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Mary Jane (Gigi) Secuban
Ohio University, secuban@ohio.edu

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What University College Presidents Need to Know about the Chief Diversity Officer Position

Gigi Secuban
Ohio University

Correspondence related to this article should be directed to Dr. Gigi Secuban, Vice President for Diversity and Inclusion, Ohio University, secuban@ohio.edu

ABSTRACT

Renewing commitments to historical injustices, tackling declining numbers of underrepresented students, addressing national outrage to racial and social inequities, and attempting to retain faculty, staff, and students of color on campus are all complex issues that become part of the role of a Chief Diversity Officer on college campuses today. The Chief Diversity Officer can be “a strategic partner, invested leader, and change agent- who helps colleges and universities move forward on the path to address inclusion with policies, programs, and people” (Aguilar, 2020). This article provides guidance to university presidents on how to best support the CDO on their respective campuses.

In 2020, Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs) play a critical role in the academy. Racial unrest, political turmoil, pandemic spread, and high levels of unemployment are among the numerous issues the United States is facing and we see the impact of these issues reflected on college and university campuses across the country. According to Worthington (2020), “Higher education institutions are microcosms of the larger systemic racism reflected in society; they commonly act on and reproduce social inequities. Instead, higher education institutions should act to eradicate racism embedded in institutional policies, procedures, practices, and everyday operations”. The CDO position has been essential to creating campuses that are inclusive and welcoming spaces and not just during times of racial unrest. So, what do University Presidents need to know about this position and its impact on diversity and inclusion? This article will detail the critical areas that Presidents should keep in mind when creating and working with your Chief Diversity Officer.

Create a Vice-President/Vice-Chancellor for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Many campuses, when creating a CDO position, have to determine whether the position will report to the President or the Provost. For this position to be the most effective in building collaborative partnerships across campus, particularly in places that have been largely resistant to change, the position must report directly to the President. By doing so, the CDO is at the decision-making table with other executives on campus and this is the table where policy decisions are being made that ultimately affect the campus. Representation is important. If campus leadership is determined to make diversity and inclusion a strategic priority, then the CDO must sit at the table. The CDO must be trusted as the thought-leader for DEI on campus, just as a President would trust their chief Academic, Finance, Student Affairs and Advancement officers. The CDO should work with the President and leadership to determine priorities related to DEI on campus.

Provide Genuine Support for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Efforts

It is not uncommon for the Chief Diversity Officer to feel they are isolated or sitting on an island by themselves due to the common perception that once the CDO is hired, all of the DEI issues will be solved by that one person. WRONG. It is also important that the CDO have a reasonable budget to create strategic initiatives and programs that are fully integrated into the university's strategic plan and supports institutional DEI goals. This could include funding to support additional staff, faculty grants, programming, or diversity and equity training initiatives. Additionally, it is equally important to ensure your CDO is being represented in spaces where D and I work is not typically thought of, such as during COVID response, search committees for executive positions, orientation, convocation, commencement, HR policy discussions, or executive hiring committees. It is equally important for the President and the Provost to prioritize DEI initiatives in their work with the Board of Trustees and Foundation Board members, report on DEI initiatives in State of the University reports, and keep DEI initiatives top of mind during other higher-level campus meetings. For example, Presidents can discuss key diversity initiatives during executive and public sessions of board meetings or at dinners with alumni. This support is critical in showing others the value that your CDO brings to your leadership team and shows how diversity and inclusion efforts are central to your agenda. Finally, providing the CDO with central administrative support and operations staff is critical to accomplishing everything previously mentioned. CDOs are often placed in offices by themselves, expected to personally perform all administrative tasks, and attend to high-level and campus-wide strategic planning. In most cases, beyond administrative support, the CDO will need additional staff as they develop collaborative relationships across campus. For example, having full- or part-time diversity officers and staff located within the academic colleges and other departments enables the CDO to have a presence throughout the campus. Led by the CDO, these diversity staff members, along with faculty, student leaders, and alumni representatives, become part of a campus-level DEI committee charged with leading campus-wide inclusive excellence initiatives. Without proper administrative support and other staff, CDOs will not last long on your campuses.

Providing ongoing Diversity Education for Campus

Issues of implicit and explicit bias as well as microaggressions experienced by members of the academic community can be addressed proactively by providing ongoing diversity education. There are several ways to do this including sending staff to national training institutes, bringing trainers to campus, or utilizing the current staff and faculty on campus who have expertise in these areas. In my experience, it is almost an easier sell for campus faculty, staff, and students to regularly participate in these trainings and a bigger challenge to engage senior leadership, deans, and board of trustee members. When Presidents, other senior leadership, and board members can be part of ongoing education efforts, it truly shows a commitment from senior administration that diversity education is important for everyone.

Have Patience, Courage, and Understanding

Understanding that this work takes time and takes courage is critical and will impact whether your CDO will be successful. There will be moments where the two of you will disagree and it is

in these moments where it is important to give your CDO the courage to disagree and challenge the status quo. This might mean your long-standing ideas need to be seen through a different lens. It will be important for you to give your CDO time to develop goals that they can share with you. Together, prioritizing what the CDO should accomplish during the first year, will not only ensure goals will be accomplished but also keep the CDO from tackling the entire world during their first year. Further, how a President involves the CDO early in their tenure will be critical. Is there an informal opportunity during a Board of Trustees meeting, like a dinner or social, where your CDO can interact with key board members? Creating these moments will facilitate jewels of interactions and long-standing relationships with your CDO and Board members that will eventually be a plus for your Presidency and further illustrate your commitment to DEI efforts on your campus.

For CDOs to be successful, the support of their President is critical. Being available for productive discussions with your CDO, supporting their initiatives, and providing adequate resources in the form of staff and other resources is key and can yield very positive outcomes for your campus. Specifically, these outcomes include improved retention of faculty, staff, and students of color, expanded enrollment and retention of students from underrepresented populations, and an improved campus climate. Presidents who get this right accept that DEI work and initiatives take time, invest proper infrastructure and resources, and understand that CDOs and their staff are facilitators who engage the entire campus community to develop campus-wide strategic initiatives that elevate the importance of diversity and inclusion for all.

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