

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Statements In Theatre and Cinema

Is Measurable and Continuous Change Enough For These Initiatives To Create Impact?

The United States prides itself on being a melting pot of cultures, races, ethnicities, religions, and other identities that reflect different experiences and perspectives. However, that melting pot of identities has not completely translated into the workplace. Businesses in all fields have noted their lack of representation. This acknowledgment has been heightened by social justice movements, discussions and debates in the mainstream media, and legislation being written in the government. This push for representation has been noticeably increasing in the cinema and theatre world. The arts have a duty and a responsibility to observe and reflect the interactions of life through their platform. This reflection requires accurate representation of the different struggles different communities face. The arts cannot successfully portray these struggles without employing the appropriate identities for the roles. These pressures and recognition has led to the development of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusivity statements, better known as DEI statements. These statements are initiatives companies implement with specific goals to provide more opportunities and platforms for marginalized and underrepresented identities. Although DEI statements have an evolved history, and are intended to uplift marginalized groups to create equity within the theatre and cinema industry, the statements are sometimes performative, and have little impact on an organization when it comes to measurable and continuous change. In order to make DEI statements meaningful and impactful, organizations should expand their statements to include all religious, racial, and ethnic minorities and measure the effectiveness quantitatively and qualitatively throughout each fiscal year.

DEI statements have progressed a lot in the last decade, but there is still a pattern of neglect. Diversity training as a whole began in the 1960s with gender before extending in the 1980s to include race. In the 1990s diversity training was broadened to include other identity groups based on disability, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and a variety of worldviews

(Vaughn 2018). Since then diversity training has evolved to include the consideration of white privilege, “the benefits they reap individually as a member of the racial group with the most social, political, and economic power,” and multiculturalism, “the inclusion of the full range of identity groups in education” (Vaughn 2018). This is what led to the creation of DEI statements as a way to specify organizations commitment to these marginalized identities. DEI statements provide a commitment in three parts to their audiences. Each segment of the DEI statement is associated with a distinct value. Despite the fact that many believe the values are interchangeable, the three are distinct steps towards providing opportunities and spaces for all identities. The University of Washington provides articulated definitions for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, specifically within the realm of DEI statements. Diversity is, “the representation of different and unique identities, characteristics, experiences and perspectives.” Equity is, “giving everyone what they need to succeed by increasing access, resources, and opportunities for all; especially for those who are underrepresented and have been historically disadvantaged.” Inclusivity is, “a welcoming culture in which differences are celebrated and everyone is valued, respected, and able to reach their full potential.”(University of Washington Human Resources). These three definitions are not interchangeable with each other. It is possible for a company to succeed within one value while not employing the other. For example, perhaps an organization is diverse given the array of identities of their employees, but those same employees are not all being offered the same opportunities within the organization. That would not be considered inclusive. DEI statements have incited change in the workplace and led to more conversations about underrepresentation. However, especially due to recent events, these statements have implemented change for certain marginalized groups while continuing to isolate others. Specifically within the theatre and cinema world, there has been a trend to elevate identities

based on race while pushing to the side the elevation of identities based on religion, mental and physical disability, sex and gender identification, and even socioeconomic status, immigration status, and education level. This support and elevation of one community while concurrently continuing to exclude others brings up the question: are DEI statements effective at representing marginalized communities within theatre and cinema, both on stage and off? How can we measure the success of DEI statements to continue to hold them accountable so that we move away from any potential performative action and implement impactful, measurable, and continuous change? Is it enough to hold DEI statements to a higher standard and rewrite these initiatives to live up to their values? Do we need to create new initiatives that better articulate and enforce the holistic movement to create diverse, equitable, and inclusive work environments within cinema and theatre? The goal is to not erase any of the work these organizations have made towards creating opportunities for those who have endured racial inequity, but rather to extend this work to continue to create space for them in the arts while also creating space for other marginalized communities. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion statements were created with the intention of actually guiding an organization to make decisions that result in representation. Given the social justice movements circulating the country and the new guidelines and developments being made by impactful organizations in response to backlash, it is clear the nation is calling for further action to commit to the support of historically oppressed identities and their opportunities in the theatre and cinema world.

The push for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the cinema world is stronger given the public's ability to continuously hold these organizations to a higher level. With smaller organizations comes smaller audiences. It means less people to hold the company accountable and make sure DEI statements are being appropriately implemented. With corporations and

larger organizations, the audience size grows which means the amount of people watching them grows too. With cinema and television, there are major studios and networks responsible for hiring people and giving them opportunities. Since this is an entertainment field, the whole world watches and has an opinion. One case where this was extremely prevalent was the Oscars. The Oscars, also known as the Academy Awards, is the most prestigious and famous awards show for artistic and technical merit in the cinema industry. There is a plethora of critical acclaim that surrounds the Oscars because of the highly exclusive voting membership and very influential board of governors. As many who have accepted the prestigious award say during their speech, it's a great honor. If the Oscars reward outstanding talent with high recognition, in theory, they would want the most deserving of the field to be nominated. And yet, there seems to be an inclination to continue to nominate and award people who have not been historically oppressed or marginalized. In 2016, the Oscars made headlines when they failed to nominate any Black identifying actor in any of the best actor/actress and supporting actor/actress categories. From there, many criticized the Academy for their lack of diversity (Davis 2020). Famous actors Jada Pinkett Smith and Spike Lee, were among many famous artists in Hollywood who boycotted the award ceremony that year. The Oscars viewing ended up being the third lowest in Oscar history since its broadcasting start (Patten 2019). Whether or not that was due to the lack of diversity is unclear, but it is notable. Since then, the Oscars have developed a large diversity and inclusion initiative. Entitled the Academy Aperture 2025 initiative, the Oscars have dedicated themselves to better representation through new standards and eligibility requirements. Starting in 2024, films being considered for the Best Picture nomination must meet two of the four standards for eligibility. The four categories are as follows: (1) on-screen representation, themes, and narratives, (2) creative leadership and project team, (3) industry access and opportunities, and (4)

audience development (Davis 2020). Within each category are subcategories that cater to identifying marginalized groups that should be represented or benefited within the film. Depending on the subcategory, these identities can include: women, a racial or ethnic group, Asian, Hispanic/Latinx, Black/African American, Indigenous/Native American/Alaskan Native, Middle Eastern/North African, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, other underrepresented race or ethnicity, LGBTQ+, or people with cognitive or physical disabilities, or who are deaf or hard of hearing. This range of identities is significantly more all-encompassing. It comes from the directness of the Academy. By articulating specifically which marginalized communities they wish to provide opportunities to, it makes it easier to hold themselves accountable. These eligibility requirements are a great technique that can be implemented in a lot of arts organizations. Creating certain standards for a production to meet, is a way of creating measurable and continuous change. It is measurable because the product has to meet guidelines which offer a quantifiable amount of necessary representation. It is continuous because it makes sure that it is not one production that meets these standards, but every production thereafter. That continuous improvement because it is less performative and effectively impactful. It also is also to satisfy all three values within a DEI statement. It satisfies diversity by making sure a spectrum of marginalized have an opportunity to be represented, even if not all at once. It satisfies equity because it ensures that historically oppressed identities are getting the same opportunities that non-marginalized identities are getting. Finally, it satisfies inclusion because in specifying which identities need to be represented, it is giving those people a platform and an opening to not only be a part of the project, but be a centerpiece of the project. In this set up, more than one marginalized identity is being presented with an opening and it no longer falls on the audiences to hold the organization accountable. When the audience does not need to hold the arts

organization accountable, it leaves more room for them to actually enjoy the art and feel its intended impact.

When measuring how we hold people in the cinema and theatre world accountable, we can also see society's intelligence in understanding that accountability in systems of oppression can extend to one oppressed group oppressing another. That is to say that society as a whole understands the concept that one can belong to one marginalized community and still contribute to the oppression of another marginalized community. For example, one can identify as Black and have the experiences of oppression as a Black person but be anti-semitic and contribute to the marginalized of a Jewish person. Why is this important and relevant to the implementation of DEI statements? It serves the argument that they continue to support one marginalized group while ignoring the other. A significant example of this is Rihanna's Islamic offensives in her Fenty Beauty fashion show in October of 2020. As Rihanna opened her show for Fenty Beauty Lingerie line, viewers noticed that the background music had samples of a hadith, a sacred Islamic text (Lavin 2020). Hadiths are known to talk about the sign of Judgement Day and serve as a strong moral guiding force for most practicing Muslims. Rihanna's choice to use them in her show was seen as ignorant as there was no indication she knew what the text meant and chose to play it because it sounded pretty. Many viewers were quick to call the businesswoman and artist out on this choice. Social media users took to their platforms to highlight how Islamophobic this action was. Some users compared the situation to Christianity and highlighted that if this had been a Bible verse, the whole world would have been quick to critique her (Lavin 2020). What made the event even more contrasting was that the lingerie line was supposed to celebrate inclusivity. Audiences claimed, " 'inclusivity' seems only to include some groups of people" (Lavin 2020). While this example may not be from an arts organization and not directly from the

cinema or theatre world, it's relevance is seen through the fundamental aspects of it all: one cannot claim and commit to diversity and inclusion and not include certain marginalized people in that commitment. Furthermore, it is possible for someone to come from a marginalized community themselves, and continue to contribute to the marginalization of others. Rihanna herself is a Black woman but has offended members of the Muslim community. In the cinema and theatre world, we are seeing this performative commitment to marginalized identities but a lack of action because these organizations do not know how to apply their intentions. In what ways can we solve this? Firstly, standard and eligibility requirements similar to the Oscars. If there was a system that Rihanna was required to follow in which she had to consciously cater her material to certain marginalized identities, then she would be forced to pay attention to inclusivity on a deeper scale rather and understand the scarcity of Islamic music. Secondly, through education and exposure. If organizations, in the cinema and theatre world (or yes, in Rihanna's case) would create a commitment similar to the Oscars where the entire team on a project is required educate themselves on whatever issue they filming, producing, acting, etc, not only does it help to make sure no one's identity is misused, it helps to bridge the gap between their isolation and their representation. Diversity Training is a great way to promote education within organizations. Hiring trained professionals to help employees foster environments for marginalized identities to thrive will also make them more aware of what actions the need to be making daily to make sure everyone has opportunities. The more knowledge we have on an idea, the more we can relate to it and understand it. This knowledge leads to exposure. When we as a society are exposed to an idea, we are more willing to give it a platform.

In order to ensure all marginalized identities have this platform, it can require structural change that means reshaping an entire organization. In the theatre world, a lot of theatres and

organizations are built systematically to provide opportunities to certain identities over others. Simply implementing a DEI statement will not erase that bias. It requires an entire rewriting of their system. If these artists are really committed to this change, it could be beneficial to rewrite their structure. In Manhattan, New York, The Clemente Soto Véllez Cultural and Educational Center, which has 42 subsidized artist studios, four theaters, and two galleries in the building, has made a historic move to push their arts organizations to be more inclusive (Liscia 2020). The center has voted to dissolve its membership structure, instilled in 2006, that allows each organization in the building to nominate board members. The issue was that 38 artists were using the building without being a member of the center. While it was not required to be a member to use the center, it was required to be a member of center to nominate someone to the board. Therefore, all these artists were actively involved in the space but were not able to be represented because they were not members. By dissolving the membership, there is no binding requirement to the center for artists who wish to use the space for a certain amount of time while also allowing them an opportunity to nominate people from an outside perspective who might be qualified for the board position. Executive director Libertad Guerra explained, “My aim is to modernize the great program to open it up to more diversity and shed a light to all the projects that happen within that don’t give the Clemente its proper credit” (Liscia 2020). Not only is the center’s goal to create diversity within the representation on the board, they also are aiming to dismantle what has become a predominately Latinx organization. While the space was created to celebrate their identities, the center is moving towards offering more space for other identities so that their narrative is no longer dominant (Liscia 2020). This change has not escaped its fair share of resistance, with some saying the board is corrupt and that the systematic change could result in a decrease of funding. However, the intention behind the choice is one worth exploring

in other communities. Due to the systematic oppression marginalized communities face, one way in which this oppression is practiced is through financial accessibility. Historically oppressed identities have socio-economic limitations (Kochhar et al. 2020). When theatres implement practices like a fee-based membership, hiring practices within their own company or hiring only Actor's Equity Association members, they are creating limitations to the audiences and creatives they can bring into their spaces. By erasing and rewriting their policies and structures so that more people can afford to come watch a show or have the opportunity to audition, there will inevitably be more diversity (racially, ethnically, gender-based, sexual-orientation based, and disability based specifically) in their audiences and their hiring pool. When they have the options to choose from, it makes it easier for them to implement these DEI initiatives. If underrepresented identities do not have spaces to apply themselves, they cannot share their experiences. However, it is not their responsibility to create these spaces. It is up to organizations, systems, and society to hold themselves accountable and take the initiative.

Establishing that we need eligibility standards, accountability steps, and reshaping of organizations' systems, the question remains will doing all of this result in effective DEI statements? DEI statements are solely the articulation of commitment towards diversity, equity, and inclusion. In terms of who, what, where, when, why, how, these statements satisfy the what, where, and why. It is hard to state that DEI statements establish who because while it is clear they are targeting marginalized groups, without detailing in specifics who these marginalized groups are, it creates a lack of responsibility because the organization can hire one identity and claim they have satisfied their initiative. By detailing who exactly these statements are built for, it makes it one step easier to provide opportunities for them. Morgan Williams, published through Grantmakers in the Arts, articulates this need for specificity. Williams shares her

research on DEI statements stating, “foundations use terms that are explicitly related to DEI less frequently than terms that can have multiple meanings...discrimination, racism, privilege, social justice, and unconscious bias.” She then goes on, “Words that can have a variety of meanings and are not related as explicitly to identity characteristics are used more frequently...access, justice, fairness, quality of life, representation, resources, underserved, disadvantaged, and opportunities” (Williams 2019). Williams is highlighting the importance of specificity. Specific language choices, as she puts it, delivers more specific results. This will make it clear who DEI statements are meant to support. Acknowledging and understanding that leaves the question, how do DEI statements satisfy the values of when and how? Ideally, through quantifiable measures. Organizations can articulate the when by setting clear goals with deadlines whether that be for the upcoming season in a theatre company or for a specific film being shot by a production studio. Specifying what projects are going to satisfy these initiatives will also create results. This leaves the last, and arguably most important value, how. It can be possible to measure DEI statements and *how* they create change through establishing eligibility standards. However, there is one other area in which diversity, equity, and inclusion are a necessity; hiring/recruitment and retainment. Howlround Theatre Commons published an article in 2015 detailing how arts organizations can create a culture that does reflect diversity, equity, and inclusion. The first step to physicalizing these commitments? Articulate them in your job descriptions. As authors Karen Fiorenza Ingersoll and Deena Selenow share, “ Smart candidates—the ones you want applying for your open positions—will be able to suss out your organization’s true commitment to inclusion in less than five seconds of reading your job description” (Fiorenza Ingersoll and Selenow 2015). If arts organizations want to become diverse, part of that goal is hiring and creating a team that celebrates that goal and wants to honor it. The article then goes on to share

how organizations can make sure they are not only hiring different identities and people of different backgrounds, but that they can retain them, or include them, too. Some key ideas pointed out that are good to consider is that hiring one person with a specific identity does not mean they will bring the rest of the people from their community with them. They are not a spokesperson (2015). This is something to keep in mind when integrating the person into your team. Inclusion means providing that specific person with a platform for their own ideas, not asking that person to represent all identities in their community. When hiring, seek help from managers who have experience in hiring diverse and inclusive teams (it is not enough for them to identify as a marginalized identity they must have “actionable history”) (2015). It also could be useful to provide DEI training for all employees. Once arts organizations in the theatre and cinema world commit to these practices or similar ones, it will be easier to measure the actual success of DEI statements.

While Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion statements do have the right intention in providing opportunities for marginalized individuals, their creation did not take into consideration how practices of performatism and tokenism can be harmful in producing change in the arts. The arts are supposed to reflect the struggles, lifestyles, and experiences of those in real life. Some of these are universal and not based in a certain identity, but some are not. We cannot all relate to the experiences of discrimination based on religion, mental and physical disability, sex and gender identification, socioeconomic status, immigration status, or education level. That does not negate the importance of these experiences being shared. It also does not negate the importance of society taking on the responsibility of rebuilding these experiences and dismantling these oppressions. At the organizational level within theatre and cinema taking on these responsibilities means analyzing what is working and what is not. If implementing measurable

and continuous action within DEI statements and the initiatives organizations create under them is a solution to moving forward and not limiting ourselves to performatism, then we can reshape DEI statements to be successful. If implementing measurable and continuous action within these statements does not create a solution to moving forward, then it is clear DEI statements cannot be successful because what is required is a rewriting of the language surrounding social justice in the arts for marginalized communities. There have been some examples of new statements and initiatives that create a broader umbrella that invites more groups to the table of inclusivity and representation. In 2016, Americans for the Arts, for example, released what was called a cultural equity statement. Americans for the Arts defined cultural equity as, “embodying the values, policies, and practices that ensure that all people--including but not limited to those who have been historically underrepresented based on race/ethnicity, age, ability, sexual orientation, gender, socioeconomic status, geography, citizenship status, or religion--are represented in the development of arts policy; the support of artists; the nurturing of accessible, thriving venues for expression; and the fair distribution of programmatic, financial, and informational resources” (Proquest 2016). The organization used this redefinition claiming that, “While our commitment to this core belief has never wavered, the political, social, and economic circumstances in which we carry out our mission are constantly evolving, As the local arts field reacts to and anticipates change, all of us must recognize inequities and continuously work to find ways to achieve greater access to a full vibrant cultural life. True change is never a one and done deal; we can always do better” (Proquest 2016). Whether or not a cultural equity statement is more appropriate solution than a diversity, equity, and inclusion statement, the organization articulated one thing very clearly; society is constantly evolving and in order to implement lasting change, we have to get

comfortable with the idea that change itself is always adjusting and growing based on the climate of our society.

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