

Shared Equity Leadership

Q&A with Taffye Benson Clayton

Can you talk a little bit about your role and what equity leadership means in your role?

I serve as vice president and associate provost for inclusion and diversity (and CDO [chief diversity officer]) at Auburn University. In my role, shared equity leadership is a next step evolution in my individual professional and institutional DEI [diversity, equity, and inclusion] work. In addition to existing concepts and frameworks utilized to inform our individual professional practice as CDOs, shared equity leaders[hip] provides a viable model for CDOs to advance an institutional approach that includes leaders across employee or faculty categories and levels to become equipped and empowered to engage in this work. Shared equity leadership adds to existing scholarship on equity-mindedness and inclusive excellence, and [it] distinctly captures a process that involves individual leader growth and evolution and connects it with collaborative engagement and collective action toward institutional impact. The process of colleagues sharing their lived experiences, examining disaggregated data, participating in equity-focused professional development, and reading and discussing curated DEI materials . . . is a powerful combination for cultivating new allies and champions in advancing equity in our institutions and across the higher education landscape.

One of the key takeaways from our latest SEL report is that leaders' functional roles can influence the way they execute their leadership within the SEL model. For example, someone who works in student affairs may be able to more easily lean into different values and practices compared with a faculty member. How do you think your role shapes the way that you think about equity leadership—are there particular values and practices that are especially important for you in your role?

The role of the CDO is both central and unique within the context of shared equity leadership. As the senior executive leader charged with leading and catalyzing the DEI change strategy for an organization, CDOs—while well positioned to inform and influence strategic DEI efforts—must also educate colleagues about the CDO role to allay the perception that embracing shared equity leadership effectively absolves a CDO from their DEI-related responsibilities. It becomes imperative that CDOs distinguish their role[s] as content experts, strategists, conveners, advisers, administrators, and leaders in contrast to being perceived as the singular senior executive leader/professional charged with execution and accountability for the institution's DEI progress/success or the lack thereof. This can be a considerable challenge when some presidents, provosts, and other executive leaders do not fully understand the complex role of the CDO. Matters of inequity are predominantly long-standing and systemic, requiring the time and focused attention of all leaders. As the framework and approach of shared equity leadership is adopted by campuses, presidents, provosts, and CDOs must define and clarify the role of the CDO as a senior executive DEI leader and clearly articulate the role of the CDO within the adoption and implementation of the shared equity leadership model.

Another major finding from our latest SEL report is that a leader's position in the organizational hierarchy also shapes the way they enact SEL. So senior leaders are better able to lean into some of the structural practices, for example, such as working to rethink rewards and incentives or making changes to hiring practices. How does your position in the hierarchy (senior-level, mid-level, ground-level) impact the way you think about equity leadership or the practices you emphasize?

Serving as vice president and associate provost/CDO affords me direct access to senior executive leaders, academic leaders, students, faculty, staff, administrators, campus constituency groups, and governance leaders. As an experienced DEI leader and former equal employment opportunity officer with a predisposition to identifying equity-related barriers and working collaboratively to devise strategies to address them, my role as CDO influences how I think about equity leadership and the equity related practices that I employ rather than my position in the hierarchy. As professionals conditioned to examine policies and processes; identify barriers; analyze qualitative and quantitative data to understand disparities; and engage students, faculty, staff, administrators, and leaders to better understand their experiences as well as the gaps in experiences between differentiated groups, CDOs are consistently considering these matters as top of mind. The compelling aspect of shared equity leadership is that it conditions others across campus to be collaboratively active and engaged in understanding the challenges and generating solutions as well.