

# Addressing the Emotional, Interpersonal, and Professional Costs of Being a Senior Diversity Officer

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Everyone who holds a senior administrative position in higher education faces challenges that require them to listen with empathy to aggrieved parties to find effective solutions to common problems. They must also at times interact with emotionally taxed members of the campus community who will be unhappy with the outcomes they provide. These tasks can be stressful and professionally fraught.

However, as an institutional leader, it is unlikely that you will be put in situations daily that address, and at times challenge, the core of your identity. That is, unless you are a senior diversity officer.

The nature of equity, inclusion, access, and anti-racism work sits at the core of identity. It is intimately connected to who each of us believes ourselves to be. As a result, diversity work often takes a significant emotional, interpersonal, and professional toll on the well-being of those who choose this important vocation.

## Professional and Interpersonal Dynamics

The central role that navigating the emotional aspects of relationships plays in the success of this position is antithetical to traditional views of leadership. The old view of executive leadership was that one should strive to be an impartial expert, making logical decisions to advance strategic objectives. Although we are beginning to understand the added efficacy of authentic leadership, this executive behavior is still what most of us think of when we imagine effective organizational leadership. For example, the vice president of finance must keep an eye on the budget's bottom line. When this job is done effectively and everyone has the monetary resources needed to do their work, they get rewarded for a job well done.



Kimberly Barrett

But imagine a world in which these vice presidents had the most recent audit, university balance sheets, and their own personal bank statements tattooed on their faces. Detached objectivity would be difficult under these circumstances.

This is the paradox that senior diversity officers must navigate daily. As experts on issues of identity and power, they need to be as objective as possible in the conduct of their work while also existing in circumstances that are the subject of their work. In each interaction, at work and during off hours, they carry with them the issues that they must address for their institutions. Consequently, being effective in these positions requires an adept skill set. Possessing highly developed emotional intelligence is crucial to navigate each fraught, but potentially transformative, encounter. Being successful in this role also requires an organizational structure that gives sufficient agency to the position.



Noelle Chaddock

The social dynamics that create this constant tension are identity anxiety and transference. The Perception Institute defines “identity anxiety” as worry, stress, and heightened emotion that a person has related to the idea that their identity will interfere with an interaction with another person. People in marginalized groups worry that they will be subject to bias while those in the dominant identity group fear they will be labeled as biased. These dynamics can exacerbate the issues presented to senior diversity officers and contribute to conflict.



Gretchel Hathaway

Furthermore, racial anxiety is especially heightened given the uprising for racial justice related to the police-involved murder of George Floyd. This anxiety is compounded by growing awareness of the pervasiveness of similar incidents within systems that are supposed to protect and serve all communities. In addition, more people today understand implicit bias and structural discrimination.

Similarly, the political polarization of this moment speaks to the fear racial anxiety creates, which, at its core, is rooted in culturally ingrained stereotypes. For most people this fear response is activated without us even knowing it because of what the Kirwan Institute refers to as implicit “social cognitions” that affect our behavior and decision-making. The reaction people have to Black women, for example, who make up a large number of senior diversity officers, is influenced by centuries-old expectations regarding their role in U.S. society. Renowned scholar Patricia Collins refers to these ideas as controlling images.

## Controlling Images and Stereotypes

Although there are several controlling images associated with African American women, ranging from Jezebel to Matriarch, the one most relevant to the role of senior diversity officer is that of Mammy. In “Admirable or Ridiculous?” The Burden of Black Women Scholars and Dialogue in the Work of Solidarity,” Darius Hills discusses the impact of the expectations associated with the enduring Mammy trope on Black women in higher education. This stereotype is evident in the ways in which senior diversity officers are expected to spend a good deal of time caring for others rather than focusing on strategic action to create inclusive organizational structures.

The Mammy image is the loyal, obedient, nurturing, and selfless servant, or the “mule of the world.” This idea of what a Black woman should be sets up expectations that are in many ways incongruent with the change agents senior diversity officers must become. On the one hand, the disruption that change necessitates is often met with resistance by peers and others in power. This results in the diversity officer being seen as disloyal to the institution. Yet the Mammy image often creates distrust on the part of people from marginalized groups when the role is seen as being loyal to the institutional status quo rather than the “cause” of activists.

No one person can make the tough decisions required for culture change and also be seen as consistently nurturing, yet this can be an expectation of both those from marginalized groups and institutional leadership. Women of color in these roles are routinely penalized for being unwilling to blindly and selflessly support everyone on campus — at times even at the expense of their personal integrity or physical safety. Often there seems to be confusion over the role of the senior diversity officer. Are they expected to *lead* creation of the new inclusive structures, or are they to *be* the structure, a new “mule of the world”?

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These dynamics create the opportunity for what counselors refer to as “transference” in helping relationships. Transference is the misdirection of feelings about a person to someone else — for example, treating a diversity officer in ways consistent with interactions you have had with another member of her identity group or responding based on stereotypes.

## **Racial Trauma**

These are some of the interpersonal dynamics that contribute to the difficult emotional terrain that senior diversity officers must navigate. Intergenerational trauma from centuries of racism in the Americas also contributes to this dynamic. There is a reemerging intellectual and sociocultural conversation about racism, white supremacy, and willful discrimination as trauma-inducing. Joy DeGruy Leary in her book *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America’s Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing* identifies this kind of generational trauma in the bodies and lives of African Americans.

While all Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian people experience varying levels of bias, targeting, exclusion, racism, and unrealistic expectations in higher education, Black and Indigenous female-identified persons experience this trauma in particularly potent and intersectional ways due to histories of sexism and racism in the world.

This is the result of, as Dr. Kimberle Crenshaw posits in *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex*, “the problematic consequence of the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis.” In higher education, this inability to address issues of identity from an intersectional perspective contributes to an academy-induced trauma that likely starts in grades K-12, but certainly can be found in the undergraduate experience. It can be seen as an accumulation of harm that overwhelms bodies, minds, and psyches, resulting in the long-term impact we see on the health of Black and Indigenous female-identified academics.

The unrealistic expectations that we change ourselves to conform to the very norms we were hired to change while caring for others like us creates a level of exhaustive labor for those in the academy who are racialized as Black and are gendered as feminine. We hear Black female colleagues describing this circumstance as “being expected to die in your seat.” A vice president for equity and inclusion confided to one of the authors that “they expect us to work until we can no longer work ... just like on the plantation.” She is not alone in this sentiment.

In addition, part of the trauma of higher education for people of color and first-generation students stems from the realization that college is not automatically a gateway to social and financial mobility. This

trauma is compounded by the awareness that we are recruited for our differences and then penalized for being different. And even when there is demonstrable progress in areas such as graduation and promotion rates for people of color, the trauma of the academic experience is not mitigated. This is the case even for some of those who reach the executive ranks of senior diversity officer positions; it is particularly troubling considering the constant vigilance and labor required of these positions, especially when they are in an office of one.

Attempts at enhancing diversity in higher education are not new. Some attempts have been less successful than others, many times to the strong displeasure of the campus community. The senior diversity officer is often hired with an immediate, crisis-filled, highly racialized fire to put out. And when they themselves are racialized, especially raced and gendered as Black and female-identified, that person is put in the position of dealing with a highly caustic situation while being the direct target themselves of racism, sexism, and exclusion.

The amount of trauma and harm that is experienced in this situation is possibly immeasurable, but in order to heal the harm that many senior diversity leaders in our institutions experience, we must examine what it is that can make this position so damaging. We are just beginning this work as researchers, theorists, and institutions. We offer a few suggestions for institutions, other senior leaders, and senior diversity officers to enhance the success of those who hold these critical positions.

## Recommendations for Senior Leaders to Provide Strategic Support

Ask yourself if the position is structured in a way that gives the person holding it the authority necessary to lead institutional culture change. Then ask if the position requires the person who is hired to experience racial trauma. If so, identify ways to care for and apply cultural empathy in circumstances where these social dynamics appear to be inevitable while working to build structures to remove occurrences of racism and White supremacy from campus. Consider the aforementioned issues as you develop the job description for these positions and as you welcome new senior diversity officers to campus.

Higher education leaders should develop a concrete plan for the onboarding, development, retention, and support of the person in this new role. Specifically, how will this officer be introduced to the campus community and to other key campus partners? In addition, leaders must provide resources for professional development and connection to others doing this work, both on and off campus, as well as opportunities to practice self-care.

Clarify (with information) and reinforce (through behavior) the roles and responsibilities of new positions, such as the vice president/senior diversity officer, with the campus community. Make sure everyone understands both the authority of the position and their own continued responsibility for diversity, equity, inclusion, access, and anti-racism.

Reward authentic and inclusive leadership on the part of all in senior administrative positions, managers, and supervisors. Provide professional development for these leaders to support this culture change.

Employ strategies to prevent identity anxiety and transference. Hold regular discussions regarding the ways in which identity (race, culture, class, ability, gender identity, etc.) impacts leadership among the executive team. Implement strategies to decrease implicit bias (e.g., individuation, stereotype replacement, counter stereotypic imaging, and increased contact). Develop accountability around these issues.

Practice mindfulness to help everyone act with thoughtful intention and compassion.

## Guidance for Senior Diversity Officers

Practice self-care. This is a necessary first step to success in these positions. It is not something to which you treat yourself occasionally, but a sustained daily practice. Self-compassion is what will enable you to treat others with compassion as you do your part in the challenging work of creating a more just and inclusive world.

Start the healing process. Self-healing starts with recognizing trauma when it happens. Tell people what you need. Most institutions will be responsive and give you the support you need if you let them know what's necessary.

Develop personal and professional goals for yourself. If you find that you aren't achieving these on the expected timeline, work with a mentor to identify obstacles to your success.

Have an exit plan. Before you agree to take on a senior diversity officer role, identify a strategy for your safe departure. This position, like any other, is just a job. It is not worth damaging your personal and professional well-being. Good work feeds our spirit, and diversity work certainly can qualify as good work. — it's hard work, but it is good work. If you feel that it is not good for you, find a graceful way to leave. Begin with the end in mind.

The role of the senior diversity officer, a position new in the ranks of executives leading colleges and universities, presents unique challenges for both those serving in these positions and for those who hope to support them. The identity anxiety, controlling images, transference, countertransference, and intergenerational racial trauma that plague the academy and society create conditions that can wear daily on the physical and emotional well-being of diversity practitioners. However, there are ways that we can work to mitigate these dynamics with greater organizational intention, support for authentic leadership, and self-compassion. If we engage in the strategies outlined above, we can increase the professional success and well-being of those holding these critically important positions while also advancing our goals of creating truly diverse, equitable, inclusive and anti-racist institutions.●

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