

# The Critical First Year

## *What New Chief Diversity Officers Need to Succeed*

A WittKieffer Survey Report in the Fields  
of Higher Education, Healthcare and  
Academic Medicine



**WittKieffer**

## Introduction

The chief diversity officer (CDO) has become increasingly prominent in today's top institutions and is critical to their success. With appropriate support, a CDO can enhance and capitalize on an organization's greatest asset — its people. This leader can also help to confront complex internal challenges that threaten employee culture and organizational livelihood.

The CDO can help the organization navigate external challenges as well. Now, more than ever, issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion are at the forefront of national conversations and policy. Institutions are faced with increasing expectations from students, patients, staff and other constituents around diversity and inclusion that are pushing the need for strong leadership with a depth of understanding of these issues and a strategic approach to solving them.

The world needs CDOs. But what do CDOs — and other diversity and inclusion (D&I) executives — need to achieve success, especially in the *critical first year* of the role? To find out, WittKieffer recently surveyed sitting CDOs about the early days of their tenures.

This summary report highlights thoughts — frank, encouraging, eye-opening — shared by diversity leaders in higher education, healthcare and academic medicine. They reveal that effective D&I leadership calls for a genuinely supportive culture, and that starts with total buy-in at the top. The challenges are great, as are the rewards.

## About Respondents, Roles, and Reporting Relationships

In early 2017, 81 chief diversity officers and diversity leaders in higher education, healthcare and academic medicine responded to an online survey from WittKieffer. Roughly half of the CDOs in higher education work at a public university and the other half at a private college or university. Of the other respondents, 14% work at a hospital or health system and 10% work at an academic medical center or medical school.

Wherever they work, they are influential pioneers in the field. Over half of respondents are in the first five years of the position. This is in light of industry data, such as that from the higher education association [NADOHE](#), which suggests that three-quarters of diversity leaders are in senior-level roles and roughly half are members of the president's cabinet.

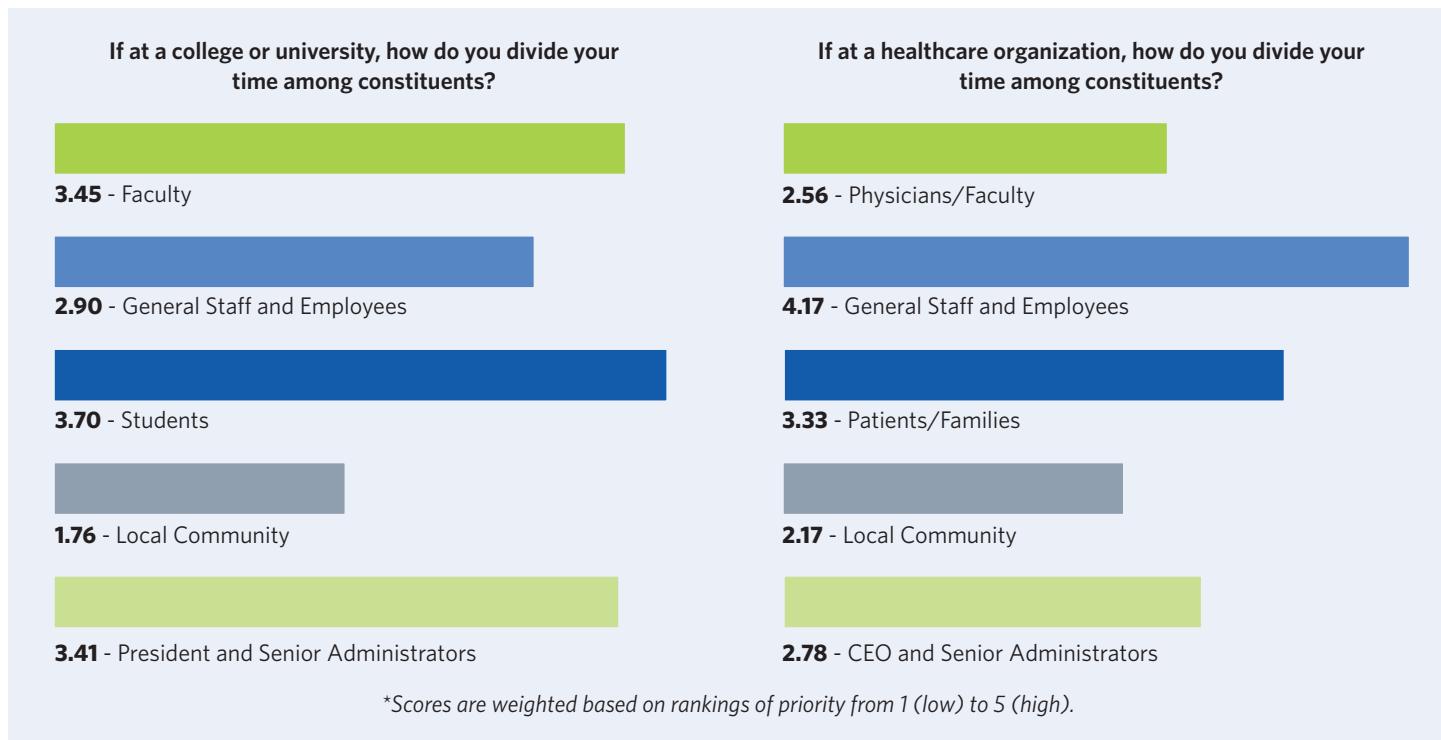
Fifty-three percent (53%) of respondents said that their current role is their first as a CDO (or similar role) in their careers; 32% said this is their second. Further, 62% of those surveyed indicated that they are the first individual to hold their position at their organization — that is, theirs is an inaugural role.



\*Top Answers: General Counsel, Dean, Vice Dean, Vice Provost

CDOs are well positioned to make an impact. Forty percent have a direct line to the top (i.e., they report to the president, chancellor, or CEO) and 21% report to the provost. Nearly one-third of respondents report to others, mostly general counsel, deans (especially within medical schools) and vice deans or vice/deputy provosts.

One of the foremost challenges of diversity leaders is allocating time to the various constituency groups who command their attention. CDOs and others in education, healthcare, and other industries juggle the need to cater to, and communicate with, myriad parties. In education, students garner the most attention though time is divided broadly. The same breadth of constituents applies within healthcare.



By far, most academic CDOs ranked students as their top priority. While faculty ranked second, only 2% of CDOs specifically ranked them as their top priority. There's also room for improvement in the CDO's engagement with their local communities as two-thirds of respondents ranked them lowest in priority.

Healthcare CDOs are clearly focused on staff as their top priority. None of the respondents ranked physicians or faculty first. As for external interests, patients/families received 45% of respondents' first or second rankings but more than a third of the respondents pushed them to fourth or fifth. Where does the time go? Thirty-nine percent ranked their bosses as their first or second priority in time allotment.

## Planning for Success

As in every important institutional endeavor, strategic planning is a condition for success in D&I. It is important for CDOs to ensure that both diversity and inclusion are priorities at their hiring institution and that there is a clear plan around D&I within the institution. While 84% of respondents did not have an existing strategic plan to work with when they arrived, most understood their responsibilities when signing on (59%), which would include putting a plan into place.

With any new role, change is inevitable. But 60% of respondents to this survey experienced "big changes" in their first year on the job. CDOs and their institutions need to be able to adapt to changes, both internal and external, as they develop a framework for D&I that allows for a clear path forward as well as flexibility to address issues as they arise.

The following are examples of opinions that we heard from survey participants regarding the **conditions for success**:

*Organizational change is constant, so trying to leverage strategy in an ever-changing environment is difficult.*

**Diversity & inclusion strategy needs to be baked into the overall enterprise strategy** with clear goals, objectives, metrics and accountability.

If the organization/institution has not articulated the values and behaviors that it associates with excellence, **it should engage the new CDO in helping it to define excellence**. Once organizational/institutional excellence is defined, the CDO must have the latitude to work with constituents to determine how excellence can be made inclusive.

**Have an understanding from all parties what the expectations of your role are supposed to be** over the course of your tenure and know that will change moving forward.

Most (63%) new CDOs indicated that they were not saddled with existing issues to fix at the start, so they felt prepared to address the challenges ahead (91%). And in the end, they felt good about the first year's accomplishments (88% affirmative).

Comments regarding **initial challenges and focus** include:

**It's important to balance real-time responses to crises as they emerge while also being strategic and visionary for the long term.** Depending on the stakeholder, long-term strategies are a necessity and yet the outcomes of those strategies won't bear fruit for at least a year, maybe more ... if ever.

**Accomplish some simple, straightforward early successes** to create immediate impact while building a 1-3-5-year professional and organizational strategic plan.

**Ask for the top three D&I priorities** and focus your time and energy there. Fires will emerge and other things will overtake you if you are not careful.

**The institution should be clear about what defines success in the first six months, and first year.** And metrics must be identified because they are essential for defining success.

**Focus on the social justice aspects of your role** as CDO and make sure that you don't despair.

■ Yes ■ No

**I had the support of the president/CEO and administration to fulfill my charge.**

86% ■ 14% ■ No

**I had buy-in from broad constituents about what I was tasked to do.**

72% ■ 28% ■ No

## A Seat at the Leadership Table

Ensuring that CDOs have the ability to influence and enact change is crucial. While most survey respondents found requisite support from the administration (86%), a notable 14% said they did not have administration support and 28% lacked broad-based organizational buy-in.

The survey asked, "What is the **greatest challenge facing a CDO** in the first year?" The question yielded several responses addressing leadership:

**Knowing what the president and provost will actually support** and where their values are.

**Educating all leaders** on the importance of diversity and inclusion and its positive impact on everyone in the organization.

**A CDO must be prepared to be “the diversity expert.”**

**A CEO who believes he can delegate** the responsibility and not be involved.

**When the executive team lacks diversity, it can be hard to help others** at that level understand the strategic need for D&I—even with support from the CEO.

Additional advice culled from several respondents' comments centered on job security in healthcare organizations and tenure in academic settings. Secure leaders are happy leaders who are inclined to see through the difficulties of executing new D&I initiatives.

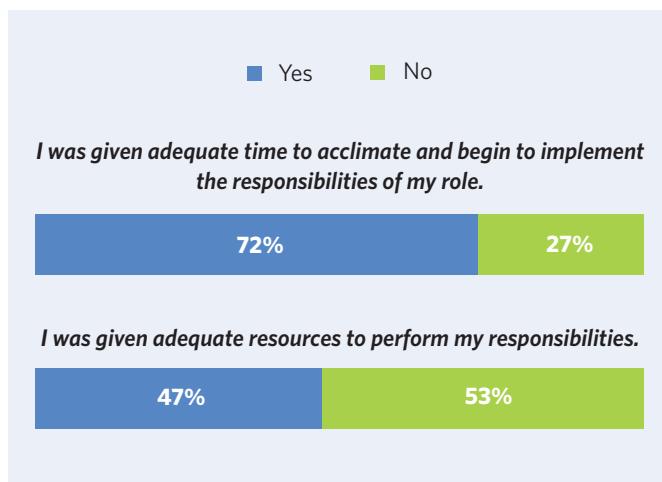
**Add a diversity measure** to your scorecard metrics and tie pay to it.

**Make sure the position is tenured.**

## Finding Critical Funding and Support

Even where intentions are good and the cultural climate is favorable for D&I, a lack of resources can be the greatest challenge in the first year on the job. Even with a clear job description and support from the administration, if the CDO and the office isn't appropriately resourced – in terms of budget, staff, etc. – the probability of effecting real change is diminished. Adequate resources will look different at each institution and the CDO should be an integral part of developing the structure and budget for D&I.

Survey respondents gave crucial advice for both the institution and other newly hired CDOs: **Allocate adequate financial and staffing resources to support the work.**



Participant advice included:

*Make certain resources are available - office staff, dedicated resources for professional development, clear expectations and flexibility. Additionally, my thought is no two CDO's have the same portfolio so it will be important for campuses to clearly define role, influence, and authority of position.*

**Support staff and resources** to fulfill the mission are essential. One person cannot effectively handle all the responsibilities involved in institutional diversity.

*Have real resources (budget and staff) available for this role and ensure that the role has direct access to leadership to ensure that the strategy is part of the overarching strategy.*

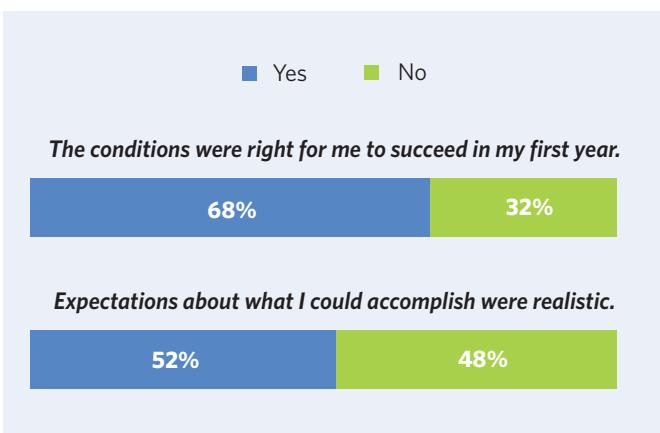
*Commit financial and other resources to this position. Value the position beyond presence.*

**The institutional vision and the mission of the CDO must be clear.** The work must be prioritized with adequate support and strong endorsement from senior leadership and with the resources to do the work at the highest level.

**Strong visibility and sustained political and financial backing** are required to support the work. Consider everything from location of the office to funding and staffing.

## Managing Expectations

Upon accepting a new position, diversity leaders must ensure that there is support from senior administration, boards, faculty and staff, and other key stakeholders. As noted earlier, 28% of survey respondents said no when asked whether they started out with broad-based buy-in; clearly, they had work to do on that front. And while they are busy building their support base, they must balance expectations.



As one survey respondent pointed out, there are no “CDO unicorns.” Other respondents were quick to share their advice both to CDOs and CEOs as well.

**You are no messiah** and be clear about that. This work is a team effort.

**Be clear about reporting** relationships and collaborations with key administrators.

**Keep expectations real.** Superman and Wonder Woman already have day jobs.

**Balance expectations** with the available level of resources and other institutional priorities.

*It is critical to the success of the CDO and the institution’s effectiveness that **clear expectations are provided based on institution’s mission and capacity for diversity and inclusion.***

## Cultivating Relationships

Ultimately, the new CDO will succeed if resources are present, expectations are known, and the entire organization is on board. It requires a great deal of relationship-building.

*In a new position, it is imperative to **network and cultivate relationships** with those who know the institutional history (how it got to the position it’s in today). These individuals will become key allies to drive necessary change.*

*Building genuine relationships with constituents early* is very important. It creates a foundation through which to establish trust.

## Conclusion

This WittKieffer survey included a wide variety of constituencies, and yet the results show some recurring thoughts. In recounting the challenges of their crucial first year on the job and sharing advice to executives and institutions, the CDOs’ responses are very informative. In short, the role’s success (or lack of it) is dependent upon the conditions in place at the institution and the expectations that leadership and constituents have for what is to be accomplished.

The CDO’s role is still relatively new and evolving. It is critical to organizational relevance in the increasingly diverse communities that we serve. CDOs are at the vanguard of cultural change, which isn’t an easy role to fill. They are human, not miracle-workers; there is no set portfolio to suit the task at hand, and no two institutions share the same degrees of readiness and willingness.

As this survey shows, a steadfast strategy of diversity and inclusion tempered by flexibility in tactical approaches can serve both the CDO and their organization well into the future.

*Note: Some comments in this report have been edited for style and clarity.*

## About WittKieffer

WittKieffer is a global executive search firm dedicated exclusively to organizations that improve quality of life in healthcare, education, the life sciences and the not-for-profit sector. Its industry-specialized consultants deliver solutions across the leadership continuum – experienced, emerging and interim – that build long-term partnerships and successful outcomes. The firm understands leadership, people who lead and the impact they have on organizations and society. WittKieffer—leading the way forward for 50 years.

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