

Chapter 3

Leading Transformative Change as the “First”: An Examination of the Institutionalization of a Southern PWI’s DEI Strategic Plan

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ABSTRACT

Although extant literature on chief diversity officers in higher education has provided insight into their roles, priorities, and standards of practice, few studies have exclusively explored the perspectives and experiences of Black women CDOs. This qualitative study draws on theories of organizational change, critical race theory, and critical race feminism to make meaning of and interpret the experience as an inaugural Black woman chief diversity officer at a public regional institution in the South, with a focus on the author’s experience leading the strategic planning process. This study advances the research on Black women in higher education, spotlighting the distinctive, layered, and intersectional journey of one Black woman CDO working in a predominately White institution in the South.

INTRODUCTION

As institutions of higher learning grapple with social, economic, and political issues of the twenty-first century, a key challenge has been to elevate, integrate, and centralize diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) functions in colleges and universities (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013). Microcosms of the larger systemic inequalities reflected in society; institutions of higher education often reproduce social inequities (Worthington 2020). Institutions established Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) positions to centralize DEI work, with a focus on improving inclusion and integrating this work more fully around the entire campus (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013). When institutions are sincere in improving the diversity climate and advancing their focus on DEI practices within the institution, CDOs can serve as change agents within the institution, developing sustainable diversity-focused initiatives, addressing systemic inequities, and

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guide efforts to engage in proactive, inclusive approaches that support cultural and institutional change (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013; Worthington et al., 2014).

The extant literature on CDOs has provided insight into the roles, priorities, and standards of practice for CDOs. Decades of research highlight the challenges and barriers CDOs face when engaging in the work of shifting culture and building infrastructure that integrates diversity at the core of the educational experience. Recent studies sought to better understand the experiences of women of color CDOs and how their social identities influence how they enact their professional responsibilities. In her 2016 study about the experiences of women of color (Black and Latina) serving as college and university CDOs, Nixon found that “social identities affected how they experienced their lived reality as extreme tokens, and they had to manage their own expectations, in addition to the impressions of others regarding behavior, competency and status, in order to fulfill their functional and symbolic roles” (314). While motivated to advance the institution beyond a focus on compositional diversity and serve as role models for others, her study highlights shared feelings of pain, isolation, doubt, and frustration. In her 2016 dissertation exploring the experienced women of color (Black, Latina and Asian) CDOs, Marañña found similar results, highlighting a shared sense of responsibility and pride in serving in their role and feelings of isolation and discrimination.

Fewer studies have exclusively explored the perspectives and experiences of Black women CDOs. Johnson (2021) explored the experiences of Black women in diversity roles (including the CDO position) at four year predominately White institutions and identified several themes including the belief that Black women in these positions have to “bend” and “shift” (Harris-Perry, 2011) to navigate their predominantly White environments and often have to explore coping mechanisms to navigate their professional environments. Even less is known about the experiences of Black women who serve as the institution’s inaugural CDO. In their study of one institution’s approach to prepare, hire and support an inaugural CDO, Arnold and Kowalski-Braun (2012) highlight the importance of politics, structures and culture in the planning and implementation process. Yet, there is little to no discussion of how the CDOs social identities influenced the institution’s decisions and actions, particularly at historically White institutions. Acknowledging these gaps in the literature, this study seeks to answer the following research questions: How do inaugural Black women CDOs at historically White institutions experience their identities as women and people of color? How do their experiences influence efforts to develop and implement the institution’s first diversity, equity, and inclusion strategic plan? To investigate these research questions, I engaged in an autoethnographic study, making meaning of and interpret my own experience as an inaugural Black woman chief diversity officer at a public regional institution in the South, with a focus on my experience leading the strategic planning process. In following sections, I offer a review of the literature on Black women CDOs and use theories of organizational change, critical race theory, and critical race feminism to focus the inquiry and guide this research. A discussion of the methodology is then followed by a discussion of the dominant themes that emerged from the study. This study advances the research on Black women in higher education, spotlighting the distinctive, layered, and intersectional journey of one Black woman CDO working in predominately White institution in the South.

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