

**Literature Review from Women of Color Chief Diversity Officers: Their Positionality and Agency in Higher Education Institutions, a dissertation by Monica L. Nixon**  
**Excerpts from Chapter 2, Literature Review**

Operationalizing Diversity in Colleges and Universities

Historically, institutions have employed different approaches to operationalize diversity, to recruit and retain students, faculty, and staff, and to engage this compositional diversity in meaningful ways. Early emphasis on increasing compositional diversity often led to pressure to provide space and opportunities for meaningful interaction. In some cases these pressures came in the form of student protest, with demands for cultural centers, inclusive curricula, and attention to recruiting and retaining diverse faculty and staff. **On many campuses, these initiatives may have felt disconnected from one another, absent a strong institution-wide coordination of diversity efforts, resulting in inconsistent diversity engagement (Milem et al., 2005). A perpetual challenge for institutions has been the move from reactive to adaptive change that integrates diversity goals with the overall educational mission, maximizes the educational benefits of diversity, and sustains commitment over the long term (Milem et al., 2005).**

History of Diversity Initiatives on college campuses:

Williams and Clowney (2007) presented three diversity models currently operating on college and university campuses, each of which frames diversity differently, focuses on distinctive goals, and employs varying strategies, organizational capabilities, and program targets.

**1.) The Affirmative Action and Equity Model**

The Affirmative Action and Equity Model emerged during the 1950s and 1960s in response to shifting laws, policy, and social movements. It focused on increasing the compositional diversity of faculty, staff, and students and eliminating overt discriminatory practices through affirmative action programs and plans, nondiscrimination clauses, and diversity training programs. The model did not address, however, exclusionary campus cultures that were not designed with people of color, women, and other federally protected groups in mind (Williams & Clowney, 2007).

**2.) Multicultural Model**

Campus social protests and shifting legal policies in the 1960s and 1970s launched the Multicultural Model, which provided services to help ethnically and racially diverse students, women, and other social identity groups thrive in institutional contexts that often resisted their presence on campus. Students, faculty, and staff experiencing academic and social alienation on campus created counterspaces, or “ethnic enclaves that offer shelter from the psycho-emotional harms of racial microaggressions” (Harper & Hurtado, 2007, p. 14). Multicultural affairs units, cultural centers, ethnic and gender studies, and bias response systems were created under this model.

**3.) Diversity Learning Model**

The late 1990s and 2000s saw the emergence of the Diversity Learning Model, which linked diversity with academic excellence and the intellectual mission of colleges and universities. Curricular diversity requirements, intergroup dialogue programs, and holistic admission processes developed in this model encompass all members of the campus community, inclusive of identity and background.

Strategies that focus explicitly on undoing structures that perpetuate exclusion and oppression are not well-articulated in any of these models. Each of the models has its strengths and limitations, and

integrating them to create structural, institution-wide commitment to diversity and equity is the emerging goal of many campuses (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007).

### **Diversity Leadership**

Smith (2009) emphasized the role of broad leadership in creating diversity change. Although commitment from the president and senior leadership is essential, on its own it is not sufficient to deepen and sustain investment in diversity. Given the reality of brief presidential tenures in higher education, **commitment to diversity must permeate through the organization so as to continue beyond one particular person (Aguirre & Martinez, 2006)**. This requires “a multidimensional effort [that] exists in many different locations in the institution – all requiring leadership” (Smith, 2009, p. 265) that is distributed vertically and horizontally in the organization. Complicating this need for broad leadership engagement is the reality that status and influence play out differently according to positionality in the academy, with role, race, gender, class, and other factors affecting perceptions of leaders and constituents (Aguirre & Martinez, 2006).

**Developing sustainable diversity leadership requires an investment of financial and human resources to cultivate new understanding, knowledge, skills, and attitudes, to support the efforts of those already engaged in campus diversity initiatives, and to bring on additional expertise to propel new or coordinated efforts (Williams & Clowney, 2007)**. This investment must be consistent over the long term, especially when examination of the diversity climate reveals rifts to be addressed. Bolstering the work of those already engaged with diversity is critical, because these areas are often underfunded, stretched beyond capacity, and located in parts of the institution, such as student affairs, that have limited social and political capital in the organization (Aguirre & Martinez, 2006). Institutions may need to make new hires in key leadership roles among administrators, staff, and faculty, and they certainly need to invest in the support and learning of their current personnel.

An effort at the University of Connecticut illustrates the challenge and promise of building capacity in diversity leadership. The university hosts “Conversations on Diversity,” an ongoing series for the president, provost, deans, and vice presidents, who hear from prominent scholars and leaders about diversity issues and then discuss implications for the institution. The goal of this series is to help those in administrative and academic leadership develop new mental models to understand diversity priorities (Williams, 2007), especially critical in order to sustain diversity commitment during times of budget retrenchment and competing strategic priorities. Aguirre and Martinez (2006) emphasized the need for “leaders in higher education ... to undergo the same personal transformational changes that students and faculty are expected to undergo as they pursue diversity initiatives on campus” (p. 81), a key focus of the University of Connecticut program.

### **Presidential Commitment: Essential but not Sufficient**

Although presidential leadership on its own may not be sufficient to move an institution’s diversity agenda forward, it is an essential ingredient. A study about the influence of 27 university presidents in advancing diversity agendas illustrated the need for presidents to understand “diversity as a political position” (Kezar, 2008, p. 409). The presidents described the necessity of relying on political strategies, such as building coalitions, taking the political pulse, anticipating resistance, using data, showcasing success, and understanding conflict, and the importance of including diversity in strategic planning, budgeting, rewards and incentives, curriculum, and board priorities. Kezar (2008) found that “leadership is perhaps the most important factor in ensuring institutional transformation and institutionalizing a diversity agenda” (p. 407). Presidents must work with other institutional leaders, including boards of trustees, faculty, and diversity specialists, to articulate a compelling agenda for diversity, a challenging task given the almost paralyzing complexity that can come with reconciling numerous diversity definitions and paradigms (Williams & Clowney, 2007). However, the presidents in Kezar’s study urged

their peers to engage with the politics of diversity, rather than remaining in what they characterized as the safe zone of visioning and strategic planning.

## **History and Evolution of CDO Positions in Higher Education**

Colleges and universities aspiring to embed diversity into the learning enterprise and to integrate diversity-related responsibilities into a coherent structure have created Chief Diversity Officer positions and units in increasing numbers (Banerji, 2005; Fleigler, 2006; Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007). Though seemingly one of the newer senior leadership positions to gain relevancy in higher education, organizational predecessors for this kind of diversity-focused role have existed for some time. Demographic shifts in student populations in the 1970s, particularly enrollment by African American students, prompted creation of positions such as “**vice president for minority affairs**” to produce access- and retention-focused services (Lowery, 2011; Pittard, 2010; Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007). In addition to minority affairs positions, other units such as **multicultural affairs offices, ethnic studies departments, women’s centers, disability services offices, gender and sexuality centers, and international student services** offices have impacted inclusion efforts for underrepresented groups (Lowery, 2011). These kinds of units continue to exist on college campuses, particularly those operating in an affirmative action or multicultural model (Williams & Clowney, 2007). CDOs represent a continuing evolution of diversity-focused programs and services on campuses, building on compliance, recruitment, and retention efforts to address curriculum, climate, and policy-making (Stuart, 2010).

**CDO positions have existed for some time in private industry, federal and state agencies, and school systems** (Pittard, 2010), with a strong focus on legal compliance and affirmative action. The private sector in particular has influenced the spread of CDO positions in higher education, as colleges and universities look to businesses and corporations that have prioritized positioning and hiring in a global and interconnected world. Other external pressures on higher education that have contributed to the adoption of CDO positions include demographic shifts, international conflicts, inequitable access to educational, social, and political capital, the emergence of an information-based economy, and the educational-benefits justification for admission and financial aid decisions (Williams & Wade Golden, 2007). As one long-time CDO stated, “leadership positions are appearing because equity so far has not” (Fleigler, 2006, p. 60).

In addition to external pressures, internal influences have prompted the creation of CDO positions in colleges and universities. Banerji (2006) posited that CDO positions have come about partly because of the “reality of operating in a laissez faire post-affirmative action environment” (p. 38), where diversity is presumed to be a component of a quality education but institutions lack clarity in terms of how to effect an inclusive climate. Despite considerable progress in higher education over the past several decades in terms of expanding access for historically underrepresented groups, “institutions fall short of reaping the benefits that diversity brings to the college environment” (Leon, 2010, p. 5). **Presidents and provosts who want to leverage diversity in a strategic learning model may look to a CDO to move an institution forward (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007). This is not always the case, of course. Some positions have emerged from controversy or crisis and may function as damage control to appease offended groups.** Harvard University, for example, hired its first Senior Vice Provost for Faculty Development and Diversity following President Lawrence Summers’s contentious and highly-publicized remarks in 2005 about women in the sciences.

A primary distinction between the newest generation of CDO positions and other current or earlier diversity capabilities is the CDOs’ institution-wide focus to create policy and infrastructure that integrate diversity at the core of the learning enterprise (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2006, 2007).

## Functional and Symbolic Roles of CDOs

Although specific executive-level CDO structures may differ from institution to institution, several commonalities persist across CDO responsibilities, including leadership of strategic diversity planning efforts and building institutional diversity infrastructure (Barceló, 2007; Stuart, 2010; Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007). **CDOs serve as catalysts, educators, and persuaders in their organizations (Green, 2008).** In its ideal implementation, a CDO position elevates, integrates, and centralizes diversity functions in an institution (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007). Because of the complexity of this charge, the CDO serves in a facilitative capacity, rather than as the sole responsible party for moving forward an institutional diversity agenda (Pittard, 2010). In a case study of an institution with a new CDO position, the provost stated that the structure created around and by the CDO communicated symbolic group accountability, beyond the individual in the position: “There’s the CDO work, but it really is our work. ... We probably need to keep circling back to that. It’s all of us doing that work” (Nixon, 2011, p. 19). Just as a university’s Chief Academic Officer (CAO) and Chief Information Officer (CIO) do not “own” the entire academic and technological enterprises, respectively, nor should a CDO have to shoulder the expectation of owning diversity. However, CAOs operate within a fairly well-understood sphere comprised of the curriculum, faculty, and classroom, and when institutions create CIO positions, they typically understand the need to invest in technology infrastructure and determine discrete outcomes against which to measure progress. In contrast, many CDOs are carving out new space, are under-resourced (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007), operate with ambiguous expectations, and their institutional charge “could almost be seen as ‘organizationally’ overstepping boundaries” (Pittard, 2010, p. 41). Fear of the potential transformation of the academic landscape can introduce uncertainty among the very people with whom CDOs must work in order to advance diversity issues.

Williams and Wade-Golden (2007) described **three archetypes of the CDO position, each with varying levels of resources and structure: the collaborative officer model (represented by 45% of CDO respondents), the unit-based model (38%), and the portfolio divisional model (17%) (p. 18).**

1. The collaborative officer model is characterized by limited staff support, lack of authority to hire, terminate, or evaluate performance, and initiatives that rely on lateral coordination and partnerships.
2. Unit-based models include more robust staffing and budget resources centralized in an office or department to support lateral relationships and coordination.
3. The vertically-integrated portfolio divisional model is the rarest form on college campuses and also the most organizationally complex. CDOs in this model have direct reporting units that might include a cultural center, ethnic and gender studies, equity and compliance, research and assessment, faculty recruiting and retention, prospective student outreach, and community outreach.

The role of the CDO and the diversity infrastructure built around the person are shaped by institutional context, diversity priorities, and individual characteristics of person in the position (Leon, 2010), which may change in a dynamic and rapid fashion (Green, 2008). **Green (2008) noted a “pattern of transition and change” in the CDO positions in her study; of note, the three CDOs she interviewed had all experienced significant realignment of their responsibilities, even though two of the positions were fewer than three years old at the time of her research.**

## CDO Barriers to Success

CDOs must address **decentralized structures, institutional resistance to change, co-optive pressure, and traditional ways of operating;** additional challenges may include an exclusionary institutional history, rocky community relations, and disparate “cultures and micro-cultures of the campus” (Leon, 2010, p. ii). Generally, **CDOs lack formal authority to reward or punish individuals and units based**

**on degree of diversity progress.** “As a result, their source of ‘power’ is often grounded in status, persuasion, and symbols” (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2006, “Leading Through Status and Influence,” para. 1). The political and symbolic frames described by Bolman and Deal (2008) articulate a range of strategies that are available to CDOs, including mapping the terrain, developing an agenda and planning structure, balancing relationships with allies and enemies, integrating performance assessments, and negotiating conflict, alliances, and compromises. These political and symbolic strategies may facilitate and focus institutional attention to diversity issues.

Unlike other senior-level leaders, CDOs as individuals may be understood as functionally and symbolically representing the issues they are charged to address. **Many are hired into new roles and may come from outside the organization, thus having few existing relationships and experiencing isolation in the institution (Jaschik, 2011; Leon, 2010; Pittard, 2010). They may also be seen as an instrument or even a pawn of the senior leadership, which limits their ability to develop relationships and initiatives.** In his research, Leon (2010) that “the CDO can not only be a symbolic figure that represents the commitment of the leadership, or that serves to please sectors of the campus that show discontent in regards to campus climate” (p. 187). In one study (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007), 74% of CDOs identified as African American/Black, 3% as Asian American/Pacific Islander, 10% as Latino(a)/Hispanic, 13% as White, and 0% as Native American; further, 42% were men, and 58% were women (p. 37). **The majority of CDOs are people of color and women. Their charge focuses on systematizing a commitment to diversity, even as they experience marginalization themselves, a set of concerns that is arguably most salient in institutions of higher education where predominantly White faculties and staff serve a predominantly White student population.**

## **CDO Positionality in Colleges and Universities**

### Institutional Positionality

The diversity movement in higher education “still struggles for legitimacy” (Barceló, 2007, p. 7), raising questions about **whether adoption of formal CDO structures is intended primarily to serve ceremonial purposes or to facilitate deeper attention to diversity challenges.** Organizations commonly look to upgrades in management and structure in order to improve processes and bring about change (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Green, 2008). Creating a position can provide a way to symbolically embed issues in an organization, but this approach simultaneously may function to sideline issues and groups by situating responsibility in one person, rather than the community, and by symbolically conveying action without making instrumental changes to the organization (Bolman & Deal, 2008). This latter outcome may not result from intention or malice, but rather from what is communicated in the structure of the position through resources such as reporting lines and budget allocations. In the case of CDOs, Williams & Wade-Golden (2007) found that only 17% oversaw a broad portfolio of direct reporting units with technical and administrative support, contrasted with 45% of CDOs who operated with little or no staffing and limited influence on hiring, evaluation, and resource allocation (p. 18). In the absence of dedicated diversity capabilities, the authors noted that institutions were at risk of experiencing organizational resistance, dissonance, and misalignment of resources.

CDOs typically lack the power to sanction behavior; rather their capacity for effectiveness rests in how they influence others to value diversity, create concomitant change, and maintain momentum even when encountering resistance. Experiences of marginalization may emerge from the unique location and function of the CDO as a senior leader without key sources of power that are valued in institutions of higher education, such as reporting lines, budgetary resources, and hiring authority. **They have a title that communicates power but that in many cases does not include actual authority. This poses challenges, because a primary source of CDOs’ influence is their executive-level positioning (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007).** In some ways CDOs serve as the institution’s conscience (Fleigler, 2006; Pittard, 2010) with regard to equity and inclusion, which injects a moral and values-based

dimension of right and wrong into an organizational culture that prizes autonomy and academic freedom. Williams & Wade Golden (2008) cautioned that CDOs may function as a “diversity messiah,” with the expectation of solving an institution’s diversity challenges, and simultaneously as a “lightning rod for criticism” from all sides when difficult decisions must be made (p. B44).

In some ways, establishment of CDO positions may serve as “diversity theater.” Paralleling the notion of “security theater,” which describes measures intended to provide a sense of improved security but doing little to increase actual safety (Schneier, 2008), establishing CDO positions potentially engenders the feeling of increased focus on diversity, even if these roles do little to move institutional targets forward. One CDO described living the challenge of being “easily ‘invisibilized’ when we function in the interests of the order, as well as ostracized when we speak out in some way” (Nixon, 2010, p. 17). **CDO work can be isolating, given the challenges of serving in a visible, high-ranking role and addressing complex issues, often with an infrastructure that is vulnerable during challenging economic times (Hernandez, 2010; Pittard, 2010; Stuart, 2010). The CDO’s lived paradoxes of simultaneous visibility and invisibility, high rank and low resources, and recognition and tokenism can result in marginalization achieved not through sidelining or sweeping under the rug, but in essence by hiding the CDO in plain view, by creating window dressing without substantive resources or support (Nixon, 2011).**

#### Identity-Related Positionality

Smith (2009) and Baez (2000) described some of the ways that presidents, provosts, and faculty with tokenized identities encounter greater leadership challenges than leaders with majority identities, because they face the additional pressure from underrepresented communities to present evidence that they have not “sold out” (Smith, 2009, p. 267). “Diverse communities in higher education often expect more from diverse leadership than it can deliver” (Aguirre & Martinez, 2006, p. 83). The same dynamic may impact CDOs. **When Diverse: Issues in Higher Education (“Ask the Chief Diversity Officer,” 2010) asked six CDOs what made their jobs difficult, they described feeling like second-class citizens, being tokenized as racial and gender minorities, lacking support, resources, and authority, and balancing unrealistic expectations from other people of color on campus.** Leaders with underrepresented identities must negotiate a balance between a commitment to their own community and a demonstration that they are also invested in the success of other groups. They may find that they are visible as representatives of their identity groups but invisible or hypervisible as individuals (Smith, 2009). Navigating these tensions can potentially lead to isolation and burnout for CDOs, key considerations for institutions that are committed to retaining healthy diversity leadership.

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