

'Shouting Down an Empty Hallway'

Demand for diversity, equity and inclusion specialists on campus is high—and so is turnover. Many in the field say the work can be isolating and support from top leaders is rare.

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After four years at Princeton University, Avina Ross left her job in September 2021. She was one of three DEI employees who have resigned from the institution over the past 18 months due to what they described as a lack of institutional support for their work, according to a December [article](https://www.dailyprincetonian.com/article/2022/12/princeton-dei-resign-staff-athletics-share-lack-of-support) in the student newspaper, *The Daily Princetonian*.

Ross, who is Black and has a doctorate in social work, was hired by Princeton's health services department in part to provide a culturally sensitive approach to violence prevention and support for sexual abuse survivors. But she told *Inside Higher Ed* there was a disconnect between her goals for making the university more inclusive and the expectations of Princeton's leaders, who she said had at best a "surface-level investment" in DEI work.

"That kind of environment can really lead to an exodus, and that's what you had at Princeton," Ross said.

In an email to *Inside Higher Ed*, Princeton spokesperson Michael Hotchkiss disputed Ross's assessment of the university's commitment to DEI work.

"There is a shared and continual commitment to ensuring a diverse and inclusive environment at the university in which all staff members can thrive," he wrote.

In addition, Michele Minter, Princeton's vice provost for institutional equity and diversity, noted that the university's approach to DEI is not "top-down," so each department develops its own initiatives.

The departures at Princeton are part of a pattern in higher education, according to nearly a dozen college and university DEI administrators and staffers who spoke with *Inside Higher Ed*. While some institutions have elevated their highest-level DEI (<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/05/07/chief-diversity-officer-position-new-path-presidency>), officers to senior positions or even president, the employees interviewed for this article said that more often, university leaders show a lack of appreciation and support for their work, leading them and many of their colleagues to leave higher ed burned out and disillusioned.

Compounding those challenges is an increasingly aggressive political attack on DEI initiatives by conservatives across the country. Texas (<https://www.texasmonthly.com/news-politics/texas-dei-schools-bill/>) lawmakers have proposed legislation to ban DEI work in public higher ed outright. Last week, Oklahoma's new Republican superintendent of public instruction issued a letter (https://tulsaworld.com/ryan-walters-jan-23-request-to-ok-higher-education-chancellor-allison-garrett/image_344a552a-9c3f-11ed-9f58-7347b3b3de49.html), requiring the state's public colleges to account for "every dollar spent" on DEI in a potential effort to curb that spending. And on Tuesday, Florida governor Ron DeSantis announced plans to defund all DEI offices (<https://www.insidehighered.com/live-updates>) across the state's higher education system, the latest in a long string of political maneuvers that includes the recent appointment of two vocal anti-DEI activists (<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2023/01/11/desantis-seeks-overhaul-small-liberal-arts-college>) to the New College of Florida's Board of Trustees.

Despite the increase in political hostility, the number of senior DEI roles is steadily multiplying. Between 2020 and 2022, in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder by Minneapolis police, membership in the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education increased by 60 percent, according to Paulette Granberry Russell, the association's president. At the same time, she added, senior diversity officers increasingly come from diverse backgrounds and are thus likely to experience the difficulties of being a rare leader of color in the predominantly white world of higher ed administration (<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/10/28/black-administrators-are-too-rare-top-ranks-higher-education-it%E2%80%99s-not-just-pipeline>).

"The vast majority of our members come out of communities that have been historically underrepresented or marginalized in higher ed," Granberry Russell said. "There's an emotional toll, and that's exacerbated when you have inadequate resources and support or when the job is tokenizing."

For Ross, that emotional burden eventually became too heavy to bear.

"That's the double-edged sword of DEI work: in this space, the learning doesn't end. And the more you learn, the more you start taking a look at your own experiences and applying that lens to them," Ross said. "Eventually you might ask yourself, 'Is this a sacrifice that I'm willing to make?'"

When those issues lead to frequent departures, it can have long-term consequences for the entire institution.

“That kind of burnout and turnover really does have a negative effect on DEI work,” said Nicholas Creary, a former co–chief diversity officer at Moravian College. “It means that every couple of years or even less, you have to reset the needle and start over.”

Contentious Exits

Last March Creary was removed from his role as co-CDO at Moravian for, as he put it to *Inside Higher Ed* (<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/04/06/professor-accuses-moravian-retaliation-dei-work>), shortly after his departure, “doing his job well.” After being recruited for the CDO position and offered a simplified tenure process as a history professor, Creary began getting pushback for making negative comments about the college’s diversity practices. When he later shared minority faculty retention data with colleagues, Moravian accused him of committing “an egregious violation of university policy,” according to an email the college sent to Creary’s lawyer.

Inside Higher Ed previously reported on the circumstances surrounding his departure, which Creary declined to elaborate on in a recent interview due to a nondisparagement agreement he signed with the college. Last April a spokesperson for Moravian told *Inside Higher Ed* via email that Creary was fired “for cause” and declined to comment further.

Institutional culture can have a major impact on a DEI officer’s experience, Creary said. Some campuses are invested in the work and take it seriously; others are merely looking for someone to mediate conflict with students and faculty of color—to “patch ‘em up and push ‘em through,” as Creary put it. Managing the expectations and attitudes of leaders and colleagues can be a significant part of the job.

“There are a lot of places that are [hiring CDOs] because they have to check the boxes, to say we’ve got somebody doing diversity,” Creary said. “At some institutions, it’s not even a question of will they support the work; it’s a matter of getting them not to obstruct it.”

Often, DEI officers part ways with their institution under less-than-amiable circumstances. Of the 10 sources who spoke with *Inside Higher Ed* for this story, three had reached or pursued settlements with their former employers over discrimination or contract disputes.

Cecil Howard said he resigned as vice president for diversity, inclusion and equal opportunity at the University of South Florida in July 2021, after years of “frustration and disrespect” boiled over into open conflict with the university’s then president, Steve Currall.

Some of that conflict was incited by what Howard called “an incredibly tone-deaf and disrespectful” statement (<https://crowsneststpete.com/2021/07/09/usf-diversity-administrator-resigns-after-hotly-rebuking-currall/>) that Currall made after Floyd’s murder. But more than that, Howard said he left because he felt undermined and belittled at every turn, a pattern that slowly reinforced his belief that his role at USF was no more than “window dressing.”

“Everybody wants to hire a chief diversity officer to throw a Black History Month event or read a land acknowledgment,” he said. “But when the rubber meets the road—when we’re at least aspiring to become an antiracist environment—those senior leaders and major decision-makers, they don’t want to hear it. I was never going to be OK being a pawn, a token, a box-checker. So I left.”

Althea Johnson, USF’s director of media relations, told *Inside Higher Ed* via email that prior to his resignation Howard submitted two charges of discrimination with the Florida Commission of Human Rights, which has since dismissed both.

Howard said being a DEI administrator is especially difficult in red states like Florida or Texas, considering the vitriol state lawmakers have expressed for work they see as a symptom of administrative bloat (<https://www.heritage.org/education/commentary/ums-administrative-bloat-fueled-diversity-inclusion>) or a tool for politically motivated indoctrination (<https://pulse.ncpolicywatch.org/2021/11/04/republican-lawmakers-take-on-diversity-training-decry-indoctrination-at-unc-chapel-hill/#sthash.ATZO9Yr3.dpbs>).

“I tell people, I live in Florida but I won’t do my work here,” Howard said. “People who are very talented won’t come to Florida to do this work anymore, or a number of other states. I said no to a job in Tennessee recently for the same reasons.”

Michael Dixon, a diversity officer with nearly two decades of experience in higher ed, said those concerns are increasingly important for many in his line of work; a friend of his recently turned down an offer in Florida after considering the political challenges.

“There’s no way we can work effectively if we have to consistently justify the work we’re doing,” he said. “This job is challenging enough as it is.”

Support From Leadership ‘Rare’ but Crucial

More common than outright conflict between DEI staff and institutional leaders, though, is a general sense of discouragement and frustration. This can result in DEI staffers hopping from job to job, hoping to find a good fit.

“I think that’s often a result of institutions that have not clearly defined the expectations of the position, what they regard as priorities,” said Granberry Russell. “The important thing is making sure that people come into the roles adequately prepared and that those who are developing those roles understand what it takes to not only realistically set goals, but also support that individual in pursuing them.”

Dixon resigned from his last job, as chief diversity officer at Susquehanna University, in December. He said he’s proud of his work at the Pennsylvania institution, but that he felt a disconnect between “the way that position was initially crafted and what it turned out to be.” And at his first CDO job, at Manchester University in Indiana, he said he had so little access to the president and other senior leaders that he felt unmoored and ignored, “without the ability to make meaningful change.” He left after two years.

“If you have the support of the institution and leadership reinforcing your message, your work becomes a lot easier,” he said. “Otherwise it just kind of feels like you’re shouting down an empty hallway.”

Kevin McDonald, the University of Virginia’s vice president for diversity, equity, inclusion and community partnerships, said he “has a real partner” in UVA president James Ryan and other senior leaders. Though he knows that’s “rare” in his field, he said it’s the “most important factor” in making DEI work fulfilling and impactful.

“If those relationships are watered and seasoned, they will grow and bloom and benefit not only the president and the CDO, but the whole institution,” McDonald said.

Sabrina Gentlewarrior has spent 19 years working at Bridgewater State University in Massachusetts, the last dozen as vice president for student success and diversity. She said the university has been supportive of her and her colleagues’ “long-term work” to make the institution more welcoming for faculty and students of color, and that the commitment has made a real difference to the DEI staff.

“There was a real rush to emphasize this work on campuses; that was needed and good. But many campuses have not yet lived up to their promises,” she said. “It can be exhausting for workers in this field when their institutions haven’t matured from minor diversity programming to making strides toward institutional change.”

Dixon said his frustration at Susquehanna and Manchester led him to question his future in DEI work—and academe.

“I’ve been really thinking about, after 18 years, is the next step another position like this? Or do I look for DEI work in the nonprofit or corporate world, or focus on my consulting firm (<http://www.quincymichael.com>)?” he said.

Howard, formerly of USF, has already made up his mind.

“It got to the point where I don’t want to do this work anymore, as much as I care about it,” he said. “An experience like the one I had will just take the wind out of your sails.”

McDonald, who has mentored other CDOs, said that building community is especially important for those working in DEI.

“We’ve lost some amazing individuals in the field because of this, people who are kind of used and abused by their institutions,” he said. “Being a diversity officer can be such a lonely job ... it’s important that we be there for each other.”

Creary said the thorny circumstances surrounding his departure from Moravian have created “some challenges finding a next permanent gig” in higher ed. Nonetheless, he is determined to stick with it.

“It’s frustrating and can be disheartening,” Creary said. “But ultimately, if you believe in the work—and more importantly, if you believe in and want to help those students and those faculty that are hurting—you do it anyway.”

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