

## The Chief Diversity Officer: An Examination of CDO Models and Strategies

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The Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) position has emerged as an executive-level role that provides strategic guidance for diversity planning and implementation efforts. The growing number of CDO appointments has raised the expectations regarding the contributions of this officer. Williams and Wade-Golden (2007) identified three CDO models or archetypes of vertical authority (i.e., collaborative officer, unit-based, and portfolio divisional) that serve as templates for colleges and universities to design the CDO role. In higher education, these models range from simple one-person office configurations to more developed multiunit reporting structures. Drawing upon this structural framework, the researcher conducted a qualitative examination of three CDOs representing each of the three organizational models. Using a multisite case study methodology, the researcher interviewed three CDOs and 25 administrators working in three large public research institutions in the Midwest region of the United States. This study explored two central questions: (a) What strategies are used by each CDO to develop, manage, and maximize diversity resources? and (b) Can the CDO configuration facilitate or constrain the work of the CDO? This study's findings reveal that all CDOs included in this study were engaged with a number of tasks to fulfill their role. However, their configuration does impact how these diversity leaders carry out their work. This article highlights the collaborative nature of the CDO position and key considerations when comparing and contrasting CDO models at large institutions.

**Keywords:** chief diversity officer, institutional change, higher education, diversity

Despite widespread efforts in higher education, only a few campuses have achieved their diversity goals, and many continue to struggle with linking diversity to educational quality (Milem, Chang, & Antonio, 2005; Chun & Evans, 2008). To respond to these challenges, at least 60 colleges and universities have created the position of Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) in the last decade, a leadership role devoted to diversity planning and implementation (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013). Comparable to trends in the federal government (Pittard, 2010), the business sector (Metzler, 2008), and the health care field (Association of American Med-

ical Colleges, 2012), the rising number of CDOs in higher education signals a renewed commitment to diversity, shifting from a reactionary model to one that is more intentional and strategic when managing diversity resources (Barcelo, 2007; Williams, Berger, & McClendon, 2005).

### Purpose of the Study

Williams and Wade-Golden's (2007) foundational work defined the CDO as an executive-level diversity administrator who directly reports to president and/or provost, and manages, integrates, and coordinates campus diversity efforts. Williams & Wade-Golden conducted interviews with 110 CDOs and collected survey data from more than 700 CDOs nationally. In their study, they found that CDOs rely on their personal charisma, integrative thinking, and capacity to build lateral relationships to carry out their work. Unfortunately, despite these attributes, CDOs continue to face challenges. In particular, they note that poorly constructed

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roles continue to hinder the work of CDOs, with no connection between the vertical structure of the CDO position (i.e., the configuration of the CDO, reporting relationships, the formal authority of the position, and the resources that a CDO manages), and the responsibilities of this officer, or the size of the institution (Arnold & Kowalski-Brown, 2011; Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013).

In their recent publication, Williams and Wade-Golden (2013) report that 55% of CDOs believe their roles are not optimally structured, and 93% argue that changes to the diversity infrastructure of campus are necessary. Consequently, this topic clearly requires further attention, in terms of examining the importance of the CDO role's vertical structure.

### Theoretical Framework

Considering that 72% of CDOs are newly created positions (i.e., less than 5 years) (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013), a theoretical framework becomes a tool for the researcher to further "complement, extend, and verify" emerging findings (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 39). Two theoretical frameworks were selected for this study: CDO models of vertical authority, and strategies for institutional transformation (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007).

First, Williams and Wade-Golden (2013) identified three models of vertical authority that serve as templates for institutions to design the CDO role. From their survey, they note that 40% of CDOs operate with a Collaborative Officer model, 31% operate with a Unit-Based model, and 28% operate with a Portfolio Divisional model. Table 1 describes each of the three CDO models.

Second, in their roles, CDOs rely on several strategies to become "powerful integrating forces for diversity issues" (Williams and Wade-Golden, p. 12). Table 2 presents six prevalent categories of strategies used by CDOs. During this study, two additional categories (i.e., recruitment strategies and diversity scholarship strategies) were incorporated into this framework.<sup>1</sup> Drawing upon these two frameworks, two questions emerged to guide this inquiry: a) What strategies are used by each CDO to develop, manage, and maximize diversity resources? and b) Can the CDO configuration facilitate or constrain the work of the CDO?

### Data Sample

A multiple-case study methodology was used to examine three CDOs operating in three predominantly white public research institutions in the Midwest region of the United States. Yin (2009) notes that building an in-depth explanation for all individual cases, without ignoring unique details for each case, is a demanding but essential task to successfully complete a cross-case case analysis. Creswell (2007) suggests that limiting the sample to no more than four or five case studies provides ample opportunity to accomplish this task. Following this rationale, the researcher used an ideal-typical case selection process, purposely finding three CDOs that represented desirable examples of each of the three CDO models identified in the literature (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). To make this selection, several steps were followed.

First, 12 CDOs were initially identified in the Midwest region of the country through searches on institutional Web sites and a review of members of the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education (NADOHE). According to Williams and Wade-Golden (2007), 26% of CDOs operate in this region. The researcher selected this region considering: a) access to interview each CDO and administrators; b) logistical and travel arrangements to reach each campus; and c) the resources needed to complete three case studies as a single researcher.

Second, the sample was reduced to eight CDOs by selecting only those institutions that had or were developing a diversity plan. This parameter was included because diversity plans provide the campus and the CDO with a framework, objectives, and goals to pursue (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007). Consistent with trends in the literature, all eight CDOs operated in predominantly white (98% of CDOs operate in PWI) public institutions (68% of CDOs operate in public institutions) (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013).

Third, to select the three CDOs included in this study, the researcher used two additional parameters. First, the researcher obtained CDO organizational charts, position descriptions, and

<sup>1</sup> For more details about CDO models and strategies, please refer to Williams and Wade-Golden (2007, 2013).

Table 1  
*Chief Diversity Officers: Archetypes of Vertical Authority*

|   |   |
|---|---|
| Collaborative Officer CDO Model Characteristics |   |
| -   | One-person office with small support staff (secretary, student employee)  |
| -   | No reporting unit structure/no supervision of lower-rank diversity officers   |
| -   | Limited budget and narrow span of priorities  |
| -   | High value on building personal relationships on campus   |
| -   | Rarely involved in implementation of diversity initiatives at ground level  |
| Unit-Based CDO Model Characteristics            |   |
| -   | Presence of additional staff (e.g., administrative support professionals, program assistant, research assistant) to sponsor diversity initiatives |
| -   | Supervision of lower-rank diversity officers  |
| -   | No reporting unit structures  |
| -   | High value on building personal relationships on campus   |
| -   | Direct collaboration with diversity and nondiversity-related units  |
| Portfolio Divisional CDO Model Characteristics  |   |
| -   | Most cost-intensive model (staff and resources)   |
| -   | Direct collaboration with high-ranking administrators   |
| -   | High value on building personal relationships on campus   |
| -   | Presence and supervision of lower-ranking diversity officers  |
| -   | Direct relationship with reporting units (e.g., multicultural affairs, ethnic and gender studies)   |

spoke with each CDO. The goal of this analysis was to select three CDOs that represented the characteristics of CDO models described in the literature. Second, considering that a mismatch between the design of the CDO configuration and the size of the institution has been documented as an emerging challenge for CDOs (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007, 2013), the researcher selected three CDO models that operated in three institutions with large student populations (i.e., more than 20,000). This type of institution is often more vertically integrated (Cohen & March 1986; Weick, 1976), offering the researcher an ideal backdrop to examine the vertical structure of the CDO, which is defined as “a primary source of influence for chief di-

versity officers” (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007, p. 15).

### Data Collection

Data triangulation can establish validity in a study by analyzing a research question from multiple perspectives using different sources of data (Patton, 2002). Data were collected from three different sources: a) semistructured interviews with CDOs, b) semistructured interviews with administrators, and c) document collection. The researcher interviewed three CDOs and 25 midlevel and senior-level administrators (7–10 administrators per institution). CDO interviews were conducted before all other inter-

Table 2  
*Institutional Change Strategies*

| Type of Strategy                 | Definition  |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Educational Strategies           | Educate the campus on diversity issues  |
| Communication Strategies         | Communicate the diversity mission, vision, goals, strategic plan, and progress with the institution   |
| Symbolic Strategies              | Influence campus culture through actions, presence, messages, and rituals that embrace diversity  |
| Research Strategies              | Define current status of diversity on campus. Measures include student success, access and equity, campus climate, and student development. |
| Accountability Strategies        | Establish indicators to measure diversity progress  |
| Entrepreneurial Strategies       | Finance diversity strategies  |
| Recruitment Strategies           | Recruitment of underrepresented students, faculty, and staff  |
| Diversity Scholarship Strategies | Engage and partner with faculty to incorporate diversity into their research agenda   |

views, helping the researcher to refine interview protocols.

CDO interviews lasted between 50 and 80 minutes and followed a written protocol with 17 questions examining: a) institutional context for the CDO position; b) structural design of the CDO position; and c) CDO strategies. Interviews with administrators lasted between 30 and 50 minutes. Administrators included senior-level (e.g., provosts, associate provosts, vice presidents, deans) and midlevel administrators (e.g., directors, department chairs, program associates). The interview protocol for administrators included 13 questions examining: a) institutional context; b) the role and responsibilities of the CDO; and c) CDO strategies. Interviews with administrators were completed one institution at a time. The researcher took field notes to document particular insights offered by each respondent. All recordings and notes were transcribed into Microsoft Word documents and stored electronically.

The last source of data included 27 documents (print/online) to cross-reference the interview data. These documents (11 from the Collaborative Officer CDO; 10 from the Unit-Based CDO; and 6 from the Portfolio Divisional CDO) included mission statements, strategic plans for diversity, CDO public statements, committee charts, position descriptions, university-wide diversity statements, and diversity committee reports. All documents were coded in a numerical order (e.g., Collaborative Officer document 1, Collaborative Officer document 2).

### Data Analysis

Merriam (1998) describes the multiple-case analysis methodology as a two-stage (i.e., within-case and cross-case analysis) process. First, the researcher learns as much as possible about each case, and then the researcher builds a general explanation for all individual cases, without disregarding unique details that characterize each case (Yin, 2009). Yin (2009) notes that relying on a theoretical framework is one of the most important steps to produce robust case studies. Two theoretical constructs were used simultaneously to guide the data collection and data analysis process (Tables 1 and 2). These frameworks “provide insight, direction, and a useful list of initial concepts” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 40) and were used to draw

theoretical comparisons thinking “more abstractly about what properties” various cases “share in common and what is different about them” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 77).

To ensure data credibility, interview questions were specifically related to the research questions (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002). In addition, all interview protocols were reviewed by a current CDO who offered feedback regarding the structure, sequence, and content of the questionnaires. To further enhance credibility and trustworthiness, summaries of individual interview transcripts were prepared and analyzed. Likewise, a chain of evidence (in the form of an analytic memo) documented the decisions made throughout this study (Yin, 2009), and a case study database was created to ensure reliability (Yin, 2009).

By selecting three CDO positions, the researcher was able to carry out an in-depth analysis of each CDO model, not aiming to represent an entire population, but rather describe each single case (Stake, 2000; Yin, 2009). Yin (2009) argues that analytical generalization should be used to compare the evidence gathered from each case study to the rest of the population. The researcher acknowledges the limitations of conducting a study in a field where the work of Williams and Wade-Golden (2007, 2013) has emerged as being authoritative on this topic. Upon a review of the literature, emerging research on the CDO also (Arnold & Kowalski-Brown, 2011; Green, 2008; Johnson, 2010; Nixon, 2013; Pittard, 2010) relies on the work of these two authors. Recognizing potential bias, the researcher identified preconceived ideas about the CDO position and examined a wealth of literature in the field of diversity management, whereby a serious attempt was made to carry out a rigorous examination.

### Findings and Discussion

At the center of this qualitative examination, this study combined two theoretical frameworks (Tables 1 and 2) to examine the strategies used by three CDOs operating with three different CDO configurations (i.e., Collaborative Officer, Unit-Based, and Portfolio Divisional CDO). Summarizing findings, Table 3 presents key elements defining the institutional context for each CDO and summarizes general characteristics of the individuals in this role.

Table 3  
*CDO and Institutional Characteristics*

|                                      | CDO Model             |                  |                      |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------|----------------------|
|                                      | Collaborative Officer | Unit-Based       | Portfolio Divisional |
| <b>CDO Characteristics</b>           |                       |                  |                      |
| Identity Characteristics             | Male of Color         | Male of Color    | Female of Color      |
| Professional Background              | Faculty               | Faculty/Admin.   | Faculty/Admin.       |
| Held Previous CDO Position           | No                    | Yes              | Yes                  |
| Years in CDO Position                | 2                     | 2                | 4                    |
| Inaugural CDO                        | Yes                   | Yes              | Yes                  |
| *CDO Rank                            | Low                   | Mid-Level        | High                 |
| <b>Institutional Characteristics</b> |                       |                  |                      |
| Institutional Size (Students)        | 25,000 to 35,000      | 25,000 to 35,000 | 35,000 to 45,000     |
| Student of Color Representation      | 40%                   | 15%              | 15%                  |
| Faculty of Color Representation      | 30%                   | 14%              | 21%                  |
| Institutional Setting                | Urban                 | Urban            | Urban                |

\* CDO ranks include designations at the dean or special assistant rank (low-level), associate, assistant, or vice president/provost/chancellor rank (mid-level), and vice president/provost/vice chancellor rank (high-level)

Table 4 highlights the strategies that each of the three CDO models executed. At first sight, it appears that Table 4 answers both of the central questions driving this research project, not only documenting CDO strategies but also illustrating similarities and differences across CDO models.

Examining Table 4, one can draw the following conclusion. First, both the Unit-Based CDO and the Portfolio Divisional CDO have executed the most tasks associated with each category of strategies, and share several similarities across all eight categories. Second, Table 4 also illustrates that there are only two categories (educational and communication strategies) where all CDO models executed a similar number of tasks. In all other five categories, marked differences remain, where the Collaborative Officer CDO configuration executed less than half of the tasks identified (symbolic and accountability strategies), and in some cases only one or none (research, entrepreneurial, recruitment, and diversity scholarship).

With these noticeable differences emerging, it is necessary to examine how the configuration of a CDO model can support or deter the implementation of diversity strategies. Paramount to the configuration of each CDO position, Williams and Wade-Golden (2007) argue that the vertical structure of the position is “a primary source of influence for chief diversity officers” (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007, p. 15). They

explain that several components define this vertical structure, and that among the most important are the rank of the CDO, support staff, reporting units, and resources to fund diversity work. This section discusses these main components and draws a connection to the diversity strategies that each CDO executed.

### **Institutional Rank**

Pittard (2010) notes that one foundational aspect of the CDO configuration is positional authority, enabling the CDO to build partnerships, supervise individuals and units, and align diversity goals. In this study, all CDOs enjoyed a direct reporting relationship to the president or provost, and held titles that included “diversity” descriptors indicating their responsibilities in this area. However, not all CDOs enjoyed an executive-level rank. Williams and Wade-Golden (2013) argue that rank defines where the CDO fits within the overall organizational hierarchy, and determines the level of access that CDOs will have to other senior leaders. In essence, the higher an institution defines the CDO rank, the more political and symbolic power this officer will enjoy.

Across colleges and universities, CDO rank designations range from dean or special assistant, to higher levels such as associate, assistant, or vice president/provost/chancellor (33% of CDOs across the nation have a vice president/

Table 4  
*Comparative Overview of CDO Models and Strategies*

| Type of Strategy                                   | CDO Models            |            |                      |
|--|-----------------------|------------|----------------------|
|  | Collaborative Officer | Unit-Based | Portfolio Divisional |
| <b>Educational Strategies</b>                      |                       |            |                      |
| Educate campus about CDO role                      | X                     | X          | X                    |
| Foster dialogue among groups                       | X                     | X          | X                    |
| One-on-one meetings across campus                  | X                     | X          | X                    |
| Participate at executive-level meetings            | X                     | X          | X                    |
| Meet with deans and department heads               | X                     | X          | X                    |
| Coach faculty and department chairs                | X                     | X          | X                    |
| Participate in new faculty orientation             | X                     | X          | X                    |
| Invite leaders to meetings/presentations           | X                     | X          | X                    |
| Lead diversity campus committee                    | X                     | X          |                      |
| Consultation for search committees                 |                       | X          | X                    |
| Develop cultural training workshops                |                       | X          |                      |
| Sponsor events (e.g., forum) to educate campus     |                       |            | X                    |
| <b>Communication Strategies</b>                    |                       |            |                      |
| Develop website for CDO office                     | X                     | X          | X                    |
| Presence at public events                          | X                     | X          | X                    |
| Presence at leadership meetings                    | X                     | X          | X                    |
| Communicate and reach alumni                       |                       |            | X                    |
| Create network with peer institutions              |                       |            | X                    |
| <b>Symbolic Strategies</b>                         |                       |            |                      |
| Build reputation as a diversity expert             | X                     | X          | X                    |
| Highlight diversity progress                       | X                     | X          | X                    |
| Reach faculty formal/informal settings             | X                     | X          | X                    |
| Creating physical space for diversity              |                       | X          | X                    |
| Reconnect with the local community                 |                       | X          | X                    |
| Involvement at the national level                  |                       | X          | X                    |
| Awards to recognize individual work                |                       | X          | X                    |
| Awards to recognize units/departments              |                       |            | X                    |
| Support affinity groups for faculty and staff      |                       | X          |                      |
| Create networking opportunities for new hires      |                       |            | X                    |
| <b>Research Strategies</b>                         |                       |            |                      |
| Compile list of diversity resources                | X                     | X          | X                    |
| Request department/unit self-study                 |                       | X          | X                    |
| Develop and track diversity indicators             |                       | X          | X                    |
| Request student demographic data                   |                       | X          | X                    |
| Present data at campus events                      |                       | X          | X                    |
| Request faculty/staff hiring data (race/gender)    |                       |            | X                    |
| <b>Accountability Strategies</b>                   |                       |            |                      |
| Solicit input from campus                          | X                     | X          | X                    |
| Create campus diversity vision                     | X                     | X          | X                    |
| Share diversity progress report                    | X                     | X          | X                    |
| Request diversity plans from units                 |                       | X          | X                    |
| Offer feedback for diversity plans                 |                       | X          | X                    |
| Build a culture of responsibility with CDO staff   |                       | X          | X                    |
| Delegate CDO staff to work with other units        |                       | X          | X                    |
| Request self-study from reporting units            |                       |            | X                    |
| Connect reporting units with other units on campus |                       |            | X                    |
| <b>Entrepreneurial Strategies</b>                  |                       |            |                      |
| Grant writing (CDO and CDO staff)                  |                       | X          | X                    |
| Fundraising initiatives                            |                       | X          | X                    |
| Provide matching funds for programs                |                       | X          | X                    |
| Create diversity implementation grants for units   |                       | X          | X                    |
| <b>Recruitment Strategies</b>                      |                       |            |                      |
| Recruit (informally) students and faculty          | X                     | X          | X                    |

Table 4 (continued)

| Type of Strategy                                  | CDO Models            |            |                      |
|---|-----------------------|------------|----------------------|
|   | Collaborative Officer | Unit-Based | Portfolio Divisional |
| Partnerships with local business and associations |                       | X          | X                    |
| Fund student scholarships                         |                       | X          | X                    |
| Scholarships for high school students             |                       | X          |                      |
| Create pipeline of K-12 students                  |                       | X          | X                    |
| Fund post-doctoral programs                       |                       |            | X                    |
| Fund new positions (faculty and staff)            |                       |            | X                    |
| Diversity Scholarship Strategies                  |                       |            |                      |
| Created diversity research grants for faculty     |                       | X          | X                    |
| Partner with faculty research initiatives         |                       | X          | X                    |
| Co-author research grants with faculty            |                       | X          | X                    |
| Create diversity research center                  |                       |            | In progress          |

provost/vice chancellor rank). In this case study, both CDOs (Collaborative Officer and Unit-Based CDO) held titles below the vice president/provost/chancellor rank. As described by one administrator, this limited their CDO to “listen to the views and ideas of individuals on campus with decision-making power” without the authority to respond, implement, or execute strategies (Administrator 5 Collaborative Officer).

As Bolman and Deal (2003) note that leaders need access to these networks (key players), to enact change, bring ideas, discuss projects, and assure that diversity has a voice at the table. Findings revealed that whereas all CDOs viewed connecting with senior leaders as a key priority (education, communication, and symbolic strategies), the presence of an executive-level rank provided the Portfolio Divisional CDO with regular access to senior leaders, interacting closely with decision makers, and taking part in key meetings such as the president’s cabinet. According to the Portfolio Divisional CDO, having this rank was an invaluable opportunity to keep diversity priorities at the forefront of conversations:

“The CDO brings accountability. When colleges submit a plan to the vice provosts, there is a section for diversity. The CDO asks questions about it, about their budget that directly relates to building a sense of responsibility. It is a mechanism, because every college must report back to central administration, and the CDO can access this report. There is no guarantee that the colleges will listen, but this report is a starting point” (Administrator 11 Portfolio Divisional Model).

On the other hand, having an executive-level rank alone does not guarantee that other senior leaders will buy in or support the work of the CDO. Rather, it only means that the CDO has the opportunity to bring diversity to higher levels of discussion within the institutional hierarchy. In the eyes of administrators, this means that “even when commitment exists, the lack of formal authority can trump diversity work (Administrator 7 Unit-Based CDO).

### Support Staff

Williams and Wade-Golden (2013) note that although many CDOs enjoy an executive-level rank, few of them possess the staff and support necessary to meet the demands of diversity work. During this examination, findings confirmed that this was the case for the Collaborative Officer CDO, a model characterized by a single-person office with little or no administrative support. For this officer, the major responsibility during the entire first year was to lead a strategic thinking and planning process. During this time, the Collaborative Officer CDO met senior leaders, organized focus groups, and led campus-wide conversations (Collaborative Officer documents 3). Although administrators praised the work of the CDO on this area, there were serious concerns that even this single responsibility was a monumental task for this CDO. As shared by the Collaborative Officer CDO himself, “the job is certainly larger than what the staff (Collaborative Officer CDO) is capable of handling, specifically referring to the level of work and intensity that is needed to

truly guide a strategic thinking and planning process” (Collaborative Officer CDO).

Because this commitment was entirely in the hands of the Collaborative Officer CDO, this officer was often stretched thin, and relied on the “good will” of partners and collaborators to engage the campus. In the words of one administrator, “the message [of the Collaborative Officer CDO] is there for people that value diversity and see it as a priority, but I am not sure that is applicable to the whole campus.” (Administrator 6 Collaborative Officer Model). As a result, this not only slowed down the process toward fulfilling diversity goals, but also created feelings of confusion and ambiguity among those that had no clarity about the priorities of the CDO. “We do not know what this person is doing [Collaborative Officer CDO], there is a lot of meetings, a lot of talking, but it just seems so disorganized and repetitive” (Administrator 5 Collaborative Officer).

In contrast, the other two CDOs (Unit-Based CDO and Portfolio Divisional CDO) enjoyed the presence and support of an administrative team (e.g., program associates, administrative support, diversity officers). Findings revealed that these teams allowed both CDOs to focus on a broader array of responsibilities (i.e., efforts for faculty recruitment and retention, grant writing, community outreach, academic success, and monitoring a system of accountability) and helped them to continue to engage directly with individuals and units across the campus. To interpret Table 4, one must discern that many of the tasks implemented by these CDOs (educational strategies, communication strategies, and symbolic strategies) were not directly carried out by the CDO (individual), but rather by the CDO team under the guidance of this leader. Williams and Wade-Golden (2007) are emphatic and point out that no single CDO can reach all diversity goals alone. That is, as an individual, no single CDO can be expected to be directly involved with every diversity strategy. Rather, as described by one participant, the CDO is a leader whose work can be compared to a “strong public relations campaign” where the CDO embodies a “visionary, spokesperson, and collaborative leader within the units and across the institution” (Administrator 10 Portfolio Divisional Model).

In the case of the Unit-Based CDO, administrators stated that having the support of a team

of administrators allowed the CDO to become “very visible across multiple populations” (Administrator 5 Unit-Based Model). This helped the Unit-Based CDO to develop relationships that promoted a culture of shared responsibility for diversity: “In our department, the CDO is invited to the table prior making decisions, so input can be given in relation to a larger campus plan” (Administrator 8 Unit-Based Model).

For the Portfolio Divisional CDO, building partnerships and networks had a similar outcome where “Through one-on-one meetings and partnerships, the office of the CDO has created the opportunity to say we are in this together, shared responsibility” (Administrator 11 Portfolio Divisional Model). Both outcomes highlight that connecting with individuals and groups is at the center of the collaborative nature defining the CDO role. However, having an administrative support team allowed these CDOs to have the time to build these valuable relationships.

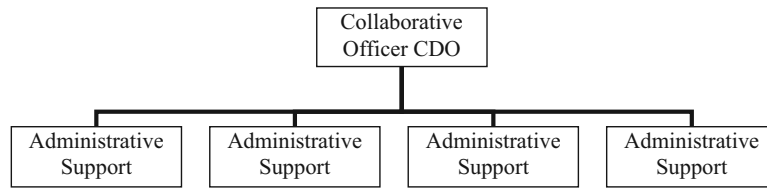
## Reporting Structures

Williams and Wade-Golden (2013) documented that a growing number of institutions have appointed CDOs to help campuses manage, coordinate, and maximize the resources invested in their diversity infrastructure (e.g., multicultural centers, affirmative action and equity offices, ethnic and gender studies programs, and international studies programs). Regrettably, they also report that a large number of CDOs (55% of their sample) believe that their roles are not optimally structured to fulfill this responsibility, with many CDOs revealing that there is a considerable mismatch between the demands of this role and the structural configuration of their position.

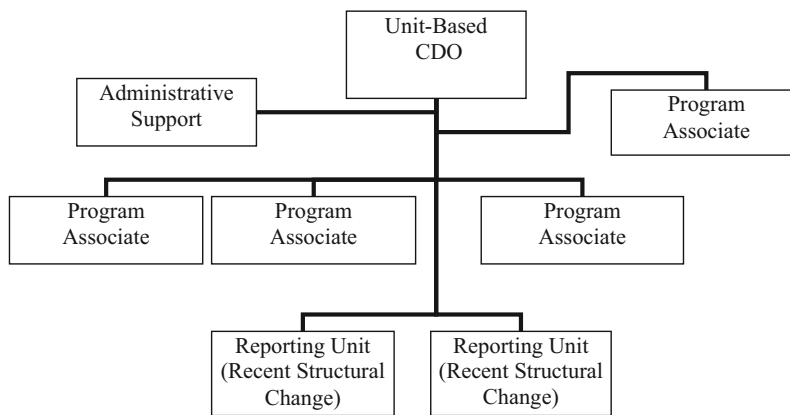
At the center of this issue, it is argued that although the “symbolic” support of senior leaders is necessary for the success of the CDO, without a well-designed reporting structure, the “CDO becomes an officer with a high rank and title but with no authority to enact change.” (Unit-Based CDO). To address this concern, institutions have created a CDO model with a reporting structure (Portfolio Divisional CDO model). Unfortunately, this has emerged as the most contested and criticized organizational design feature of the CDO configuration (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013). Figure 1 illus-



## Collaborative Officer Model CDO Configuration



## Unit-Based Model CDO Configuration



## Portfolio Divisional CDO Configuration

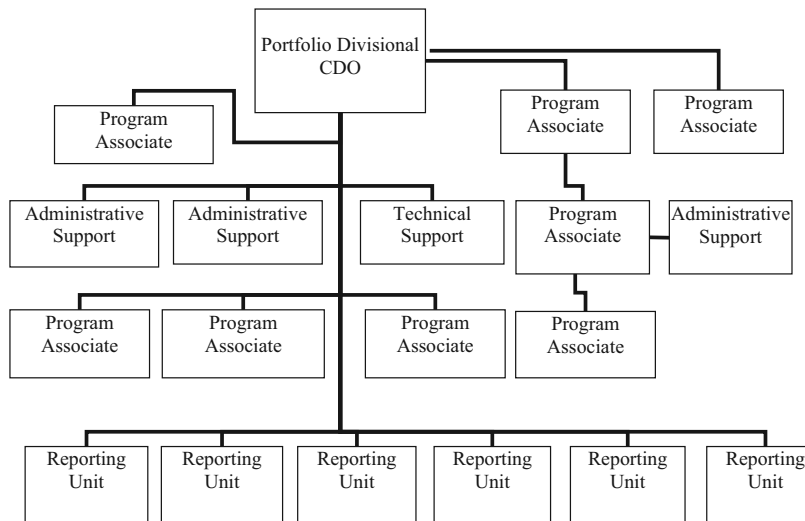


Figure 1. CDO Archetypes of Vertical Authority Collaborative Officer Model CDO Configuration Unit-Based Model CDO Configuration Portfolio Divisional CDO Configuration.

trates the structural configuration of each CDO model in this study.

On one hand, Williams and Wade-Golden (2013) emphasize that a reporting structure facilitates the work of the CDO because it mirrors the current organizational structure in higher education, allowing senior-level administrators to oversee a number of administrative units. In the context of large institutions (where a number of diversity offices, programs, and initiatives often coexist), a reporting structure brings several benefits, including helping the CDO to standardize processes, establish clear lines of authority, and facilitate information sharing (Keeling, Underhile, & Wall, 2007). Despite these benefits, the presence of a CDO reporting structure continues to be contested. According to Williams and Wade-Golden (2013), this has occurred because critics have misinterpreted the purpose of this reporting structure and continue to misunderstand how this structure should be designed.

First, critics mistakenly believe that creating a reporting structure will force institutions to relocate all diversity resources under the leadership of CDO, fearing that this change will discourage the rest of the campus to engage with diversity work (Johnson, 2010; Williams, 2013). In this case study, this type of fear was documented, and although it was not shared by all administrators, it did influence the decisions behind the design of both the Collaborative Officer and the Unit-Based CDO. As shared by one administrator: "In this particular institution, you do not want to pull all diversity resources under one person or office. This model might work in other places, but I am not convinced it works here" (Administrator 6 Collaborative Officer).

Williams and Wade-Golden (2013) argue that this is a misinterpretation of the logic behind the creation of a reporting structure. In reality, the presence of a Portfolio Divisional CDO model does not require that every diversity program or initiative is relocated under the direct supervision of the CDO, but rather that institutions decide what units and departments will benefit from the direct leadership of the CDO. Interviews at the institution of the Portfolio Divisional CDO revealed that administrators understood this difference, emphasizing that "institutions must assess whether a direct reporting line [to the CDO] or closer collabora-

tion is the best option" (Administrator 13 Portfolio Divisional Model).

Second, another major deterrent of creating a CDO reporting structure is that it will demand that institutions seriously commit to the reorganization of structures and resources. More specifically, institutions designing a Portfolio Divisional CDO will need to create a structural niche for the CDO within the organizational hierarchy (Arnold & Kowalski-Brown, 2011; Williams, 2013). This is a major deterrent because structural changes not only demand time and resources, but also because they can often generate distrust, uncertainty, and anxiety within the organization (Eckel & Kezar, 2003). As a result, institutions without a proper plan and leadership will struggle in times of transition, lacking the understanding of how a new position such as the CDO (72% of CDOs in the nation have been in their position for under 5 years) will fit within the broader institutional picture (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007). In this study, Table 4 highlights that CDOs used a number of educational and communication strategies to connect with individuals and groups across campus, seeking to make sure that the organization understood the role of the CDO. For a CDO with a reporting structure (Portfolio Divisional CDO), this is a major priority, considering that it is likely that units will be reorganized or relocated to create an organizational niche: "When my unit got moved and I first came in I was hesitant placing all diversity resources under one office, diluting us all, but with the leadership of the CDO it has worked well and has brought positive attention to collective responsibility" (Administrator 15 Portfolio Divisional Model).

During this study, the researcher discovered that the institution of the Unit-Based was actively engaged with efforts to redesign the configuration of this CDO (moving toward a Portfolio Divisional CDO model). Williams and Wade-Golden (2013) note that this is likely to occur because many institutions will seek to align the work of CDOs with the infrastructure and resources present on campus. However, as stated by administrators collaborating with the Unit-Based CDO, this change was still in the very early stages, and more clarity and support were needed to state that those structural changes were in place:

“It is not about only creating a reporting structure, it is about providing the resources that a new leader needs to manage and move forward that unit. Without this support, it is only a superficial change that might bring more of a burden than progress” (Administrator 4 Unit-Based Model).

### The Benefits of a Reporting Structure

With an understanding of the roots of the criticism associated with more vertically structured CDO configurations, this section discusses findings that underline that a CDO reporting structure might actually provide several benefits. This section presents a new perspective in the literature, connecting diversity strategies with the configuration of the Portfolio Divisional CDO.

To begin, one of the most important benefits associated with a reporting structure is that it can help the CDO to strengthen alliances and networks across different levels of the institutional hierarchy. Because CDOs often work on initiatives that span between boundaries within the organization (Arnold & Kowalski-Brown, 2011; Nixon, 2013; Pittard, 2010), reporting units can help these leaders to reach above, below, and beyond those who directly report to the CDO. This type of work is essential because it helps the CDO break institutional silos (Ernst & Chrobot-Mason, 2010; Ewell & Wellman, 2007; Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004) and can be a powerful engine to transform large and decentralized institutions (Eckel & Kezar, 2003; Keeling, Underhile, & Wall, 2007).

In this study, the responsibilities of units reporting to the Portfolio Divisional CDO included areas in both academic affairs and student affairs (e.g., compliance, outreach, communication efforts, student development, diversity training, student retention). As discussed by Evans and Chun (2007), this presence in different areas can allow leaders like the CDO to form networks and alliances, not only connecting with other senior administrators, but also interacting with individuals and groups operating at different levels of the institutional hierarchy. In the words of the Portfolio Divisional CDO, reporting units can emerge as an additional “layer of diversity leadership,” helping to reframe traditional higher education or-

ganizational structures by nurturing lateral networks to support campus-wide diversity initiatives.

How does a reporting structure help a CDO accomplish this task? The Portfolio Divisional CDO shared that “delegating responsibility through reporting structures is a vital aspect of creating partnerships” The goal is to build a strong culture of shared responsibility for diversity. For CDOs with reporting structures, this can start by creating ownership for diversity priorities among the CDO staff. Then, it is vital to engage other individuals and units across campus. The literature clarifies that successful diversity efforts “cannot be localized to certain strata of the organization, or to the leadership of one or two individuals” (Evans & Chun, 2007, p. 5). Therefore, in the case of the Portfolio Divisional CDO model, this means that having a reporting structure alone will not guarantee that the campus will immediately follow the vision of the CDO. Rather, it is imperative for the CDO and reporting units to truly operate across organizational boundaries (Ernst & Yip, 2009), playing an active role creating a culture of shared accountability. As described by the Portfolio Divisional CDO, critics of a reporting structure ignore that all CDO models must actively seek to build this type of culture:

When the CDO position is very structured, it is necessary to continue to build connections and remind the campus that the CDO is here to guide the institution and not to take part in every single operational aspect of a diversity initiative. We must create a culture where every person on campus understands that diversity is their responsibility as well (Administrator 11 Portfolio Divisional Model).

Table 4 points out that building a sense of shared accountability in a number of ways (symbolic and accountability strategies) is a defining responsibility for all CDOs. Yet, a reporting structure can provide an additional edge. To illustrate this point, the Portfolio Divisional CDO argued that one of the first tasks many CDOs engage with is to request departments and units to develop their own diversity plan. An advantage of the Portfolio Divisional CDO configuration is that this CDO can mobilize reporting units to jumpstart this process. In this case study, the Portfolio Divisional CDO requested reporting units to develop their own diversity plans (they were the first units across

campus to develop such a plan, and an external consultant was hired to oversee the process). When this was completed, the CDO asked units not reporting to this officer to follow, but they were not alone. To support this request, the CDO assigned staff from reporting units to collaborate, support, and offer feedback to these units. For the rest of the campus, this was a powerful message, reassuring them that the CDO valued an “environment of shared responsibility” (Administrator 14 Portfolio Divisional CDO).

Because the commitment of the entire campus is a cornerstone element for the success of diversity work, this strategy and the presence of a reporting structure emerge as a valuable asset, engaging the campus, strengthening partnerships, and setting a robust foundation for cross-institutional accountability and reporting systems to work (Arnold & Kowalski-Brown, 2011; Callan, Finney, Kirst, Usdan, & Venezia, 2006; Keeling, Underhile, & Wall, 2007).

### Funding the CDO

The literature states that the Portfolio Divisional CDO is the most cost-intensive CDO model, followed by the Unit-Based CDO and the Collaborative Officer CDO (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013). Findings of this study corroborated this trend, indicating that this occurs because although all CDO models require resources to hire the CDO (i.e., salary), the presence of a CDO team (i.e., administrative support, lower-ranking diversity officers, and program specialists) (Unit-Based and Portfolio Divisional CDO), and financing the operation of reporting units (Portfolio Divisional model CDO) requires additional resources.

When examining the importance of monetary resources to support the work of the CDO, two main areas emerged. First, campuses across the nation have invested in a diversity infrastructure. To explore this concept, three models of organizational diversity (i.e., Affirmative Action and Equity model, the Multicultural model, and the Diversity and Learning model) have been introduced in the literature describing how campuses have invested their resources.<sup>2</sup> Across the nation, campuses have built affirmative action and equity offices (Affirmative Action and Equity model), ethnic and gender studies departments, multicultural centers, disability offices,

women ‘scenters (Multicultural model), and intergroup relations officers, study abroad programs, and diversity research centers (Diversity and Learning model). This study highlighted that all three institutions included in this study currently support several of these units and departments, and in the case of the Portfolio Divisional CDO, reporting lines have been created connecting the CDO to this infrastructure.

Second, regardless of the CDO model adopted, this study reminds us that appointing a CDO will inevitably require an additional financial commitment for diversity strategies. Researchers have noted that a healthy operating budget can alter the degree of autonomy, authority, and influence of any CDO (Arnold & Kowalski-Brown, 2011; Nixon, 2013). In this area, sharp differences emerged, revealing that whereas all three CDOs had access to a budget to implement initiatives, only the Unit-Based and Portfolio Divisional CDO (as shared by CDOs and administrators) had what was perceived as an adequate budget (i.e., more than \$1 million) to fulfill their responsibilities.<sup>3</sup> As one administrator pointed out, it seems that the Unit-Based CDO has “deeper pockets” and has been “very generous” regarding diversity initiatives (Administrator 8 Unit-Based Model). In the case of the Portfolio Divisional CDO, this CDO had the opportunity to negotiate financial support, infrastructure, and staff before accepting the CDO position, and all administrators interviewed agreed that funding diversity initiatives was an institutional priority:

I don’t think any college adequately resource its diversity; but when comparing our resources to any other unit in other campuses, we are very well staffed. Relative to what we need to do here, we are not at the greatest point, but cannot truly complain seeing where other campuses are (MLA10 Portfolio Divisional Model). Examin-

<sup>2</sup> For an extended discussion on models of organizational diversity (Affirmative Action and Equity Model, Multicultural Model, and Diversity and Learning Model), please refer to Williams and Clowney (2007).

<sup>3</sup> Williams and Wade-Golden (2013) reported that of those CDOs (i.e., a total of 32 CDOs) at large institutions (with more than 20,000 students), 25% operated with a budget under \$150,000 (matching the budget range of the Collaborative Officer CDO); 25% had a budget between \$150,000 and \$500,000; and 31% operated with a budget of more than \$1 million (matching the budgets for the Unit-Based CDO and Portfolio Divisional CDO).

ing Table 4, these differences were more pronounced across the last three categories of diversity strategies (i.e., entrepreneurial, recruitment, and diversity scholarship strategies).

Originally, Williams and Wade-Golden (2007) identified a single category (i.e., entrepreneurial strategies) dealing with the importance of financing diversity strategies. This study echoed their findings revealing that CDOs are actively pursuing opportunities to secure funding through grant activities, are key players funding diversity initiatives through departments and units, and continue to create financial incentives for the entire campus to engage with diversity priorities. However, CDOs were also deeply involved with two additional categories (i.e., recruitment and diversity scholarship strategies) whose purpose is strongly associated with the central premises defining two of the organizational diversity models previously introduced.

First, the recruitment strategies category summarized institution-wide efforts to reach underrepresented populations and increase their presence on campus (Affirmative Action and Equity model). As described by one participant, it is not uncommon for many predominantly white institutions to struggle to meet this goal. Therefore, the CDO can play a key role guiding institutional efforts in this area: "The (Unit-Based) CDO is constantly networking, identifying talent, meeting with individuals who want to work at the institution. The CDO is helping to do recruiting even where there is not even open positions posted" (Administrator 4 Unit-Based Model). As indicated by Table 4, all CDOs can serve as leaders because of their visibility on campus, their connections to local and national networks (symbolic strategies), and their expertise advocating for underrepresented populations. However, this does not mean that the CDO will replace the efforts of dedicated individuals and units on campus whose priorities align with this responsibility (e.g., TRIO Student Support Services, Upward Bound, McNair Scholars Program). Rather, the CDO can help institutions cast a broader net reaching these populations.

Funding played a key role in this category because both CDOs (Unit-Based and Portfolio Divisional CDO) had resources to finance formal programs and initiatives (i.e., scholarships, pipeline programs, funds for new positions).

For example, Table 4 indicates that the Portfolio Divisional CDO was a key player supporting hiring efforts of underrepresented faculty and staff for units and departments. This level of support indicates that funding is a vital aspect of the commitment of institutions to pursue diversity goals, and it can position the CDO as a key player, allowing this leader not only to use resources to build stronger connections, but also to align efforts with important institutional priorities such as reaching underrepresented populations.

The final category summarizing the work of CDOs (Unit-Based and Portfolio Divisional CDO) in this study is diversity scholarship strategies. This category focuses on institutional efforts that seek to incorporate diversity into the academic aspects of institutional life (Diversity and Learning model). This set of strategies (e.g., conduct research, coauthor grants, secure funding for diversity initiatives) brings attention to a growing body of empirical literature that connects diversity to positive student learning outcomes (Milem, Chang, & Antonio, 2005). As described by the Portfolio Divisional CDO, this type of work helps faculty "fulfill their responsibilities and pursue their interests [research], while aligning those interests to a broader diversity agenda" (Portfolio Divisional CDO).

In line with advancing research around issues of diversity, many institutions have created research centers with a multidisciplinary focus on diversity (e.g., University of Wisconsin-Madison, Northwestern University, University of Washington). In this case study, the institution of the Portfolio Divisional CDO was in the final stages of creating such a center, bringing attention to the importance of placing diversity at the center of academic conversations. At this juncture, funds and resources once again emerged as a key factor, funding positions, contributing with funds to develop the center, hiring staff to help with its administration, and helping to finance initiatives from the center seeking to bring diversity to the center of teaching, research, and learning.

## Conclusion

This study contributes to our quest to understand the CDO role by adding three valuable perspectives. First, the literature examining the CDO role overwhelmingly focuses on the expe-

periences of the individuals who serve in this position. Strengthening this body of knowledge, this study examines not only these experiences, but also documents the perspectives of 25 administrators. Adding this perspective is a major contribution, considering that CDOs rely on building relationships and partnerships to fulfill their responsibilities. This examination reveals that CDOs pursue strategies that connect and engage the campus, bringing attention to the collaborative and integrative nature of the CDO role, and calling for additional inquiries that focus on this area in order to enhance our understanding of this diversity leader.

Second, this study contributes to the literature by connecting the strategies that CDO execute to the configuration of three CDO models operating in large institutions. These two angles bring attention not only to the capacity of each CDO model to approach diversity work, but to the arduous responsibility of the CDO to coordinate and integrate a diversity infrastructure. This study presents findings that suggest that the configuration of each CDO can affect how CDOs pursue diversity strategies. In particular, because the presence of a CDO reporting structure continues to be at the center of debate, this study brings a valuable perspective, providing a closer look at the importance of designing a CDO role that is equipped to fulfill the demands of the institution.

Third, the literature does emphasize that the success of the CDO depends not only on personal characteristics of this officer (e.g., leadership traits, ability to build networks, understanding of organizational change), but also on several organizational design components (e.g., rank, support staff, reporting structure, and resources) that can support or jeopardize the work of this leader. This manuscript scrutinized three CDO positions with particular attention to these components. However, close to the essence of case study research, this study reminds us that no two CDO roles are alike. If we hope that CDOs will emerge as the transformational leaders that institutions hope for, a bigger challenge lies ahead. At the center of this challenge, this study illustrates that colleges and universities must carefully reflect on how to design the best CDO role for their institution. That is, a CDO that is designed with their diversity goals and needs in mind, is properly situated in their organizational hierarchy, and has sufficient au-

thority, resources, and staff to execute diversity strategies. If institutions ignore this premise, it is likely that few campuses will reach their diversity goals, and CDOs will continue to face challenges, unable to nurture a cohesive and collaborative environment where diversity is truly an institutional priority.

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