

SNAPSHOT

# DIVERSITY OFFICERS: EQUITY IN THE AGE OF COVID-19



Marybeth Gasman, Rutgers University  
Brandy Jones, Rutgers University

William Lewis, CoopLew  
Ken Coopwood, CoopLew



**RUTGERS**  
Graduate School of Education



SAMUEL DEWITT  
PROCTOR INSTITUTE  
*for Leadership, Equity, & Justice*

## A LOOK AT THE DIVERSITY OFFICERS WITH WHOM WE TALKED

59% WOMEN  
41% MEN

92% AFRICAN AMERICAN  
5% WHITE  
3% LATINX

35% RESEARCH UNIVERSITIES  
65% LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGES



Higher education is rapidly changing amid the COVID-19 outbreak and given the recent protests fueled by the murders of Black men and women by law enforcement. Now more than ever colleges and universities must take a stand to condemn racial intolerance and establish strategies to address issues of equity, racism, and discrimination found on college campuses. Staff, faculty, and students are learning new skills, budgets are tightening, campus community in the traditional sense is being challenged, and most concerning – inequities that have long been in place are more and more prominent. As colleges and universities make vast changes, individuals who are often minoritized and marginalized are feeling the brunt of these changes. The role of the Diversity Officer is shifting, expanding, and continues to be vitally important to the work of colleges and universities. Students who once had on-campus organizations, cultural centers, and student colleagues are now learning from home amidst their families (often accompanied by younger siblings), sometimes without private spaces for studying, and, in some cases, without the resources that campuses provide. Faculty and staff are having to re-tool quickly and learn how to do their work in a virtual space. It's important that equity is considered in all of the changes taking place across the curriculum and campus.

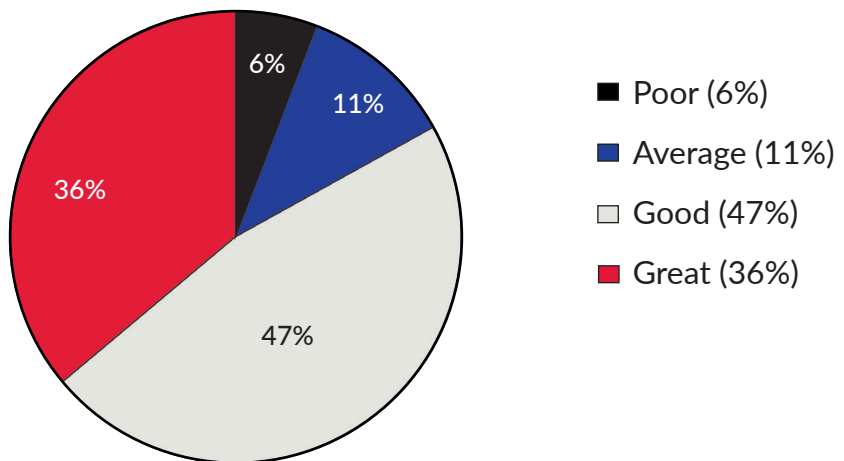
As the higher education landscape changes, it is vital that Diversity Officers (DOs) are prepared and feel supported in their roles. In an effort to understand how DOs are managing, preparing and leading during the COVID-19 crisis, we asked a group of 100 DOs three short questions pertaining to how their institutions are responding to the pandemic, how their job is changing, and how they are finding new ways to address equity amidst the pandemic.

## WHAT WE LEARNED

We asked DOs to rate their institution's response to the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of equity from poor to great. Forty-seven percent (47%) of DOs rated their institution as 'good,' while 36% of the respondents rated their institution as 'great.'

*“Diversity officers need to be visible and vocal leaders by example and hold their reports and units accountable.”*

### HOW ARE COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES RESPONDING TO COVID-19 IN TERMS OF EQUITY?



### Effectively Serving Constituents in the New Virtual Space

In order to serve their campus constituents, DOs continue to meet virtually with students, staff, and faculty. Some are learning new technologies in order to better serve people. Others are preparing virtual programming for students and virtual ‘cultural spaces’ to provide a sense of community for students. One DO shared with us: “As a diversity practitioner, I am trained for and accustomed to innovative and inclusive thought, and flexibility and adaptability – all of these elements are required as institutions shift to online learning and virtual programming and support models.” Another DO expressed that they are eager to learn more about supporting equity through virtual methods and developing their skills in this new climate. Most importantly, the DOs we talked to believe that more and more diversity and equity needs will surface as a result of the pandemic, especially in terms of accessibility issues for students as well as faculty and staff with varied resources. Additionally, the DOs reported that given the current racial climate, these needs will be distinct from the challenges they faced prior to the pandemic.

### New Ways to Address Equity in the Virtual Space

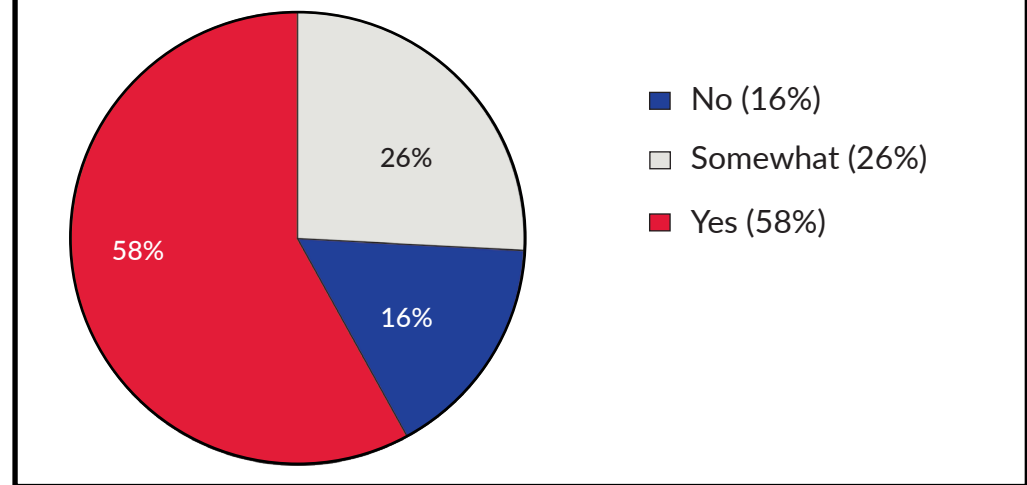
When we asked DOs for their advice on new ways to address equity in virtual spaces, they shared their wisdom. They suggested that DOs across the nation could provide more diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) based trainings for faculty and staff. DOs think it is imperative that they remain vigilant in holding campus community members responsible for providing equitable resources and policies across the board, ensuring that everyone has the resources and support to make the transition to virtual spaces, and that everyone has access to the offerings of the institution regardless of learning style, ability, and socioeconomic status. One DO suggested that colleges and universities should spend time identifying “barriers that restrict access (e.g. family care, financial stability, a quiet work space).” These particular challenges can create vast inequities among those learning and working at home.



**“Top priority is considering accessibility - does everyone have the technology, resources, personal bandwidth to transition to the virtual space. What are the personal barriers that restrict access (e.g., family care responsibilities, financial concerns, quiet work space issues)?”**

DOs also suggested that as part of their role, they need to be critical of proposed budget cuts and how these potential cuts could have an impact on equity and diversity issues across campus. DOs should be at the table for these types of discussions as they are conscious of equity issues that exist on colleges and universities and represent constituents across campuses that are often left out of conversations.

#### ARE DIVERSITY OFFICERS FEELING PREPARED FOR THE NEW VIRTUAL SPACE?



As many campuses have recently implemented confidential processes for reporting bias and discrimination, DOs are concerned that these processes may not remain in place within the virtual context. Students need to feel safe using technology to report sensitive issues as do faculty and staff. Moreover, DOs must continue to be aware and respond to acts of discrimination and oppression that take place within new virtual spaces. For example, recent Zoom bombings – intruders hacking into Zoom meetings, spreading racism, sexism, homophobia, or sharing objectionable material – have become more common with the increased use of these teleconferencing platforms. When these incidents happen, those involved need to know how to best report the incident and have the opportunity to discuss their feelings; colleges and universities need to take action against the intruders. In addition, Xenophobia related to Asians and Asian Americans continues throughout the nation, and DOs have been on the frontlines of ensuring that college and university leaders respond to the discrimination their Asian and Asian American constituents may be experiencing.

DOs are preparing for the ever-changing campus environment, seeking support from leadership, and benefitting from resources to ensure they can do their jobs in a virtual environment.

## WHAT WE RECOMMEND

### Secure a Place in the Room and in the Conversation

While diversity as a profession has seen tremendous strides over the past 20 years, senior-level diversity leaders are still often not included in the

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***“This is an unprecedented time for most of America. Students of color and first-gen students are facing more unique challenges that are systemic.”***

senior-level cabinet at most institutions in higher education. Many DOs have reporting lines that do not afford them a physical space at the senior administrative table. If in this situation, DOs may not be a part of the group of administrators asked to grapple with high-level tasks; instead, they are only brought into discussions when “diversity matters.” It is essential to have DOs present during conversations about where to make budget cuts, and more critically, who gets cut from campus-wide budgets. COVID-19 has everyone talking about a “new normal,” which will undoubtedly mean that things will go forward with less funding than what was available at the start of 2020. It would be wise for DOs to define their roles before Fall 2020. We suggest that DOs seek to renew their allies and influence. Now is a great time to touch base with people who share the concerns that are germane to DOs, and whose support will be needed to access the units responsible for virtual instruction, communication, marketing, dispute resolution, academic support, affirmative action, etc. DOs will need a specific plan in order to be heard among the many voices struck by COVID-19.

### **Stay Relevant**

One DO asked in a recent [Diverse videocast](#), “How does the DO stay relevant in the post-COVID era?” One way to stay relevant is to identify issues that cross over as a need in the virtual space. Some of these issues include accessing resources and technology, managing incidents of bias that happen in virtual courses, and holding institutional leaders accountable for developing policies that are considerate of the various demographic groups that exist on college campuses. DOs should work to identify the crossover issues in an effort to keep DOs relevant and provide a clear need for their expertise in the virtual realm. COVID-19 is a great reminder of new opportunities for change and improved services to specific populations. If DOs are leading, they may find themselves leading others to new insights.

### **Understand that Colleges and Universities Are Not Innovative by Nature**

During a conversation about leading the next generation of diversity leadership, a colleague at *Diverse* provided this insight, “I can read the headlines about the pressing issues in higher education from thirty years ago and find out what the problems of higher education are today.” Higher education is not known for its speed when making change. DOs may experience resistance when moving forward with diversity-related efforts in current and future environments. It is critical that DOs begin to represent the next generation of leaders. But it is also important to draw from the lessons of the past to inform the balance between innovation and the traditional patterns of institutions of higher education. After all, value for diversity, equity and inclusion has not been a part of higher education’s past. Being cognizant of the resistance to change on college and university campuses, and staying strong in the pursuit of equity-based change, is essential for DOs.

*“I don’t think I feel totally prepared. I have been researching ways that our campus can ensure equity in this new virtual space and while I have identified some good practices, I feel I can always learn more and will continue to do my research.”*

### **Sustain the Core Function of Diversity Administration**

One respondent stated, “This is an unprecedented time for most of America. Students of color and first-gen students are facing more unique challenges that are systemic.” Because systemic issues remain acute in higher education’s past, present, and will likely be prevalent in the future, DOs should work feverishly to ensure that the core function of diversity administration — to advance systemic transformation away from inequity — is positioned as a staple within their institutions while addressing the onset of virtual challenges. With nearly half of respondents in the snapshot indicating they felt either underprepared or somewhat prepared for virtual diversity administration, it can become more difficult to sustain core functionality while seeking new skills and sustaining allies to better accommodate underserved populations post-COVID.

### **Acquire New Skills**

DOs would benefit from taking an instructional design course to learn how to effectively weave equity and a sense of belonging into the ecosystem of virtual academic environments. DOs should learn more about their institution’s budget model. This knowledge is needed to better advocate for programs, people and projects that may seem non-essential, but have a consequential impact. DOs can also shadow faculty colleagues to gain a sense of how they view teaching and learning or teach a course so that they gain first-hand knowledge of the teaching and learning environment. Lastly, DOs can research ways to attract grant funds to keep historically underrepresented students connected to their majors. Having in depth knowledge about aspects of higher education not historically associated with diversity work, improves the value of DOs’ presence during decision making on college campuses.

### **Prepare for your Personal Post-COVID-19 Future**

Personal financial management is paramount during times of institutional instability. DOs should prepare for the possibility of budget cuts, salary reductions, layoffs, and even position elimination. They should budget for one or more of these actions that institutions may take in the aftermath of COVID-19.



## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Marybeth Gasman is the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Endowed Professor of Education and a Distinguished Professor in the Rutgers University Graduate School of Education. She also serves as the Executive Director of the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Institute for Leadership, Equity & Justice.

Brandy Jones is the Acting Director for Programs and Communication at the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Institute for Leadership, Equity & Justice.

William T. Lewis, Ph.D. is a nationally recognized diversity and inclusion thought leader, entrepreneur, and executive coach. He is a former Chief Diversity Officer who has led diversity and inclusion efforts at Indiana University, Bridgewater State University, and Virginia Tech University. Currently, Lewis is the Special Consultant to the President for Belonging, Equity, and Inclusion at and Forsyth Technical Community College. He is Co-Founder of CoopLew, LLC.

Ken Coopwood, Ph.D. is a four-time chief diversity officer who has earned national prominence as a transformative agent in higher education diversity administration. He has served at five institutions and he instructs certification coursework at the national level. He holds certifications in cognitive diversity applications, diversity return on investment, diversity executive leadership, creative problem solving, and adaptive-innovation theory. He is Co-Founder of CoopLew, LLC.

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## ABOUT THE SAMUEL DEWITT PROCTOR INSTITUTE FOR LEADERSHIP, EQUITY, AND JUSTICE

The Samuel DeWitt Proctor Institute for Leadership, Equity, and Justice (Proctor Institute) is a national center that focuses on issues of leadership, equity, and justice within the context of higher education. It brings together researchers, practitioners and community members to work toward the common goals of diversifying leadership, enhancing equity, and fostering justice for all. The Proctor Institute is located at Rutgers University—New Brunswick, in the Graduate School of Education and houses the Rutgers Center for Minority Serving Institutions (CMSI). Learn more at <https://proctor.gse.rutgers.edu>.

## ABOUT COOPLEW

CoopLew is a consulting, educational, and professional development company founded to advance skill sets of diversity professionals, especially those who work in colleges and universities. Located in Charlotte and Winston-Salem, North Carolina, the company aspires to accelerate CDO executive growth and transformation through professional development, one-on-one coaching, and skill set applications. CoopLew is comprised of former diversity executives, researchers, and scholars with a combined 95+ years of on-the-job experiences. CoopLew training has pioneered experiences that address and prepare participants for the transformation of chief diversity officer lived experiences. Learn more at [www.cooplew.com](http://www.cooplew.com)