



# The Experiences of Academic Diversity Officers at the University of Michigan

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## ABOUT CURRENTS

The National Center for Institutional Diversity (NCID) Currents publication connects scholarship in diversity, equity, and inclusion to practice and public discourse. Currents is a scholarship to practice journal that translates cutting-edge research into concise, accessible discussions to inform researchers, practitioners, leaders, policymakers, and the broader public conversation. All papers undergo a two part review process including a review by content experts and review for public accessibility.

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## Background Information

Institutions of higher education in the United States have struggled to create inclusive environments for all students, faculty, and staff since their homogenous inception. This inclusive evolution, however, does not happen without institutional effort and commitment (Kezar, 2007). Recently, colleges and universities have been more intentional and public about devoting resources to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts.

Organizations began increasing efforts and providing programmatic support to racially diverse work environments after the 1978 Civil Service Reform Act (Kellough & Naff, 2004). As court cases regarding gender and racial bias continued, employers were urged to develop programs to effectively “manage” racial diversity in the workplace, and organizations began focusing on repurposing affirmative action programs as diversity management to improve job satisfaction (Kellough & Naff, 2004). By 1998, 75% of Fortune 500 companies reported having a diversity program in place, thus creating a movement for diversity management in organizations across the country (Ryan, Hawdon, & Branick, 2002).

As both public and private sector organizations evolved, higher education also created organizational initiatives and structures to capitalize on diverse talents. In the last few decades, different types of initiatives and interventions, such as interracial dialogue programs, have been institutionalized (Gurin, Nagda, & Zuniga, 2013). Although not a new phenomenon, administrative positions known as chief diversity officers (CDOs) have been used to create, execute, and coordinate diversity initiatives to create more inclusive campus environments (Wilson, 2013). Similar to private sector “diversity manager” positions, CDO positions became a standard organizational practice in higher education due to growing recognition that diversity positions are often necessary to create the type of institutional change for which colleges are being held accountable (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013; Worthington, Stanley, & Lewis, 2014).

Whereas CDOs must be willing to initiate and sustain organizational change, especially for inclusion purposes, mid-level leaders within institutional academic units are often tasked with a significant portion of change management labor critical to enhancing DEI (Williams, 2013). For example, Griffin, Muniz, and Smith (2016) studied the ways diversity officers that specifically work on graduate

student recruitment and retention efforts (graduate diversity officers, GDOs) foster inclusive environments and student success. GDOs navigated departmental structures and cultures that challenged DEI principles in order to increase the underrepresentation of graduate students of color, and ultimately faculty of color, in the academy. Especially at institutions where academic units (i.e., schools and colleges within an institution) have significant autonomy, academic deans and school/college leadership can catalyze or inhibit organizational change for inclusion through leadership structures and roles within their units.

In 2015, the University of Michigan embarked on an institution-wide five-year diversity strategic planning process. Along with centralized goals for increasing DEI, 51 DEI plans were developed by academic and administrative units. Coordination of the planning and implementation process was led by unit-level staff and faculty. As a direct result of the university's DEI charge and strategic planning process, many academic units at the university created their own diversity officer positions to lead, coordinate, support, execute, and create structures of accountability for their units' DEI strategic plans. We refer to these academic-unit level positions as academic diversity officers (ADOs).

## Research Questions

- What are the challenges and opportunities that ADOs face, particularly during times of leadership transition within their units?
- What are the similarities and differences between ADO roles? How do ADOs fit within their organizational structure?
- In what ways are supervisors, leaders, and other college-level peers important in the success of ADOs?
- What are the strategies, social networks, and resources ADOs employ in their academic setting in order to implement DEI change?
- How do previous experiences impact how ADOs make sense of their ambiguous role?

## Methodology

### Participants

Out of the 20- identified ADOs (selected from all academic schools/colleges) on campus at the time of data collection (Fall '17), 16 ADOs participated in the research study.<sup>1</sup>

- 6/16 Participants had teaching responsibilities
- 8/16 held a terminal degree
- 6/16 had degrees related to their academic unit

### Definition

Academic Diversity Officer (ADO) was defined as a full-time professional staff/faculty member that has at least 50% of their time dedicated toward coordinating DEI initiatives for their academic school/college. Participants also must have a designated title related to their DEI role.

### Data Collection

One-hour interviews were conducted with each ADO.

Additional public documents were used to provide contextual information about ADO roles and experiences.<sup>2</sup>

### Analysis

Each interview was transcribed and coded inductively for emerging themes. Once themes were identified, each code/excerpt was agreed upon by at least two researchers.

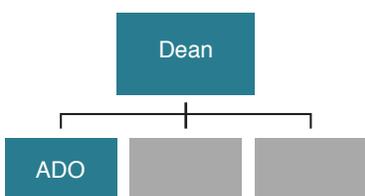
## Organizational Structure Typology

Although each of the ADO roles are unique within their academic context, there were some organizational similarities. ADOs are supervised by either the academic dean or associate dean in each unit. There are also split supervisory arrangements in which deans and associate deans share supervision of ADOs regarding different aspects of their role. Another theme that emerged from organizational structure analysis was the responsibilities between faculty and staff initiatives. Three out of the 16 units represented had separate ADOs for faculty initiatives and staff initiatives.

Although there are different organizational structural categories, there is no “right” or “perfect” organizational structure. Each academic unit has a unique culture with unique needs, histories, resources, and expectations that should be accounted for when creating organizational structures.

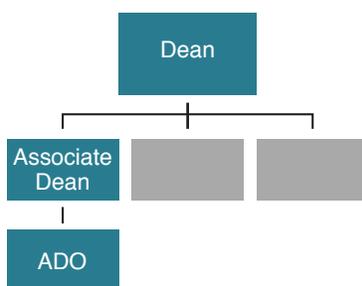
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1. For the purposes of the study, we only utilized interviews from degree-granting schools and colleges.
  2. Additional public documents include DEI websites, job descriptions, diversity strategic plans, and newsletters.

Figure 1a



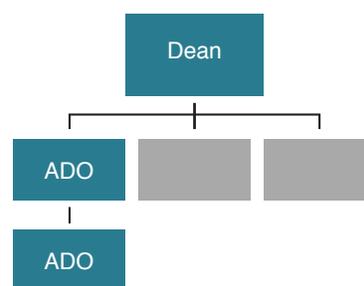
*"The previous dean changed the position so it could be part of the administrative team. For this to truly have the impact that I think was intended, that it integrates in all aspects of the school, I needed to know what all aspects of the schools were doing. As part of senior administration, I am able to be part of that conversation."*

Figure 1b



*"I report to one of the associate deans for academic affairs... I am also able to sit in on senior staff meetings... So I'm able to sit at the table with them and to get a panoramic view of what's going on, but I don't report to the dean so I work very closely with my supervisor and then we communicate regularly with the other deans."*

Figure 1c



*"In many ways I think [Associate Dean] really has more validity when it comes to trying to influence faculty to be involved in this work...I think it's different coming from [Associate Dean] than it is coming from me. [The Associate Dean] is talking more closely with the dean..."*

## Professional Logics and Sensemaking

There is no linear nor set path to diversity work roles. The ADOs at the University of Michigan have a diverse set of skills based on a myriad of previous professional experiences. We noticed that there were four main categories of professional experiences ADOs had held previously to their current role: faculty, student affairs, general administration, and community organizing. All of these roles provided unique skills that were directly and indirectly related to DEI work. What became clearer through further analysis is that previous professional roles provided frameworks, schemas, and logics that were used to make sense of the often-ambiguous ADO roles. The following is an analysis of how professional logics from previous positions shaped the sensemaking processes of ADOs.

### Definitions

**Logics:** Thornton and Ocasio (1999) define logics as the socially constructed patterns of values, rules, and practices that produce time, space, and material product. Originally introduced in organizational literature as ways organizations

organize and enact isomorphic, or similarly structured, properties (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), logics has evolved to include how individuals learn from their social and organizational environments (Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012).

**Sensemaking:** Karl Weick (1995), professor emeritus of management and organizations from the University of Michigan, defines sensemaking as the process by which individuals give meaning to their social experiences.

## Results<sup>3</sup>

Professional Background	Professional Logistics	Role Sensemaking
Community Organizing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create tension and dissonance for change</li> <li>• Engage stakeholders for change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create tension and dissonance for change</li> <li>• Leadership and communication transparency</li> <li>• Community-building and supportive responses</li> </ul>
Faculty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on academic experience</li> <li>• Guided by disciplinary norms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Utilize data</li> <li>• Recruitment/Retention of faculty &amp; students</li> <li>• Advance inclusive pedagogical techniques</li> </ul>
General Higher Education Administration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on process and outcomes</li> <li>• Adherence to rules and guides</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on micro-processes</li> <li>• Detail and future-oriented with structured plans and goals</li> </ul>
Student Affairs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual attention</li> <li>• Student support</li> <li>• Identity representation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual support and counseling</li> <li>• Focus on marginalized students</li> <li>• Strategic coalition building</li> </ul>

3. Although these results are based off of the data, some participants drew upon multiple logics, not only those from their previous work experience.

## Community Organizer

ADOs who have a background in community organizing tended to value accountability and tension in order to create DEI change. Community organizers also valued transparency by creating communication strategies, open forums, and relationships that allowed constituents to provide feedback and engage with the unit. These ADOs tended to create impactful change to the organization that directly impacted constituents.

Community organizing qualities were seemingly, or actually, in direct conflict with organizational norms of academic units. For example, communication strategies directed by public relations officers were more scripted and neutral, whereas ADOs with a community organizing background preferred a style that was value laden and personal. Additionally, ADOs with a community organizing background found it more frustrating to work within higher education bureaucratic processes and structures.

When discussing whether their role should be a part of the unit leadership team or not, one ADO replied,

I didn't find it empowered my role as much. I see them as my peers, but also these are the people I have to push. They're the leaders of the school. It's distributed. I try not to identify with them so much but keep a distance so that I can be kind of objective.

This ADO specifically distanced themselves from the unit leadership because they saw their role as both a collaborator and holding leadership accountable.

## Faculty

Our sample contained an underrepresentation of faculty member ADOs. Even with this underrepresentation, in definitive ways norms of academic life influenced how current/former faculty ADOs performed their role. For example, the faculty ADOs were all working on issues of representation (faculty/student recruitment and retention) and inclusive pedagogical training. Faculty ADOs uniquely understood from firsthand experience the difficulty of encouraging behavioral change due to academic reward structures. This understanding allowed them to make strategic

alliances with fellow faculty and approach DEI initiatives with cautious optimism and deliberate details. One faculty ADO discussed their way of proposing new changes by strategically using data to inform practice in order to create faculty buy-in:

I know if I come in with data, you're going to have a hard time arguing against me. So, I'm going to come in and flood you with all this data and get your attention and then say, 'What are you going to do?' And that's a lot of what we're doing. I'm leaning to my colleagues to do the heart string pull. I'm capable of doing that, but I just really want to come in and slam you with a bunch of data.

## General Higher Education Administration

Some ADOs also came from higher education administrative roles outside of student affairs/services. Although the types of roles were unique (e.g., human resources, research administration, etc.), they had similar latent qualities about methodically addressing issues through structure, processes, and rules. For example, one ADO discussed how a previous general administrative role provided a framework to implementing change within provided objectives, processes, and necessary budget. The ADOs in this category were able to identify issues and address them within current systems and functions. There is however a potential risk of not attending to issues that are not easily rectified and solved through conventional systems and processes.

**I know if I come in with data, you're going to have a hard time arguing against me.**

it helps me correlate a lot because for [general administration role] you have to have define a specific task. And you have to be able to know your budget. Your tasks have to be able to work towards that aim. So, I looked at that and how I do actually fit in the strategic planning here at [academic school]. I take the strategic objective, and I look what resources need to go within that. So, I use that business lens but then also the research project that lens and am like, "okay you only have 4 years" as if it were a research project, and you always have a specific time duration. So, it's easy for me to

understand that framework because of my previous background.

## Student Affairs

A few ADOs had previous roles directly supporting students. The student affairs ADOs spent a significant amount of time doing student outreach, especially to student groups from historically marginalized backgrounds. They valued representation and ensured not only intentional outreach to student communities and individual students but also increased diversity representation in already formed student

groups/committees/advisory boards. These ADOs made a special effort to and prioritized time for student one-on-one meetings and town halls after local or national DEI incidents. The personal connection and processing were an important part of building and sustaining inclusive communities. Because of the allocated time to managing crisis

**...just making myself available and present so that communities of color, LGBT students or people who I don't identify with, same identities, see me in their spaces and that has been big.**

responses and conducting one-on-one meetings with students, student affairs ADOs often felt like they did not have enough time to perform other tasks, such as reporting, writing, or strategic thinking.

Specifically, on the undergrad level, graduate students are totally different. For me, I've had to spend a lot of time on the ground just making myself available and present so that communities of color, LGBT students or people who I don't identify with, same identities, see me in their spaces and that has been big. So, because I've spent all this time in student life and have all this crisis management experience, I dealt with all the freakin' hurricanes here and managed hurricane processes.

## Job Responsibilities and Activities

The ADOs had a wide range of responsibilities, activities, and programmatic functions. Some of these responsibilities and activities were included in their formal job description, but many of the tasks that ADOs performed evolved from leadership requests and community needs. The following are the most frequent responsibilities and actions.

## LEADERSHIP

Organizational Change | Fundraising | Liaison  
Respond to Campus Incidents | Strategic Plan Implementation  
Advise School Leadership | Additional Committee Work  
Strategic Communication

## PROGRAMMING

Event Planning/Management | Intercultural Assessments  
Program Evaluation | Climate Surveys  
External Speakers | Awards & Ceremonies  
DEI-Related Training

## FACULTY/STAFF ENGAGEMENT

Outreach | Recruitment/Hiring | Retention  
Formal Evaluation Changes  
Pedagogical Trainings | Curricular Change

## STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Advise Student Groups | Recruitment  
Retention/Success | Outreach  
Student Forums | Teaching  
Response to Student Activism



## Skills and Experiences to Be Successful

The ADOs in the study utilized a wide range of skills and experiences to be successful in their role. Even though ADOs came from various professional backgrounds and were situated within their units differently, common themes emerged.

### DEI Competency

Similar to other functions that are essential to the operation of academic units, such as academic advising, accounting, facilitations management, and marketing, ADOs require advanced knowledge and competency in order to be successful. The ADOs in this study had a wide variety of personal and professional experiences that shaped how they interpreted their role, responsibilities, and priorities, yet knowledge of DEI concepts, interventions, and best practices were necessary to

create change. One ADO mentioned,

I feel like we will do DEI work a disservice if people that don't have proper training come into doing this work, because then it leads to this assumption that anybody can do it, or we can just hire a grad student, and they can lead this charge. When really, I feel like it requires specific skills and competencies.

The skills and experiences necessary to plan and implement DEI change are not only gained through additional credentials and trainings but also through life experiences. One ADO expressed their understanding and said,

I don't think you have to have a PhD or even an MA or a BA. But you have to be able to understand the culture within which you're working. What works to move that culture and what doesn't. Some people get that from life experience. Some people get that through understanding higher education and the complexities in higher education.

DEI work is complex, difficult, always changing, and rigorous. The hiring process and ongoing professional development necessary to sustain and increase DEI competency should be encouraged by supervisors of ADOs.

## **Legitimacy in Academic Context**

ADOs, either because of their work duties, their position in the organization, or social identities, spent a significant amount of time developing professional and personal legitimacy to effectively create equitable change. Although each of the ADOs approached this differently depending on their background experience and organizational context, all ADOs employed numerous strategies to build relationships and trust with organizational agents that would be helpful in their success. Specifically, ADOs mentioned two types of legitimacy that garnered differential status for ADOs: disciplinary legitimacy and academic standing legitimacy.

Disciplinary legitimacy was gained for those ADOs who shared or understood the academic discipline or field in which they worked. For example, one ADO mentioned that having an academic background similar to the school they worked for was

helpful: “I think that it helps because I understand the nuances of the work in the school – you know what I mean?” Understanding the academic context as a form of legitimacy can be seen by external observers as well. The ADO hypothesized what it would be like to not do DEI work in their field: “I was talking to my [partner] and [they] were like ‘well what if you were to go to [a STEM field]?’ I’m like, ‘I

don’t know if they would take me that seriously because I just don’t have that background.’” Having a shared academic background with those within the school made disciplinary legitimacy not only attainable but also significantly easier to obtain. Another ADO used their unique knowledge of the discipline in which they worked to differentiate initiatives and interventions from those of their peers in other academic units. The ADO said, “In the [discipline] culture, there is an emphasis on objectivity and rational thought. ... To the extent that the DEI

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work is about feelings and giving people emotional support, then this isn’t the place.” Being able to provide the appropriate framing for faculty in this unit gave DEI initiatives and the ADO legitimacy within the specific academic context.

Academic standing legitimacy is achieved by being a faculty member. While ADOs who have a faculty role recognized that they had advantage working with their faculty peers, ADOs who were staff members also recognized the positive difference it made to have ADOs who were faculty. One staff member ADO who works closely with a faculty ADO discussed the differences between working with faculty and staff:

Because I think it’s different when you have students or staff where you can say, ‘here’s what we expect of you,’ whereas with faculty it’s a very different dynamic. So how do you engage with a group [the faculty] that has a lot of leeway in terms of how they do their work? That’s something I’m still trying to figure out. That’s where I think it’s helpful to have [a] faculty member to be that champion.

This “championing” is more easily accomplished because of the academic standing of the faculty advocate.

Another ADO who works closely with a faculty member ADO noted that the spaces and meetings faculty could be present at are not open to staff members. She mentioned,

I don't know how it works for other units, but I feel for us it's pretty effective, because having a faculty lead at least when there's weekly faculty meetings [means] there's a faculty member that can raise things, because it's not open to staff just to come in whenever they want to.

If issues of DEI need to be presented to faculty or arise in faculty meetings, only faculty members can engage in these conversations, which provides legitimacy to DEI work through an academic standing perspective.

## **Interpersonal Skills for Developing Strategic Partnerships**

ADOs unanimously mentioned the necessity of having strong interpersonal skills in order to build relationships and trust with diverse stakeholders. Although not all of the ADO positions were structured to meet individually with students or provide one-on-one relationship building with constituents, many of them found this to be meaningful both for them and the students/faculty/staff they met with. One ADO stressed the amount of one-on-one time they spent with unit constituents because of the political climate. They said,

I feel like it's a lot of psychology and counseling, because we are in such a ... it's a stressful time for a lot of people, and I feel like some people don't feel heard. I definitely have people come into my office that just want to talk. I've made myself available like if you don't feel comfortable about whatever is happening in the world just come talk to me.

In addition to respond to stakeholders who need to process issues of identity and diversity on campus, ADOs used interpersonal skills to build alliances with strategic partners. ADOs used interpersonal communication skills, more so than many of the skills and experiences that came from the academic discipline or field, to connect with peers or stakeholders who may be hesitant or resistant to DEI work. One ADO emphasized that they were using very different skills in their DEI role than in their previous faculty role. When discussing the skills and experiences that are required to be a successful ADO, they said,



It's really just general leadership, change management, listening. In many ways I feel that I would benefit from degrees from the business school. A PhD in diplomacy ... I'm using a different part of my brain that I never used before.

Interpersonal skills were used to provide direct service to academic unit constituents and build strategic relationships with peers, strategic partners, and leadership.

## Recommendations for Academic Deans

- 1 | When considering ADO candidates, among many of the reasons to hire a candidate should be their knowledge and expertise of DEI-related skills and experiences.
- 2 | ADO positions must be developed in a way that specifies boundary conditions, realistic expectations, and appropriate matrices of success.
- 3 | Academic leaders should provide the appropriate functional and programmatic support necessary for ADOs to meet the vast demands of their roles either through administrative support, programmatic funding, and/or other support systems.

## Recommendations for ADOs

- 1 | Develop strategic relationships with necessary stakeholders both within and external to the academic unit.
- 2 | Ensure there is a relationship with your academic dean and executive leadership council either through direct or indirect supervision.
- 3 | Understand the unique nuances and norms of academic disciplines/fields related to DEI.

## Presentations

Grim, J. K., Chavous, T. M., Sellers, R. (2018, June). Research at the local: Research on academic diversity officers. Paper presented at the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity Annual Conference, New Orleans, LA.

Grim, J. K., Sanchez-Parkinson, L., Chavous, T. M., & Ting, M. (2018, November). I do what I do because of what I did: A professional logic perspective on the sensemaking of academic diversity officers. Paper presented at the Association for the Study of Higher Education Annual Conference, Tampa, FL.

Sanchez-Parkinson, L., Grim, J. K., Chavous, T. M., & Ting, M. (2018, April). The experiences of academic diversity officers in schools/colleges. Paper presented at the AERA Annual Conference, New York, NY.

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