts comprised only 19% of the replies. The survey shows that the majority of institutions represented by the respondents were treating succession planning as more of an as-needed, impromptu process.
How CDOs Develop Themselves

This relative lack of attention to a formalized process at an institutional and CDO-level contrasts with the efforts of CDOs to develop their own professional goals.

The question that received the most responses asked “What are you doing for your own professional development in diversity and inclusion to advance into broader institutional roles?” Clearly, CDOs are preparing to leave their current roles at some point in the future and step into new roles with greater responsibilities. This trend was corroborated by a sampling of 75 CDOs in the Witt/Kieffer network, which showed that two-thirds have moved into positions beyond diversity leadership, including presidents, provosts, deans, and roles in student affairs and HR.
What do CDOs think of the future of the diversity field?

Comments from our survey:

"Chief diversity officers will be instrumental by providing leadership and serving as strong advocates for creating the symbols, partnerships, and branding necessary for including and not losing talent in the workforce, as well as ensuring that policies and procedures are in place to assure the U.S. remains competitive in the global arena."

"The question really has to do with how we can broadly define the position... the CDO should be involved at a high policy-making level and resource allocation, as well as setting the strategic direction of the institution."

"The future is promising so long as the focus is on how diversity contributes to learning for all students, leading to student success in its broadest sense. Diversity leaders must become students of higher education leadership in general and not simply be the diversity expert at the table. To achieve its rightful place in higher education, CDO offices must practice the prevailing culture of higher education—assessment, research, learning outcomes, accountability, etc."

"I’m hopeful that the future of the field will dissolve into an institutional best practice that’s embedded in every sector of the organization."

"There will be institutions that excel due in part to structural change around diversity, but many more will stagnate (and some will fail) due to the absence of such structural change."
The Future of CDO Succession Planning

Our survey suggests that CDOs are on the move. The chief diversity officer role is expanding and becoming more important to institutional strategy, and as a result, providing more opportunities for current CDOs to leave their positions for other broader roles. These trends elevate the importance of installing a formalized process for succession, but according to survey respondents, there is much work to be done in establishing a succession plan.

Adequate succession planning must incorporate the future of CDO roles. Respondents offered their comments on the future of the diversity field. Overwhelmingly they believe the role will continue to be a vital component in higher education leadership.

According to respondents, the future of the CDO role will involve:

• **connecting** diversity strategic planning with institutional strategic planning;
• **expanding** the diversity leadership role both internally and externally;
• **developing** new revenue streams by partnering with corporate relations, foundation relations, and advancement;
• **leveraging** diversity leadership councils, faculty senate, student affairs and international affairs to create curricular interventions;
• **serving** as a resource to boards, law firms, corporations, and non-profits;
• **connecting** diversity research, assessment, experience to consulting; and
• **mentoring**, sponsoring and leading from an intergenerational perspective.

Among the expanding responsibilities that chief diversity officers in higher education are taking on, they must be responsible for planning their eventual exit.

A good CDO must be on the lookout for his or her successor, and groom others to fill this role throughout academia as well. Institutions, too, must prioritize CDO succession planning so that the gains and accomplishments of one diversity leader are not lost in the transition to another.
As institutions achieve diversity and inclusion success, does it become less necessary to have the CDO position?

Comments from our survey:

“**The diversity field is only going to grow.**
Institutions that have been around for hundreds of years are realizing how important diversity is to higher education.”

“**With the nation’s changing demographics and the globalizing of the workforce, it becomes even more imperative to have the CDO position.** ‘Diversity and inclusion success’ is not a static goal; it is ongoing progress and not a fixed ‘achievement’.”

“**Diversity is more important than ever before, especially with a projected decline in racial demographics entering in the college pipeline.** Success from a numerical standpoint isn’t indicative of an inclusive or embracing climate.”

“**CDOs are crucial to institutional development as we become a more culturally diverse and global society;** institutions must develop the cultural competency to compete in this new economy.”
CDO Development Resources


About the Authors

**Lucy A. Leske**, managing partner, guides practice development and client service for the firm’s education practice. Lucy joined Witt/Kieffer in 1998 and has been an executive recruiter for over 20 years. She has conducted a broad range of searches across institutional administration at the senior level, including presidential, vice presidential, decanal and provostial searches. Areas of expertise include executive leadership, academic administration, advancement, enrollment, and student affairs, communications and finance. Lucy serves on the Witt/Kieffer Diversity Task Force and works with clients to enhance diversity and inclusive excellence in leadership recruitment.

**Oliver B. Tomlin, III** is a senior partner with Witt/Kieffer’s education and not-for-profit and healthcare practices. Oliver has more than 30 years of highly successful management experience. His executive search practice is focused on recruiting senior leaders for hospitals and health systems, colleges and universities, professional associations, cultural institutions and community service and civic organizations. Oliver is committed to assisting his clients in achieving their strategic, organizational objectives and senior leadership recruiting goals. He focuses on recruiting for high-level positions, including presidents, vice presidents, provosts and deans for colleges and universities; and CEOs, COOs, CFOs and executive directors for healthcare and other not-for-profit organizations.

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to express sincere gratitude to the 69 chief diversity executives who provided their insight, intellect, and opinions for this report. We would also like to acknowledge our Witt/Kieffer colleagues in the education practice and marketing team for their invaluable editorial guidance.
About Witt/Kieffer

Witt/Kieffer is the preeminent executive search firm that identifies outstanding leadership solutions for organizations committed to improving the quality of life. We are the only leading executive search firm specializing in higher education, healthcare, life sciences, board services and not-for-profit industries.

Visit www.wittkieffer.com for more information.