

# SM2030 PROJECT



## A LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF EARLY-CAREER AMERICAN STAGE MANAGERS

The SM2030 Project, in connection with 2020 being recognized as the Year of the Stage Manager, is a new research project focusing on how American stage managers begin their careers. It is a ten-year longitudinal study that will follow a group of individuals from the same starting point: graduation from college. The goal of the SM2030 Project is to identify the impact of career preparations such as education and training while also identifying early-career obstacles, particularly those that may be different from challenges faced by previous generations of American stage managers. This study was begun just before COVID-19 had widespread impact in the United States, so it may also serve as a baseline of expectations prior to the pandemic and industry changes in the aftermath.

The initial study was conducted in February 2020 with an online survey of undergraduate students graduating from an American college or university in Spring or Summer 2020 who intended to pursue a career in stage management. An undergraduate degree is not a requirement for a career in stage management. This milestone was selected, however, as a means of selecting test subjects who were all at the same point in their careers. February was selected for the data collection as participants were unlikely to have already confirmed their post-graduation employment and/or graduate school.

Over the month of February, 119 participants began the study. Nine participants did not answer more than the initial consent agreement and two others were deemed ineligible as they were current graduate students. Another 4 participants withdrew prior to completing at least 20% of the survey: their responses appear in this report but they did not advance far enough to become part of the longitudinal study group. The general size of this study is therefore 104 participants but for any specific question, the number of responses will be presented as "n=x" where x is the number of participants who answered that question. For example, 105 survey participants answered the question "When did you first discover stage management?" so "n=105" will appear next to that figure.

Several data points in this study will be compared to identical questions asked in the 2019 Stage Manager Survey (1,746 participants, report available at <http://smsurvey.info>, hereby referenced as "Main Survey") to determine how this newest group of American stage managers differs from a broader sampling of the profession. These comparisons will be made by response percentages but will include the number of responses from each group for the question.

It can be very difficult to reach a broad range of participants who are just beginning a career, even through targeted advertisements on search engines and social media. I would like to thank the Stage Managers' Association, *Stage Directions Magazine*, and Amanda Spooner, organizer of the Year of the Stage Manager, as well as many colleagues who promoted the this study among their students and networks. Stage management is a very challenging career and we all want to prepare the next generation as best as we can. My hope is that this study will reveal reveal obstacles that can be removed and allow current stage managers to learn from the newest members of our profession.

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<http://smsurvey.info>

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# PART I: DEMOGRAPHICS

Survey participants reside in 27 states [Figure 1]. Half of the participants (n=104) plan to return to their home state to look for work in their first year after college, while 36% plan to look elsewhere and 14% had not yet decided whether to return home. Participants were also asked to identify their undergraduate degree [Figure 2]. If they earned one more one degree, participants were asked which one most aligned with their stage management career path.

Figure 1: State of Residence

(n=106)

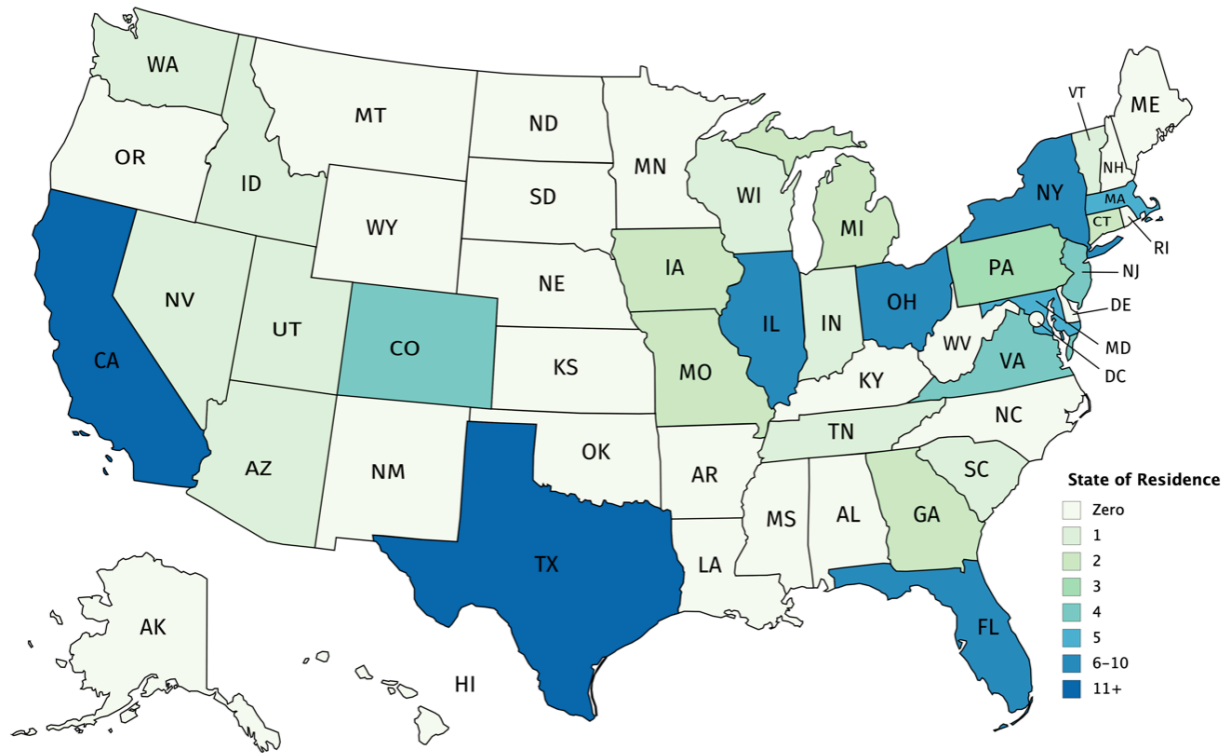


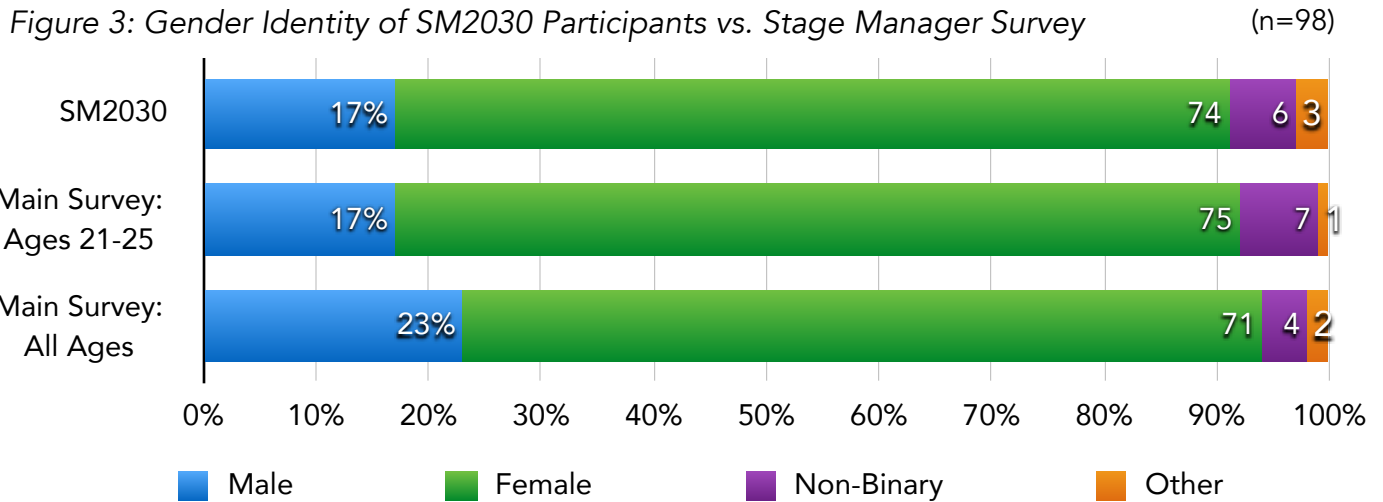
Figure 2: Undergraduate Degree

(n=100)



Other degrees included AS and BA degrees in Technical Theatre, a BT in Entertainment Technology, a BM in Performing Arts Management, a BS in Production Stage Management, and a BAA in Theatre. Nineteen earned a second major, the most popular choices being English (4), Psychology (3), and Arts Administration (2).

Participants were also asked to identify their gender to compare with the larger stage management community. **Figure 3** compares the SM2030 participants (n=98) to the main Stage Manager Survey segmented by ages 21-25 (n=332) and all ages (n=1388). The gender identity divisions among the national survey and the SM2030 project were nearly identical for the same age grouping.



A similar demographic comparison was made between SM2030 participants and the participants in the main Stage Manager Survey on race and ethnicity. **Figure 4** compares the two studies, listing the SM2030 responses (n=98) and both the total numbers for the national survey (n=1387) as well as the national survey segmented for ages 21-25 (n=312). Some participants chose to list more than one race or ethnicity.

*Figure 4: Race and Ethnicity* (n=98)

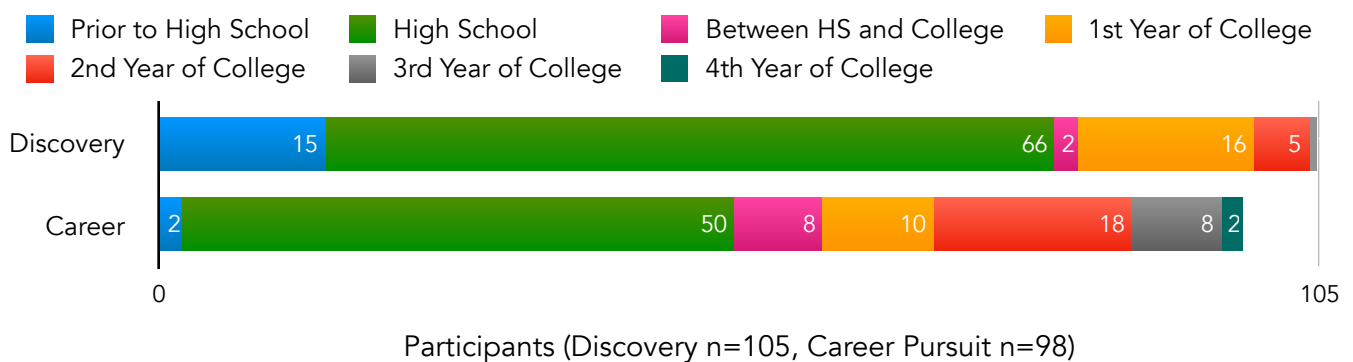
	White	Hispanic Latino(a)	Black/ African-American	Asian	Native American	Pacific Islander	Multi-racial	Other	Prefer Not to Answer
<b>SM2030</b>	80%	15%	5%	1%	0%	2%	1%	1%	3%
<b>National: Ages 21-25</b>	86%	11%	3%	5%	1%	0%	3%	0%	1%
<b>National: All Ages</b>	86%	6%	2%	4%	1%	0%	6%	1%	1%

Lastly, survey participants were asked whether they identified with having a disability. Among 98 responses, 10% of SM2030 participants identified having a disability, compared to 8% of the 1,389 responses received on the Main Survey.

## PART II: ACCESS TO STAGE MANAGEMENT

Perhaps the most significant find of the SM2030 Project was how early the study group discovered stage management and decided to pursue it as a career. Conventional wisdom has long held that stage management is one of the last areas of the performing arts that young people discover, well after the role more visible roles of performer, designer, and director/choreographer. But as **Figure 5** illustrates, the newest stage managers not only discovered the field and but also chose to pursue it as a career much earlier in their education than perhaps previous generations. The 2021 edition of Main Survey will ask this same question for comparison. It is unclear whether this earlier exposure was due to awareness campaigns by the field or greater exposure through video and social media.

Figure 5: Discovery of Stage Management and Decision to Pursue It as a Career



Could the fact that 79% of survey participants discovered stage management and 61% chose it as as their career prior to starting college be due to early exposure to the performing arts overall? **Figure 6** compares the SM2030 participants to the Main Survey in terms of access to the performing arts at a young age. While the SM2030 group did have some increased access compared to the larger Main Survey, the differences generally fall within the margin of error given the sample sizes. The primary exception is that 44% of the SM2030 group (n=105) had music classes (voice or instrument) outside of school, compared to 24% of the Main Survey participants (n=1444). This difference in music instruction does not appear to result in any significant changes in either comfort level or current level of training in reading music [**Figures 7 and 8**].

An obstacle that can prevent people from pursuing stage management is the relatively low pay of positions at the entry level for the profession, coupled with debt from the high costs of a college education. **Figure 9** shows the amount of debt carried by the SM2030 subject group while **Figure 10** provides information on their financial savings at the start of their careers. Finally, **Figure 11** compares the financial support that SM2030 participants expect to receive from family compared to the responses of what the Main Survey participants experienced at the start of their own careers.

Figure 6: Access to the Performing Arts as a Child (SM2030 n=105, Main Survey n=1444)

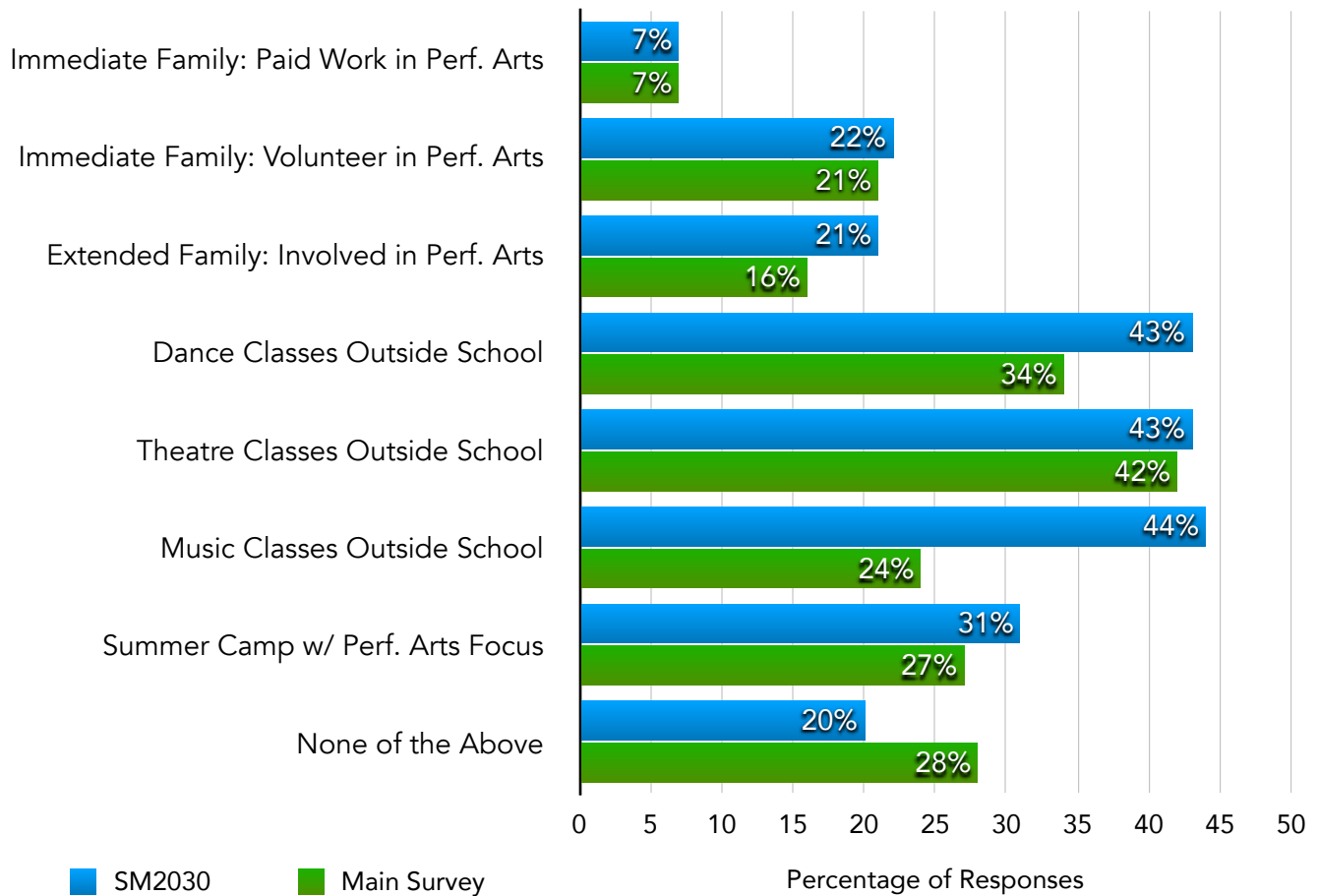


Figure 7: Comfort Level in Reading Music (SM2030 n=96, Main Survey n=1775)

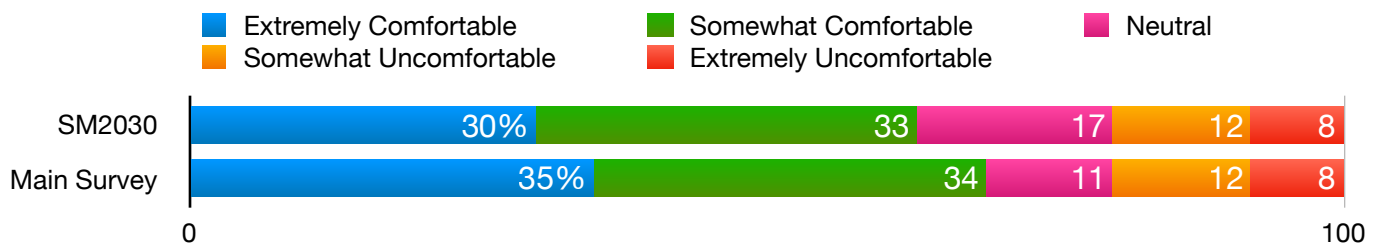


Figure 8: Training in Reading Music (SM2030 n=96, Main Survey n=1779)

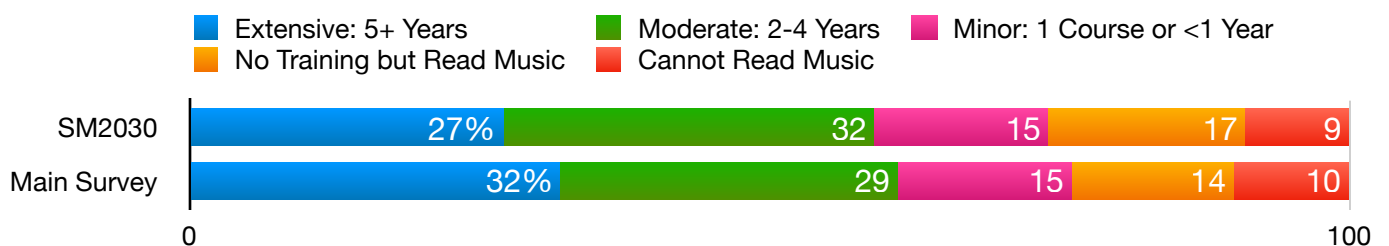


Figure 9: College Loans and Overall Debt

(n=92)

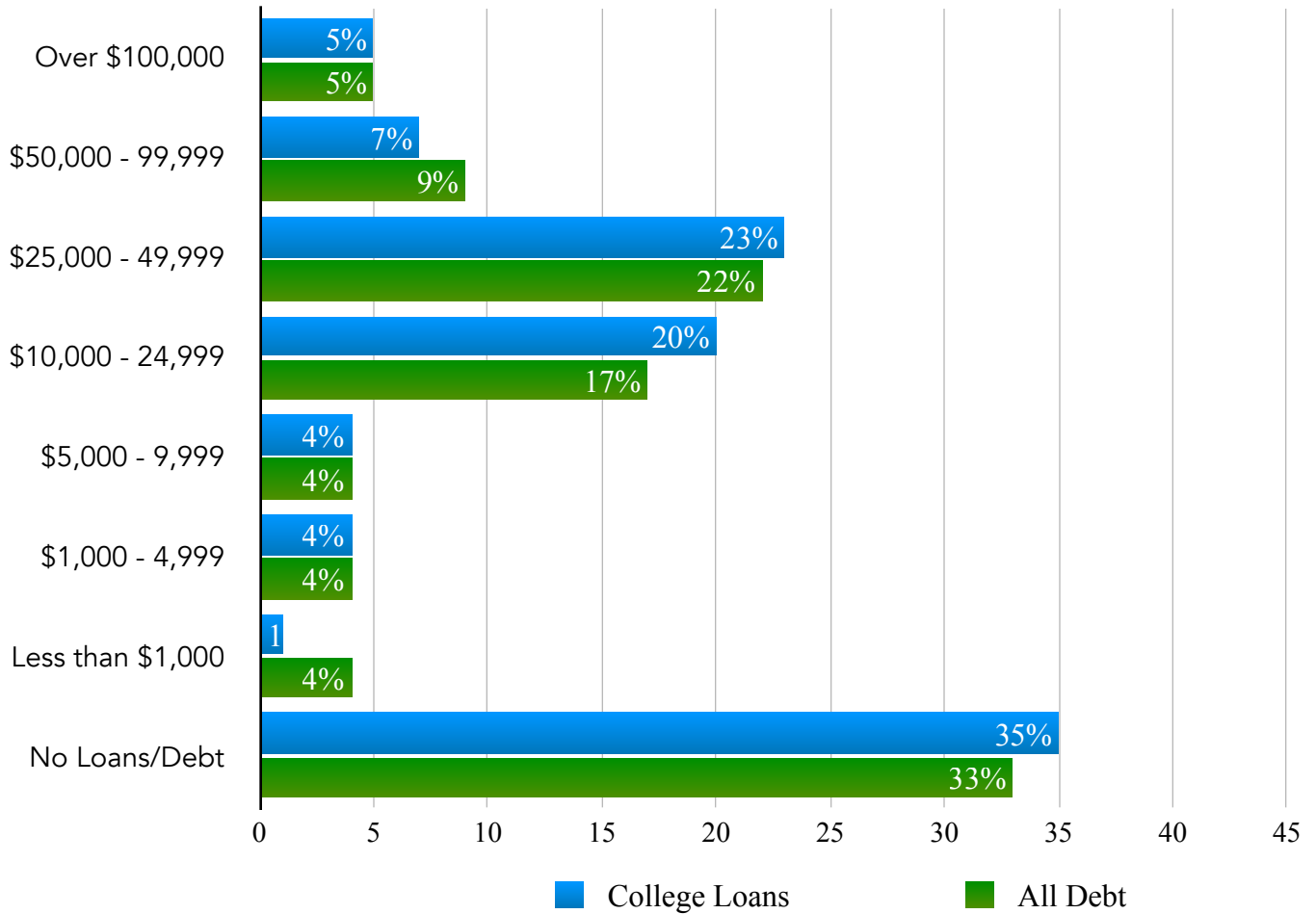


Figure 10: Personal Financial Savings

(n=92)

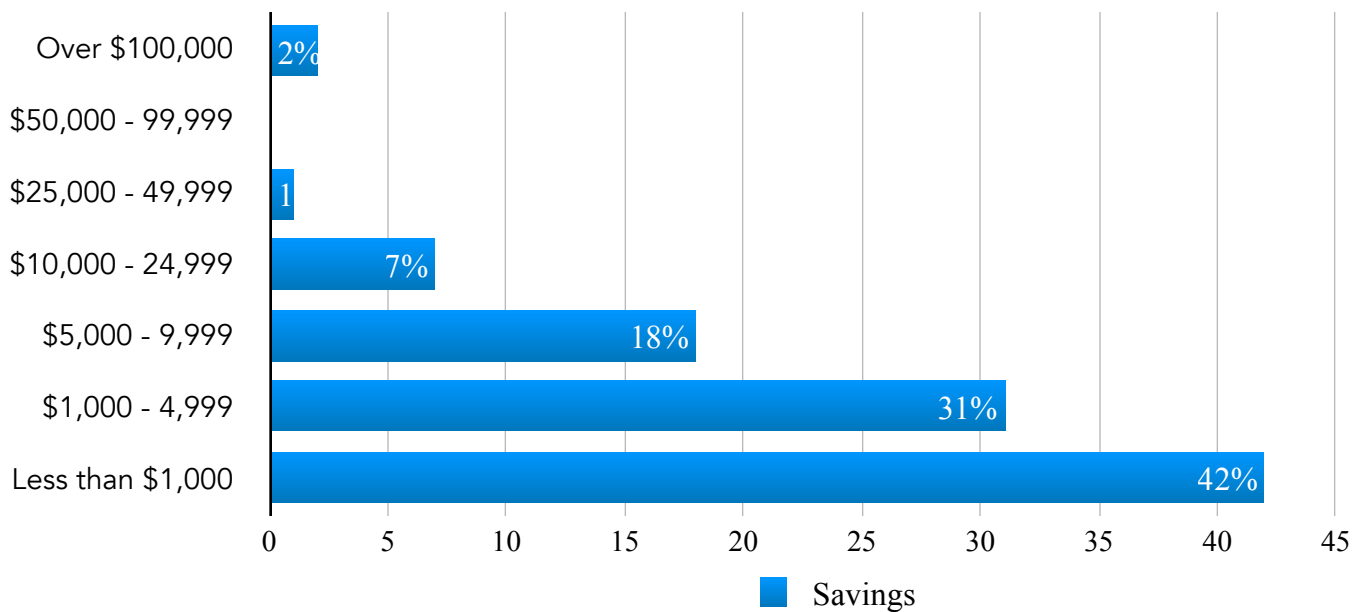
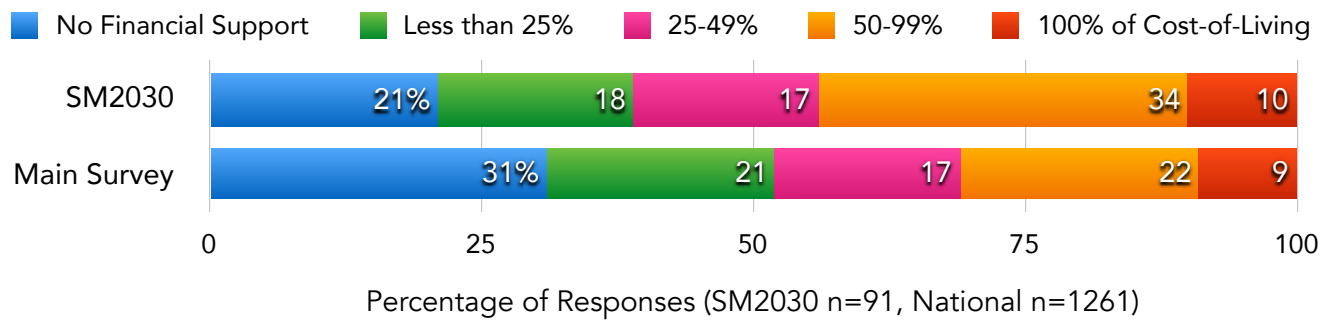


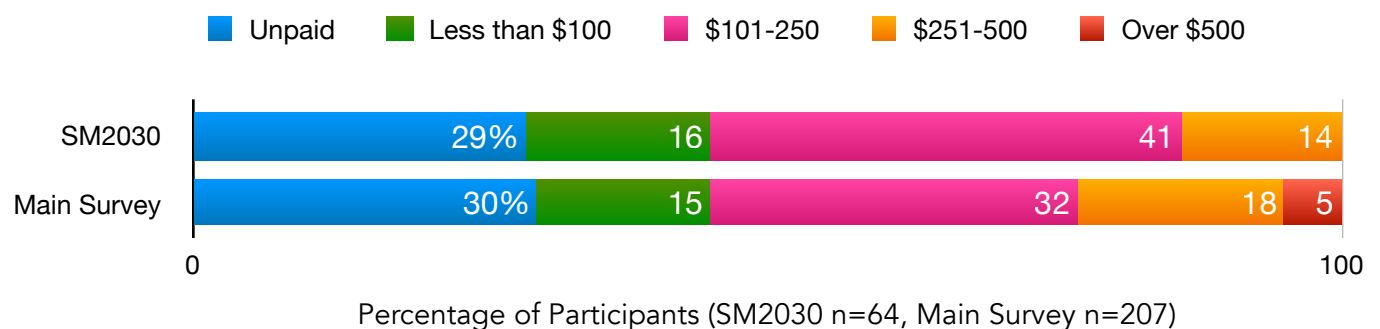
Figure 11: Financial Support at Start of Career



Among the SM2030 group, 44% expected in February that their families, spouses, and partners would provide at least half their cost of living for the first year of their careers. As noted before, these expectations may not be actualized in the aftermath of the global pandemic. Moreover, these expectations are significantly higher than the 31% of Main Survey participants who experienced family support of at least half their cost of living.

One last group of financial questions was posed to the SM2030 group regarding the internships they completed while enrolled students. Among 96 participants, 73% had served an apprentice or intern in the past two years. These 64 participants were generally paid less for their internships than the 207 participants who answered the identical question in the Main Survey. In addition, one SM2030 participant paid the producer to intern, compared to four Main Survey participants who reported paying for their internship experience. Only 11% of the SM2030 group received overtime pay for internships versus 16% of participants in the Main Survey.

Figure 12: Weekly Payment for Most Recent Internship/Apprenticeship



Nevertheless, 48% of the SM2030 participants thought that their internship compensation was fair, compared to 44% of the Main Survey. In addition, 57% of SM2030 participants found their internship to be “very useful,” compared to 43% of the Main Survey participants. In fact, none of the SM2030 participants found their internships to be only “slightly useful” or “not useful at all,” which was the response of 5% of the Main Survey.



## PART III: CAREER PREPARATION

Since the SM2030 Project is using the end of college as the launch point, several questions were asked about educational experiences. Only 68% of 100 participants had a faculty mentor or advisor who is a stage manager. Just as **Figure 2** indicated a wide range of undergraduate degrees, **Figure 13** shows a substantial difference in the number of stage management specific courses taken in college. Participants were instructed to not include design or management courses unless they were specifically created for stage managers. **Figure 14** indicates the number of academic productions that survey participants both served on the stage management team and served as the calling SM. **Figure 15** shows the interactions with professional stage managers that colleges provided.

Figure 13: Stage Management Courses in College (n=100)

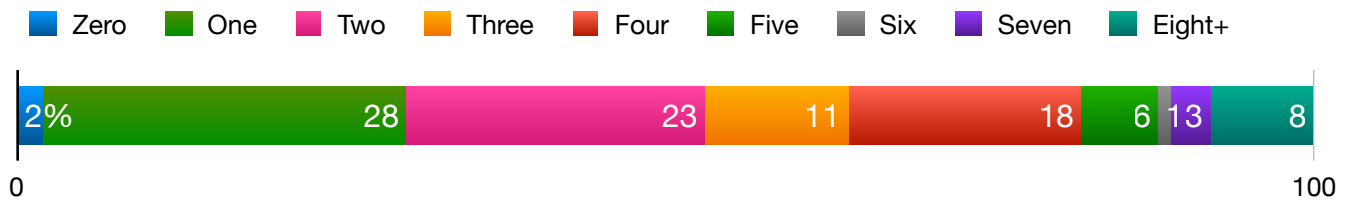


Figure 14: Experience on Academic Productions (n=100)

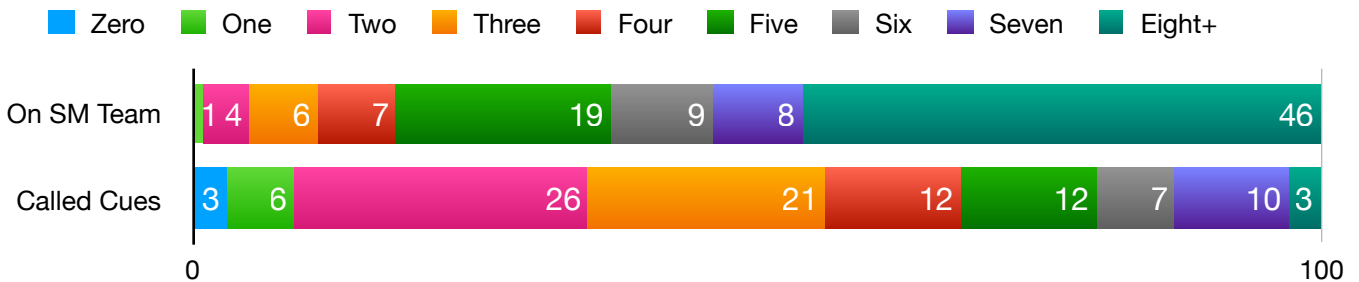
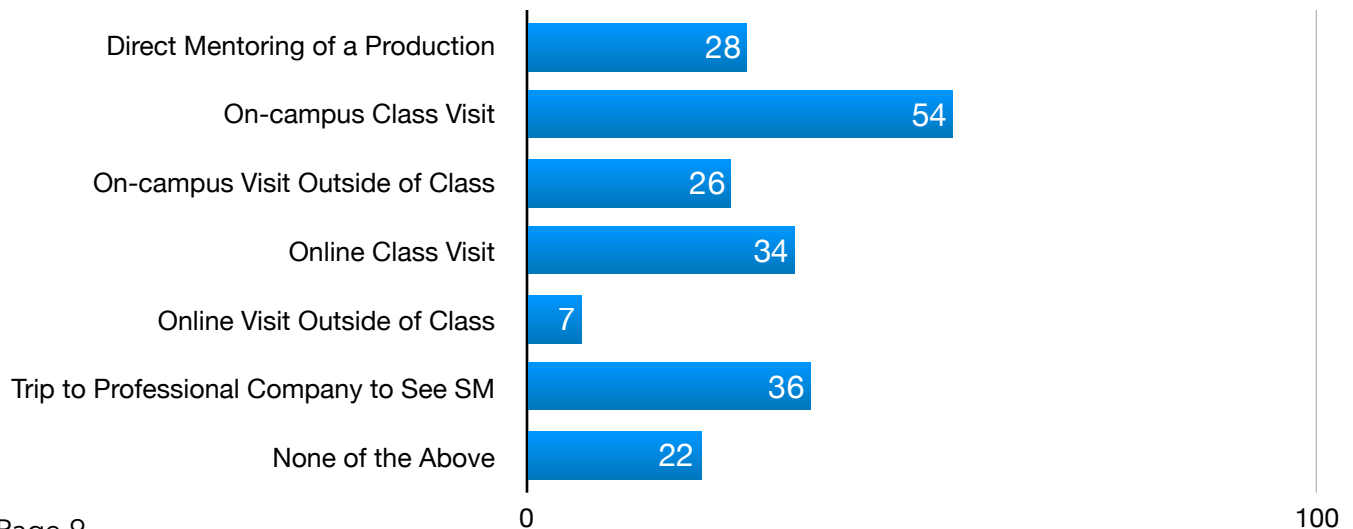
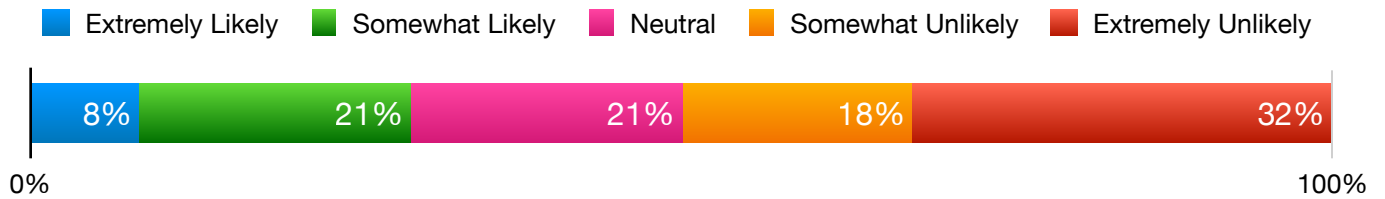


Figure 15: College-Provided Contact with Professional Stage Manager (n=100)



Graduate school was not on the minds of the SM2030 participants. Only 3 participants out of a 100 had applied to graduate school for Fall 2020 (at the time of the survey they had not yet learned admission status) and most did not have plans to return to school in the future.

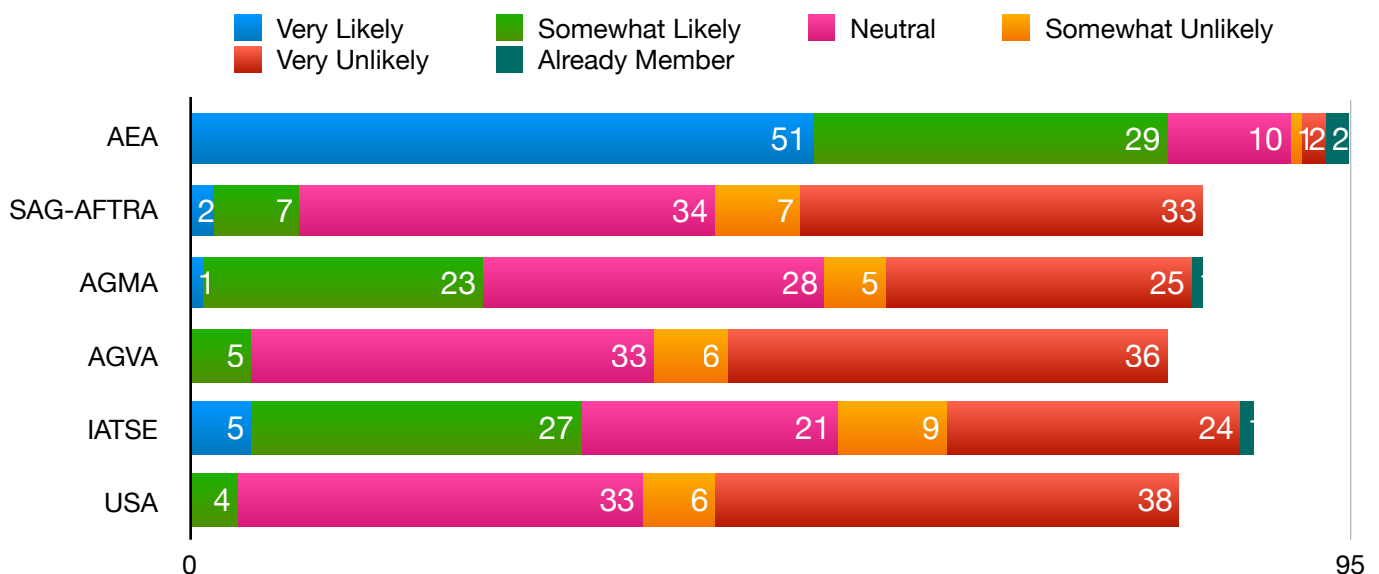
Figure 16: Likelihood of Applying to Graduate School for Stage Management (n=96)



The SM2030 group also attended a range of conferences. In fact, 23% of survey participants (n=98) had attended USITT and, among those who had not ever attended, 92% were aware of the conference. The KC/ACTF events were also well attended: 19% had attended an event and another 18% knew of classmates who had attended an event. While it was not possible to isolate each regional conference such as SETC, NETC, or ADF, 16% reported attending such an event.

Career preparation includes more than conferences and academic coursework and productions. In fact, over two-thirds of SM2030 participants (69% of 97 responses) have already worked as the SM or ASM on a paid job outside of internships or apprenticeships. Some have already joined a union: 2 are members of AEA, 1 is a member of AGMA, and 1 has joined IATSE. Another dozen participants have started earning Equity Membership Candidate points: six have fewer than 10 EMC points, four have 10-20 points, and two have more than 20 EMC points. **Figure 18** lists the interest level of SM2030 participants in joining a performing arts union.

Figure 17: Likelihood of Joining a Union in the Next Ten Years (n=95)

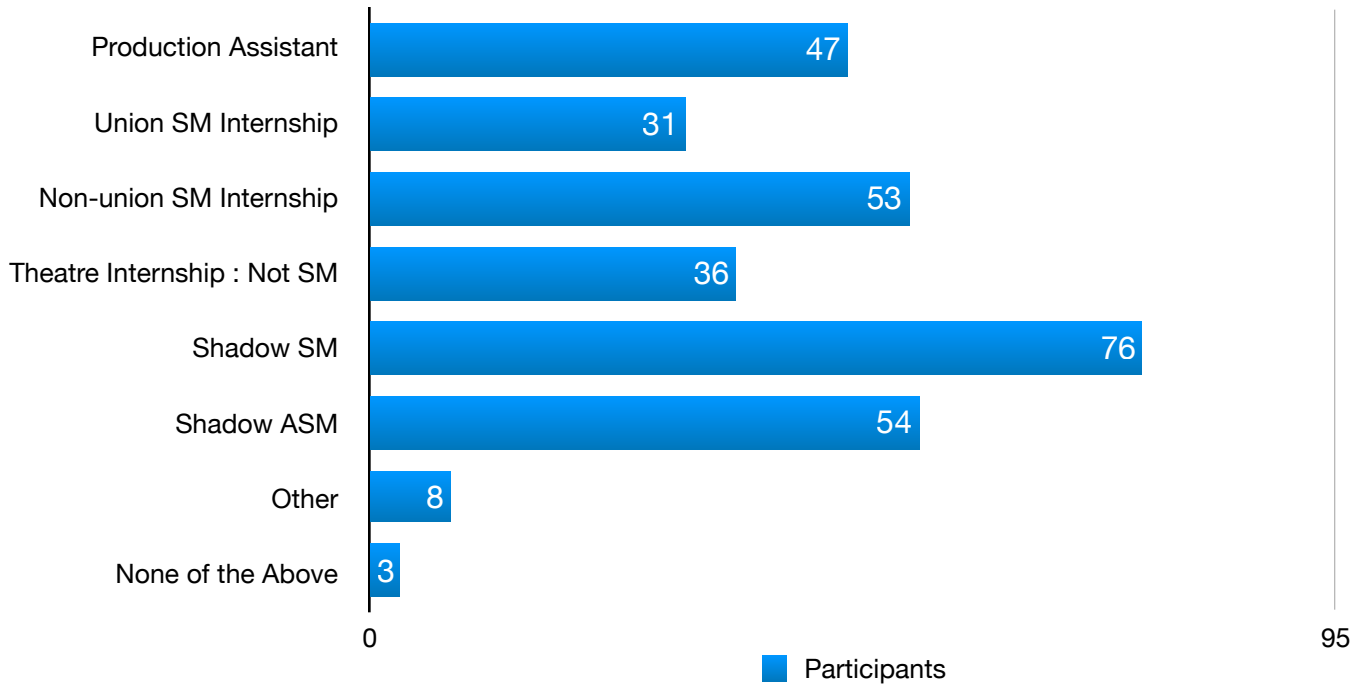


Participants. Some chose to not indicate a response for all unions.

While nearly every SM2030 Project participant noted some training in the field, the types of training varied and the only experience that a clear majority shared was shadowing a stage manager.

Figure 18: Training in the Field [Select All that Apply]

(n=95)

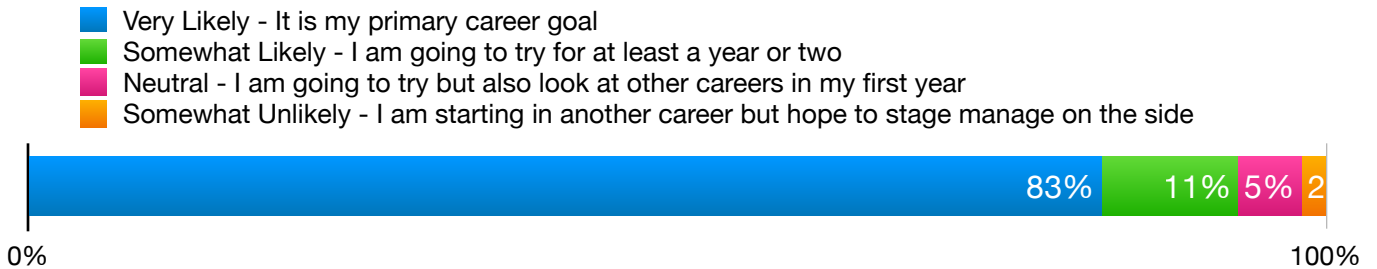


Non-SM Internships: Production (4), Properties Design, Production Management, Development, Electrics, Scenic Painting, Costume

## PART IV: CAREER EXPECTATIONS

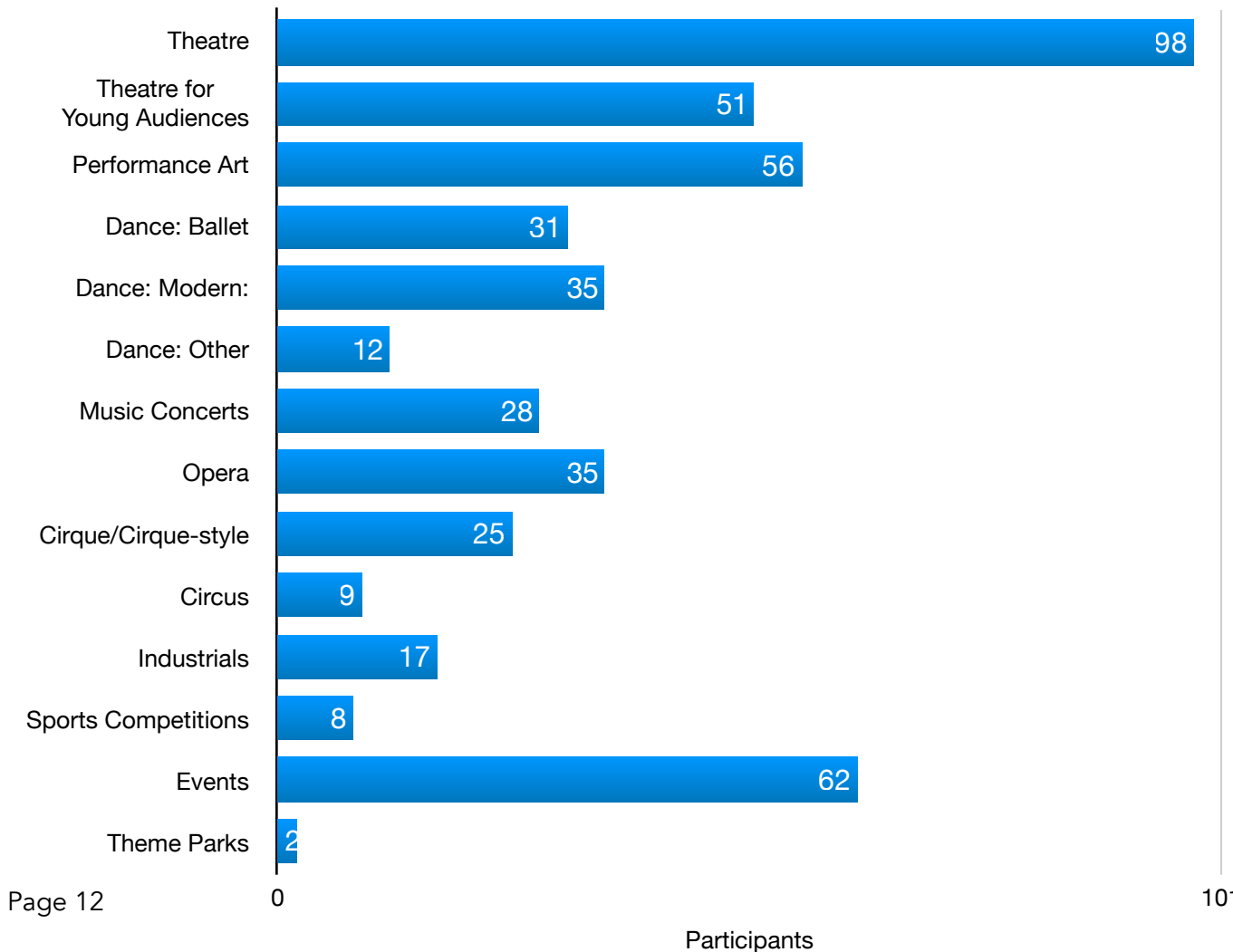
As could be expected, most survey participants are committed to a career in stage management.

Figure 19: Likelihood of Pursuing Stage Management as a Career (n=104)



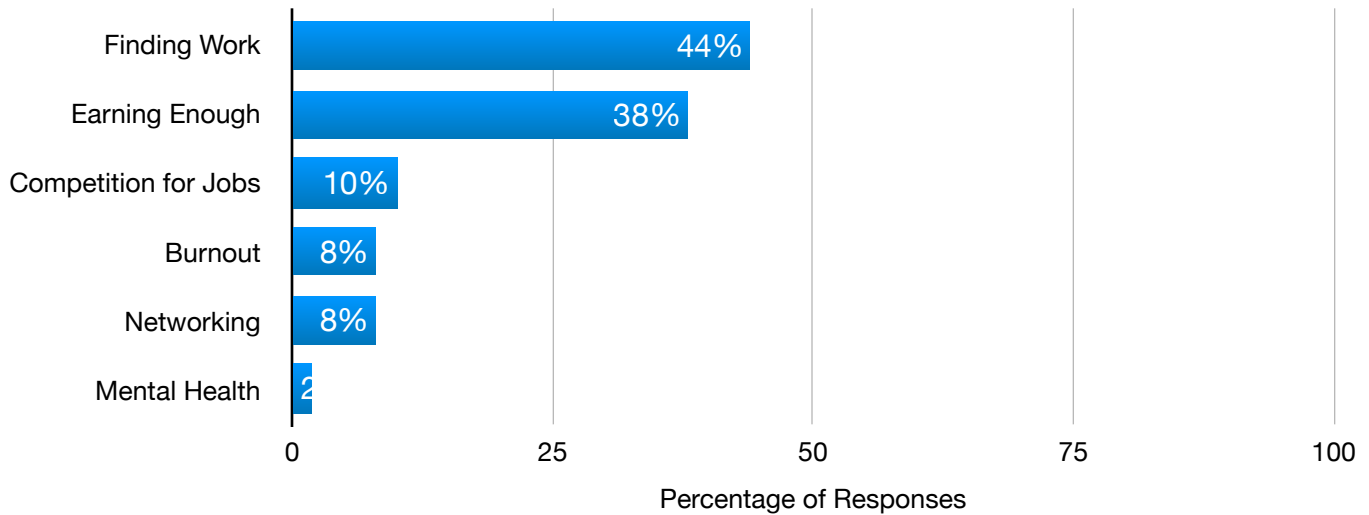
In contrast to this commitment, 48% of participants (n=91) are also pursuing work in a Performing Arts area other than stage management. The most popular areas are Production Management (9 responses), Event Management (5), Arts Administration (4), Electrics (4), and Scenic Art (4). Participants were also asked which arts disciplines/genres they want to work as a stage manager.

Figure 20: Preferred Arts Disciplines to Stage Manage [Select All that Apply] (n=101)



The SM2030 Project participants were asked their biggest concerns as they started their stage management careers. Ninety participants responded and some provided more than one concern.

Figure 21: Biggest Concern/Worry at Start of Stage Management Career (n=90)



Note: Responses were short essays that were coded by category of response.

As stated at the beginning of this report, this first survey was conducted before there was any major indications of the COVID-19 pandemic. The original plan was to conduct short follow-up surveys as the 1, 2, 4, 6, 8, and 10-year marks in the participant's careers with the goal of measuring expectations such as 77% expected to work on tour in the next ten years (n=91). But this project will also measure how the pandemic will slow or perhaps even halt careers. Few could have predicted that nearly all American performing arts would stop in Spring and Summer 2020. If these survey participants begin working in other fields, will they be able to return to careers in stage management? Will their debt, exacerbated by the pandemic, and lack of savings prevent them from taking low-paying positions that will advance their SM careers? The Class of 2020 may not be the typical sample group for a longitudinal study, but it is critical to see whether this group will be able to recover and pursue careers in the arts.

The first follow-up survey will be conducted in February 2021. The initial group of participants provided contact information and have been sent a confirmation email so that they can be reached for the next edition of the study. If you participated in the first study but did not receive a follow-up email, please contact [davidjmcgraw@sm-sim.com](mailto:davidjmcgraw@sm-sim.com) to confirm your email address. If you did not participate in this initial study but would like to follow this group, please join the SM2030 Project mailing list at <http://smsurvey.info> to receive the report of each subsequent survey.

It is the author's hope that this first study will help educators and mentors better prepare the next generation of stage managers. We can all learn from this generation and the unique challenges that they face.