

# Princess impact: Diversity, equity, and inclusion as a pillar of sustainability in the global entertainment industry – A case study of the Walt Disney Company

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## Abstract

Social aspects of sustainability are crucial in the 21st century, which is a time characterised by multiple challenges and crises. Diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility as values and strategic areas are integrated into sustainability frameworks of global enterprises since the early 2000s.

The entertainment industry has shown remarkable growth over the past few decades and, therefore, plays a unique role in shaping the global mindset on sustainability issues. The study introduces a review of the academic literature on sustainability-related issues within the field, as well as patterns of Corporate Social Responsibility in the sector, especially concerning Sustainable Development Goals 5 and 10, which deal with gender equality and reducing inequality. To demonstrate the entertainment industry's impact and power, we have chosen the case study of the leading entertainment provider, The Walt Disney Corporation. Our research question tries to uncover whether Disney's '*inclusive storytelling*' represents symbolic gestures or significant systemic change, especially regarding the princess franchise. We demonstrate through the analysis of how the princess characters evolved from passive, Eurocentric role model to protagonists to become autonomous and culturally diverse.

We also interpret the practices and difficulties of Disney in converting narrative diversity into company policies and actions. The study concludes that storytelling can be a tool for forming social norms, especially among young children, and the paper draws attention to the challenges of sustainability in the world of children's cinema, cartoons and entertainment experiences, and finds a balance between narratives on the screen and responsible company policies.

**Keywords:** Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI), sustainability, entertainment industry, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), gender representation, Sustainable Development Goals, cultural sustainability

**JEL Classification:** L82, M14, J16

## Introduction

By 2025, both researchers and policymakers have become aware that we face an era of *polycrisis* (Losoncz, 2023). Besides environmental sustainability issues, attention is increasing towards the social dimensions and aspects of sustainability, particularly diversity, equality, inclusion and accessibility (DEIA) in global industries (United Nations, 2015). The entertainment industry, with its worldwide reach and influence on culture, also plays a key role in shaping public opinion, reinforcing norms or limiting or eliminating long-standing inequalities.

The entertainment branch developed its sustainability guidelines and standards, firstly focusing on climate-related sustainability initiatives using the ALBERT Media Production Carbon Neutrality Framework (also called ALBERT Initiative) (BAFTA, 2023). In the early

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phases of sustainability-related policymaking, the social aspects of sustainability remain underrepresented in the sector's strategies. This can also be observed in the whole creative industry regarding the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 5 (gender equality) and 10 (reducing inequalities) (Sorensen&Nooan, 2022).

This paper focuses on DEIA as a strategic and ethical component of sustainability in the global film, cartoon and entertainment industry. Using a case study approach, we examine how one of the most influential players, The Walt Disney Company integrates DEIA principles into its corporate practices, and we will give an overview of the company's development path related to idols and role models depicted on the screen. The company's recent approach of inclusive storytelling and casting is recognised and criticised at the same time. For some of the audience, it is too performance-oriented or commercial rather than focused on meaningful societal transformation (Elsawy, 2024; Jiménez-Morales & Lopera-Mármol, 2022).

In the first chapter, we provide the historical evolution of Sustainability Frameworks and reporting standards. We particularly focus on the introduction of the movie and entertainment industry, where reporting and measuring standards mean a challenge even nowadays due to the specialities of the industry. In the second part, we aim to assess how sustainability narratives are interrelated with the real-world activities of the entertainment industry. The third part explains the case study of The Walt Disney Company, focusing on the evolution of princess characters, known as the princess franchise or princess impact. In its conclusions, the study aims to critically assess whether DEIA is a core business principle at Disney aligned with sustainability goals.

## **Theoretical background**

### ***From environmentalism to environmental, social, governance (ESG): The evolution of sustainability frameworks***

The origins of sustainability are rooted in shifting the corporate mindset from a purely profit-oriented approach to a responsible conduct of business in terms of environmental harms and social impact from the early 1960s. Therefore, we focus on the introduction of milestones and key papers related to the sustainability of the entertainment industry.

While research and reports in the 1960s and 1970s were more focused on environmental issues or did not combine social and environmental responsibilities of corporations, the Brundtland Report, published in 1987 (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987), created the idea of global sustainability. The Commission, led by Brundtland, under the umbrella of the United Nations, declared that only sustainable development can meet today's requirements without taking away the chance of the next generations of a healthy and prosperous future. This definition created the foundation for a complex understanding of sustainability, including all three dimensions of the current ESG framework: environmental, social, and governance. These criteria are now reflected in stakeholder assessments and corporate responsibility indicators (Ferlito & Faraci, 2022).

Building on the Brundtland Report's achievements, the United Nations introduced the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with 17 global priorities in 2015. The SDGs consist of 169 further targets and 303 indicators. This globally accepted and recognised system of goals and actions is reflected in the reporting, assessment, and in measurement systems of different actors in society and the economy worldwide. The study focuses on social dimensions, particularly two global goals: SDG 5 and SDG 10.

# SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



**Figure 1:** *Sustainable Development Goals*

**Source:** <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

For decades, the creative and entertainment industries tried to avoid expectations of responsibility directed at the sector's players, like manufacturing costs and high transportation burdens. Film production generates substantial carbon footprints due to location shooting, international logistics, and energy-intensive post-production processes (Vaughan & Kääpä, 2022).

Social sustainability is equally challenging. Despite some good examples and progress, studies draw attention to gender and racial disparities in leading roles, pay gaps among actors and backstage employees based on race and gender, as well as gender gaps in decision-making positions within the industry. Sustainability in entertainment must do much more than carbon audits even beyond the scenes (Kräft et al., 2024; Regev, 2021).

### ***DEIA in the sustainability agenda of the entertainment industry***

In the early stages of the film industry, gender or racial minorities were not handled equally in the production industry. Black or Latino actors have been marginalised even in front and behind the scenes (Rodríguez, 2007). The first significant steps towards acknowledging the equal value-creating force of different genders and races started in the late 1970s, with the foundation of Studio D in Canada, the first feminist film studio. In 1979, the Women's Steering Committee of Directors Guild of America was founded, which fought and advocated against the underrepresentation of women in directorial roles (Rodríguez, 2007). These initiatives led to an increased recognition of DEIA strategies even in the film industry. By the first decade of the 2000s, the film industry developed its internal guidelines and best practices for DEIA policies and measures. Another important field of social responsibility has been developed through depicting role models, demonstrating gender equality issues and promoting inclusion in movies, films and other entertainment productions. The two fields of action, corporate policies and actions behind the scenes, and narratives through idols, actors, are parallel activities of leading companies nowadays (Elsawy, 2024; Ferlito & Faraci, 2022).

Companies like Netflix, Sony, Universal Studios and The Walt Disney Company are ranked among the top ESG performers (Grand View Research, 2022). In the entertainment category of the Standard and Poor's Global Sustainability Yearbook (2024), companies nowadays include DEIA performance in their annual CSR reporting. Initiatives include pay

transparency, inclusive casting, education programmes, and equitable hiring practices. Walt Disney's sustainability report covers the following action areas regarding SDGs 5 and 10. Workforce Diversity and Inclusion covers actions and policies to attract a diverse workforce to the company and operate the Employee Resource Groups, which are employee-led groups formed around shared identities and interests. Community Engagement and Philanthropy covers initiatives like Charitable Giving: in the fiscal year 2023 Disney directed over 145 M US Dollars (USD), 46% of its charitable contributions to support programmes for Asian American and Pacific Islander communities, Black communities, Hispanic and Latinx communities, Native and Indigenous communities, LGBTQ+ communities (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning and other sexual and gender minorities), veterans, women and girls, and people with disabilities. Finally, the Leadership and Governance pillar of the programme aims to reach an equal representation of minorities and genders in boards and other institutions. In 2023, five out of ten members of Disney's Board of Directors represented diverse gender and/or ethnic backgrounds, which also reflects the company's commitment to inclusive leadership (The Walt Disney Company, 2023).

Based on the developments of the last decades, sustainability in the film industry has two different layers. Therefore, the entertainment industry is not only a "film factory" releasing creative products to the market, but it is a cultural infrastructure with social responsibility, as through its cultural impact it is able to shape social norms (Vaughan & Käätä, 2022). These two layers are, according to Vaughan & Käätä:

- Operational sustainability: Production facilities, infrastructure and its carbon footprint, including waste management, recycling, reducing transport and travel-related costs, energy saving solutions.
- Narrative sustainability: The values displayed and messaged through the cultural content–role models, idols, heroes and the stories they transmit, or the message they tell.

DEIA is part of the Narrative Sustainability layer. Quoting Jiménez-Morales and Lopera-Mármol (2022), "*green production is not enough without green messaging*".

### ***The ALBERT initiative and the BAFTA Certification Model***

The ALBERT Initiative was launched by BAFTA in the United Kingdom in 2011 and has grown into the primary standard for sustainable screen content internationally. Originally a carbon calculator for productions, ALBERT now offers a complete certification framework that covers pre-production planning, crew training, sustainable transport and waste reduction (Sørensen & Noonan, 2022; Vaughan & Käätä, 2022). ALBERT certification is a requirement for BBC and Channel 4 productions, these producing companies have over 500 projects certified (BAFTA, 2023). BAFTA plays an important role in educating film industry experts on sustainability and provides a knowledge base and best practice sharing for the industry players.

ALBERT has also developed the "Editorial Sustainability" space, where they share editorial content (blogs, articles, commentaries). This site raises awareness about climate issues and inclusive values (wearealbert.org, 2024). However, based on analysis of publications, articles and news, the ALBERT Initiative needs to improve regarding measurement protocols of social pillars and metrics related to DEIA, as it promotes storytelling but it does not provide a formal audit for gender or racial representation (Jiménez-Morales & Lopera-Mármol, 2022). The BAFTA Awards now include sustainability performance as part of their eligibility criteria, which also motivates film studios to adopt greener practices, introduce and measure their sustainability performance. In conclusion, the ALBERT Initiative is a best practice in the film industry, yet its social metrics can be further developed in the future.

## Methodology

In this study, we employ a qualitative-type case study methodology, introducing The Walt Disney Company as a leading player in the global entertainment sector. The research aim is to explore how DEIA practices are embedded within the company's sustainability strategy. We analysed whether the company's actions align with the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 5 on gender equality and SDG 10 on reduced inequalities (United Nations, 2015).

The main data source for the case study analysis is the official CSR and Sustainability Report for the year 2023 (The Walt Disney Company, 2023), which provides a detailed dataset on the firm's internal and external initiatives and actions related to DEIA. Furthermore, we concentrate on the narrative sustainability-related actions and programmes, e.g. storytelling, workplace representation, and public engagement through culturally significant programmes such as the Buy Black Challenge, Pride Nite, and heritage month celebrations.

The methodology enabled us to analyse and interpret other reports and texts as well as academic research literature related to the evolution of Disney's social responsibility. Our content analysis focused especially on the evolution of Disney's princess characters as interesting markers of changes in representational policy and interpretation of gender roles, and then on inclusivity towards different racial and gender groups.

We will demonstrate how these characters transformed from the passive, Eurocentric figures of the early 20th century to culturally diverse and independent protagonists in recent decades. This Princess Paradigm has a long-term, wide-ranging impact not only in educating young girls but also in challenging and breaking taboos in public narratives (Noseworthy-Roberts, 2016).

### *Case study: The Princess Paradigm and the evolution of DEIA in practice*

The Walt Disney Company's princess franchise targets young girls and has been more than a profitable merchandise over the last few decades. We have chosen to introduce its compelling cultural case to demonstrate how DEIA principles can be applied in practice in the entertainment industry. As demonstrated below, the portrayal of princess characters not only shows the changing gender norms and cultural representation but is a well-aligned, professional corporate strategy, where the storytelling is aligned with social values represented by the company.

The transformation of Disney princesses over the past almost a hundred years illustrates how the company has become open towards issues of diversity and equity and started to display these values in its creative content. Later, a broader shift in both market demand and socio-political consciousness occurred. Several empirical studies assessed the impact of princess role models on young girls, mainly in educational, social and psychological segments. As this study concentrates on sustainability issues, we illustrate the brief history of princess characters in the context of SDGs 5 and 10.

The classic era of Disney cartoons, starting from *Snow White* (1937) to *The Little Mermaid* (1989), was characterised by feminine passivity and Eurocentrism. These characters, such as Cinderella and Aurora, Sleeping Beauty and the classic fairy tale characters, reflected ideals of beauty, virtue, and silence. They were reinforcing a narrow vision of womanhood that did not incorporate any racial and narrative diversity. These early portrayals, as Noseworthy-Roberts (2016) notes, reflected the expectations of a mid-twentieth-century patriarchal society. They positioned female protagonists primarily as objects of rescue and desire. Racial homogeneity was the norm, putting the white Western gaze into focus (Regev, 2021; Rodriguez, 2007).

These stereotypes were first amended by the productions of *Pocahontas* (1995) and *Mulan* (1998), where the princesses had non-Western identities. A criticism of this era is that these characters have been portrayed through the lens of stereotypes, and they have been romanticised with an obvious historical inaccuracy. *Mulan* remained burdened by orientalist framing, and *Pocahontas* was criticised for sanitising colonial history (Noseworthy-Roberts, 2016). These films marked a transitional phase in which representation began to emerge as a strategic concern but had not yet been incorporated into the ethical framework of The Walt Disney Company, and there has not been any impact measurement related to the role models or idols.

Between the late 1990s and 2009, we witnessed a gap in princess stories related to the release of Disney’s animated productions. Analysing the overall market situation, it became clear that in that era The Walt Disney Company lost market share compared to Pixar, which introduced its new 3D computer-generated imagery (CGI) technique, with such iconic productions like *Toy Story*, *A Bug’s Life*, *Monsters*, *Cars*, *Ratatouille* and *Finding Nemo*. In this period, Disney underperformed compared to Pixar. In 2006, Disney acquired Pixar, bringing the creative leadership of Pixar to The Walt Disney Company and starting a revitalisation process at Disney’s animated films branch (Eloranta & Patching, 2020).

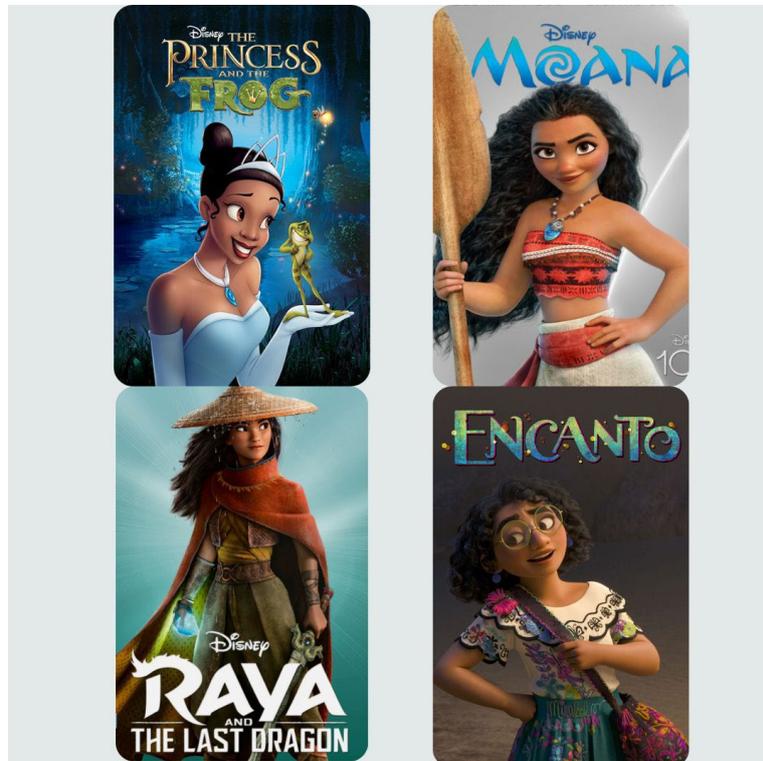
After that, a phase of intentional redefinition started at Disney. *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) introduced Tiana, Disney’s first Black princess, whose character is clearly defined by ambition, leadership skills, and authority. Subsequent productions such as *Moana* (2016), *Raya and the Last Dragon* (2021), and *Encanto* (2021) enlarged the scope of DEIA narrative with topics of ethnicity, geography, complex personal traits, and family relations. These narratives offer the audience protagonists rooted in Pacific Islander, Southeast Asian, and Afro-Latin cultural contexts. These characters not only challenge the gender conventions of earlier decades but also actively promote female autonomy, generational differences and learning from elder generations, and a positive approach towards leadership on a community level. These representations are not just generalised messages on diversity; they demonstrate deeper issues of advocacy. Their strategic goal is to transmit a different natural approach to social identities in media content for children (Noseworthy-Roberts, 2016; Elsayy, 2024).

### Princess impact – evolution of Disney’s princess characters in the light of DEIA principles

1937 - 1989	1990 - 1999	2000 - 2008	2009 - present
CLASSIC ERA – TRADITIONAL GENDER ROLES	RENAISSANCE ERA – SLIGHT PROGRESS	THE GAP – TRANSITION, TURBULENCE & A PRINCESS HIATUS	MODERN ERA – INTENTIONAL CONCLUSION
<p><b>Examples:</b> <i>Snow White</i>, <i>Cinderella</i>, <i>Sleeping Beauty</i></p> <p>These princesses embodied passive femininity—kind, beautiful, waiting to be rescued.</p> <p>Cultural representation: Almost entirely white and Eurocentric.</p> <p>DEIA View: Lacked racial, cultural, and gender diversity. Reinforced traditional roles.</p>	<p><b>Examples:</b> <i>The Little Mermaid</i>, <i>Beauty and the Beast</i>, <i>Mulan</i>, <i>Jasmine</i></p> <p>Women started showing more agency (<i>Mulan</i> disguises herself to save her father).</p> <p>Cultural steps: <i>Mulan</i> represents Chinese culture; <i>Pocahontas</i> is Native American (though heavily criticized for historical inaccuracies and romanticizing colonialism).</p> <p>DEIA View: A start toward representation, but with stereotyping and oversimplification.</p>	<p>Disney largely stepped away from princess-centered stories. Decline of traditional animation.</p> <p>In the early 2000s, Pixar’s 3D animation took off, and Disney’s 2D films were struggling.</p> <p>Leadership Changes</p> <p>Market Realignment</p>	<p><b>Examples:</b> <i>Tiana</i>, <i>Moana</i>, <i>Raya</i>, <i>Encanto</i></p> <p><i>Tiana</i> in <i>The Princess and the Frog</i> (2009): First Black princess, shown as hardworking and ambitious.</p> <p><i>Moana</i> (2016): Pacific Islander protagonist, strong cultural input from the region’s scholars and artists.</p> <p><i>Raya and the Last Dragon</i> (2021): Southeast Asian-inspired world and a fierce female warrior lead.</p> <p><i>Encanto</i> and <i>Frozen</i>: Focus on sisterhood, mental health issues, intergenerational trauma, and family dynamics beyond romance.</p>

**Figure 2: Evolution of Disney’s princess characters in the light of DEIA principles**  
**Source: Compiled by the authors (based on Noseworthy-Roberts, 2016)**

In summary, the evolution of Disney’s princess franchise demonstrates a slow but strategically planned and realised alignment with DEIA objectives. It is a good example of both the potential and the limitations of mass media corporations in ethical storytelling. Through the eyes of these characters, we can follow how corporate strategy can be harmonised with cultural responsibility, confirming that the narrative itself is a vital but not enough infrastructure for sustainable development.



**Figure 3:** *The New Characters of Disney Princesses since 2009*

**Source:** *Compiled by the authors, based on*

*[https://disneyprincess.fandom.com/wiki/List\\_of\\_Disney\\_Princess\\_Designs](https://disneyprincess.fandom.com/wiki/List_of_Disney_Princess_Designs)*

## Discussion

Based on the above case study’s conclusions, this section collects the potential conflict areas that arise when socially conscious branding is used in business.

DEIA has evolved from a social ethical issue to an important strategic and reputational asset not just in the film and entertainment industry. To analyse The Walt Disney Company’s approach towards DEIA goals in its sustainability strategies, it is worth assessing how frequently The Walt Disney Company mentions SDG alignment in its sustainability reports especially concerning Goals 5 and 10. The SDG report 2023 shows that the company wants to present social inclusion as a key component of its global responsibility program. This is in line with general trends in corporate sustainability, and with the general structure of sustainability reports. After indicators measuring the environmental pillar of sustainability, social indicators like diversity of the staff, inclusive leadership, and representational fairness are increasingly included in ESG narratives (Ferlito & Faraci, 2022; Sørensen & Noonan, 2022).

Despite the spectacular reports, conflicts usually stem from the fact that the reality of corporate decision-making behind the scenes is less transparent. Disney’s princesses’ symbolic inclusion does not always reflect in fair systems inside creative leadership, executive decision-making, or production equity. As Noseworthy-Roberts (2016) states, industries driven by branding and consumer perception always carry an increasing risk of “*performative diversity*,”

in which case consumers judge based on the visible diversity performance and not on the real, structural inclusion at the company.

This ambivalence of DEIA as an ethical imperative and marketing tool is called “*equity-washing*,” whereby companies report progressive values without a real change in the internal hierarchies. Although the stories developed through characters like Moana or Encanto show real attempts to interact with disadvantaged voices, their success in sustainability depends on whether they are backed by long-term investments of The Walt Disney Company, e.g. in inclusive talent management, or governance-related sustainability measures. Progressive storytelling must be paired with progressive measures if the company would like to take sustainability seriously as a corporate value (Elsawy, 2024; Ferlito & Faraci, 2022; Jiménez-Morales & Lopera-Mármol, 2022).

Moreover, we must consider that the worldwide broadcasting of these stories and their acceptance may be very different in several cultures. Operating as a worldwide, dominant provider of children’s media, The Walt Disney Company’s decisions on character identification, thematic focus, and even language translation have a large impact. The standardising of inclusive narratives has the risk that it contributes to the creation of exportable clichés. Instead of contributing to a better understanding and acceptance of cultural diversity, it flattens cultural differences. Here the role of global initiatives related to DEIA is also important as it can help to find the balance between universal human rights frameworks and culturally specific understandings of identity, gender, and equity.

In summary, there has been a major shift in the types of role models inspiring young people around the world, including the Disney princess’s transformation from passive and Eurocentric beauty (*waiting to be rescued*) to a culturally diverse, self-determining everyday hero (*fighting for others*). In addition, we can witness a growing pressure on businesses to reflect their values in ways which are both narratively compelling and visible. For media experts and scholars, sustainability in the entertainment industry can be viewed from both an operational infrastructural point and the narrative responsibility perspective (Vaughan & Käätä, 2022). In this context, storytelling is a powerful tool which can shape public opinion or even openness towards DEIA issues.

## **Conclusion**

In this study, we focused on the development of The Walt Disney Company’s princess character brand, especially how Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) is implemented within the global entertainment company. The results show that DEIA has evolved to a key component of sustainability activities. The main drivers are consumers, who provide feedback on the shows, and, secondly, stakeholders, who demand more ethical behaviour from businesses in both their operations and the stories they tell the audience.

From their early portrayals to their culturally diverse, independent heroines, The Walt Disney Company made a long journey in social responsibility issues. However, until the 2010s, this evolution has been mostly narrative, with little systemic change in terms of production equity, leadership diversity, or institutional practices. The study drew attention to the danger of equity-washing, which – similarly to greenwashing – occurs when consumers are shown the image of a responsible and inclusive corporation without real changes in internal power structures or the adoption of inclusive leadership practices.

We also pointed out that inclusive narratives must be handled carefully as they become more worldwide. In the case of The Walt Disney Company, where the content reaches billions of viewers globally, a careful balance must be maintained between stories that are accessible to all, reflect the diversity and inclusivity of our cultures, without risking cultural reductionism or stereotyping. In the future, it will become more and more important to recognise the social impact of media representational innovations. Global leaders of the film and entertainment

industry shall combine their inclusive storytelling with sustained investment in equitable governance and impactful DEIA actions. Combining these can be an effective strategy for achieving the SDG 5 and SDG 10 goals. The entertainment sector has the unique ability and duty to serve as a role model for inclusive futures.

DEIA must be established in both the content and the methods – as well as in the people – of production for this approach to be believable and long-lasting. Stakeholder interviews or cross-studio comparisons could be added to this inquiry in future research to further assess institutional commitment and systemic change.

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