

SM2030 PROJECT



A LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF EARLY-CAREER AMERICAN STAGE MANAGERS

The SM2030 Project is an ongoing longitudinal study which is following a group of American stage managers for ten years starting from college graduation. Participation in this study was limited to those who intended to pursue a career in stage management and would be graduating from an American college or university in Spring or Summer 2020. College graduation was selected as the common starting point not because it is a requirement for the profession but because it would place the participants at approximately the same point in their career trajectory. This research project has the unanticipated significance of following stage managers embarking on careers just as the COVID-19 halted the performing arts around the world; the initial survey took place in February 2020.

A total of 104 respondents participated in the 2020 survey (Year 0). A subset of 81 respondents agreed to participate in future editions of the study and provided their contact information. In February 2021 (Year 1), 56 stage managers of the original group participated in a follow-up survey. This response rate of nearly 70% was particularly remarkable as many performing arts venues in the United States had not fully returned to in-person operation. In March 2022 (Year 2), the original 81 participants who had provided contact information received invitations to take part in the third survey in the series: 55 stage managers participated in this 2022 survey.

Not all participants answered every question; the note “n=___” indicates how many people answered that specific question. This report compares some responses directly to the reports for both 2020 and 2021. Please note that these comparisons are by percentage of responses and that this year’s participants are a subset of the original 104 participants. Moreover, several data points in this study will be compared to identical questions asked in the 2021 Stage Manager Survey (1,449 participants including 1,163 participants working in the United States). This report is available at <http://smsurvey.info> and will be referenced as “2021 SM Survey” for comparisons. Comparisons with the larger 2021 SM Survey, which may include some of the SM2030 Project participants, will be made by response percentage; each table or figure will include the number of responses from each group for the question.

I am very grateful to the 55 participants who chose to continue participating in this study despite the trauma caused by the global pandemic, the domestic turmoil of the Performing Arts field struggling to address its history of systemic racism, and - for many participants - a decision to no longer pursue stage management as a career. The goal of this study is to identify the impact of career preparations and career obstacles and the Class of 2020 has experienced no shortage of the latter.

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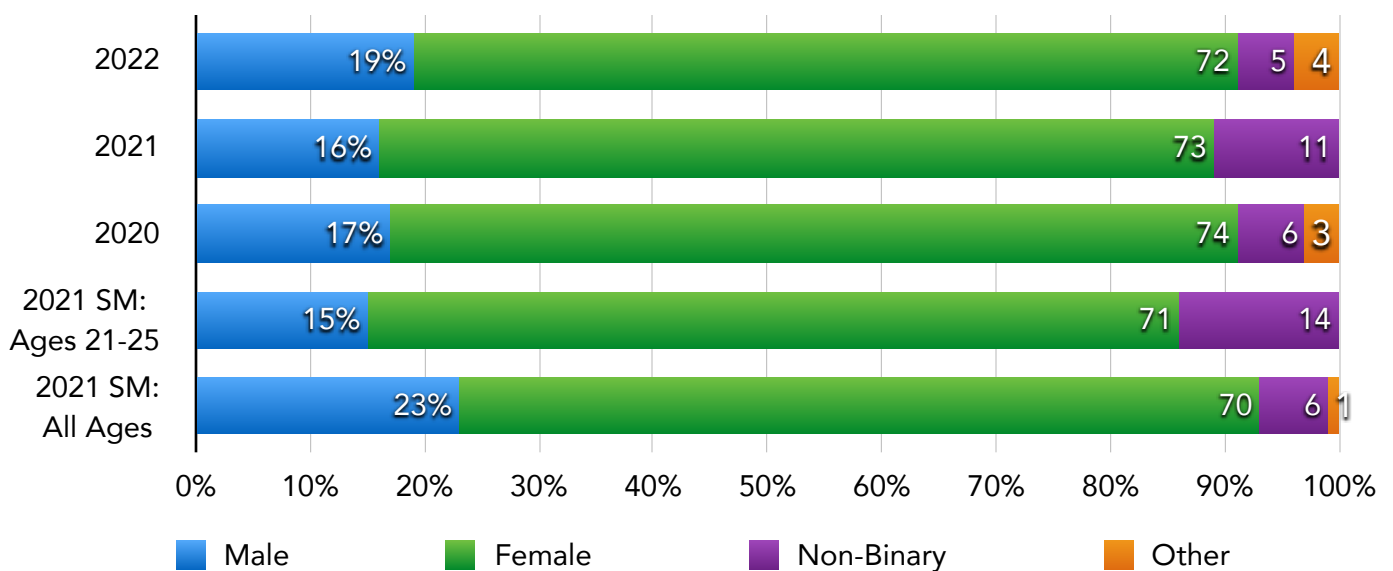
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PART I: DEMOGRAPHICS

Despite the relatively small number of participants, this longitudinal study provides something that larger industry surveys cannot: the tracking of experiences and viewpoints of a consistent group over time. But it should be acknowledged that only 55 of the original 104 participated in 2022. Each edition of the SM2030 project includes demographic questions to both confirm the survey is representing everyone and to see if certain identities are more likely to leave the field.

The gender identity of participants has remained relatively constant over the past two years. **Figure 1** compares the 2020 (n=53), 2021 (n=56) and 2020 (n=98) participants, as well as the 2021 SM Survey segmented by ages 21-25 (n=259) and all ages (n=1226). The SM2030 study offered additional "Other" gender identities whereas the 2021 SM Survey only offered the singular "Another identity."

Figure 1: Gender Identity of SM2030 Participants



Participants were asked whether they identified as having a disability. Among 98 responses in 2020, 10% identified as having a disability. Among 56 responses in 2021, 7% identified as having a disability and 3% chose "Prefer Not to Answer." From the 53 responses received in 2022, 8% indicated they had a disability and 6% selected "Prefer Not to Answer." Given the sample sizes, these numbers have been relatively consistent in year-to-year comparisons.

SM2030 participants also identified their race and ethnicity using the categories defined by the US Census. These Census categories are problematic and incomplete - they do not reflect the full range of racial and ethnic identities - but they are presently the best way to compare stage managers to the larger population. **Figure 2** compares the three SM2030 studies (2022 n=53, 2021 n=56, 2020 n=98) and both the total numbers for the 2021 US survey (n=957) as well as the national survey segmented for ages 21-25 (n=213). Some participants chose to list more than one race or ethnicity.

Figure 2: Race and Ethnicity

	White	Hispanic Latino(a)	Black/ African-American	Asian	Native American	Pacific Islander	Multi-racial	Other	Prefer Not to Answer
2022	79%	8%	4%	2%	2%	2%	4%	0%	0%
2021	80%	12%	2%	2%	0%	2%	3%	0%	2%
2020	80%	15%	5%	1%	0%	2%	1%	1%	3%
2019 SM: Ages 21-25	86%	11%	3%	5%	1%	0%	3%	0%	1%
2021 SM: All Ages	87%	6%	2%	4%	<1%	0%	6%	<1%	2%

Note: The US Census classifies Hispanic/Latino(a) as an ethnicity that could be combined with race. Totals per year could therefore exceed 100%.

Lastly, in terms of education, participants were asked if they had applied to graduate programs in stage management. In previous economic downturns, people starting careers delayed entry into the workforce while boosting their credentials and, in some fields, earning potential with a graduate degree. But the pandemic has not produced a surge in applications: only 3 in 50 participants had applied to graduate school in stage management in 2021 and none of the participants (n=42) had applied this year. One factor was that the majority of SM2030 participants earned a BFA or BA specifically in stage management, so a MFA may be perceived as less necessary. In fact, in 2022, the likelihood of applying to graduate school in the future dropped significantly: 40% were extremely unlikely, 20% were somewhat unlikely, and another 20% felt neutral about ever applying to graduate programs (n=40). Only 2.5% felt very likely to apply to graduate school in stage management. Future editions of the SM2030 Survey will inquire if participants are considering graduate school in studies other than stage management.

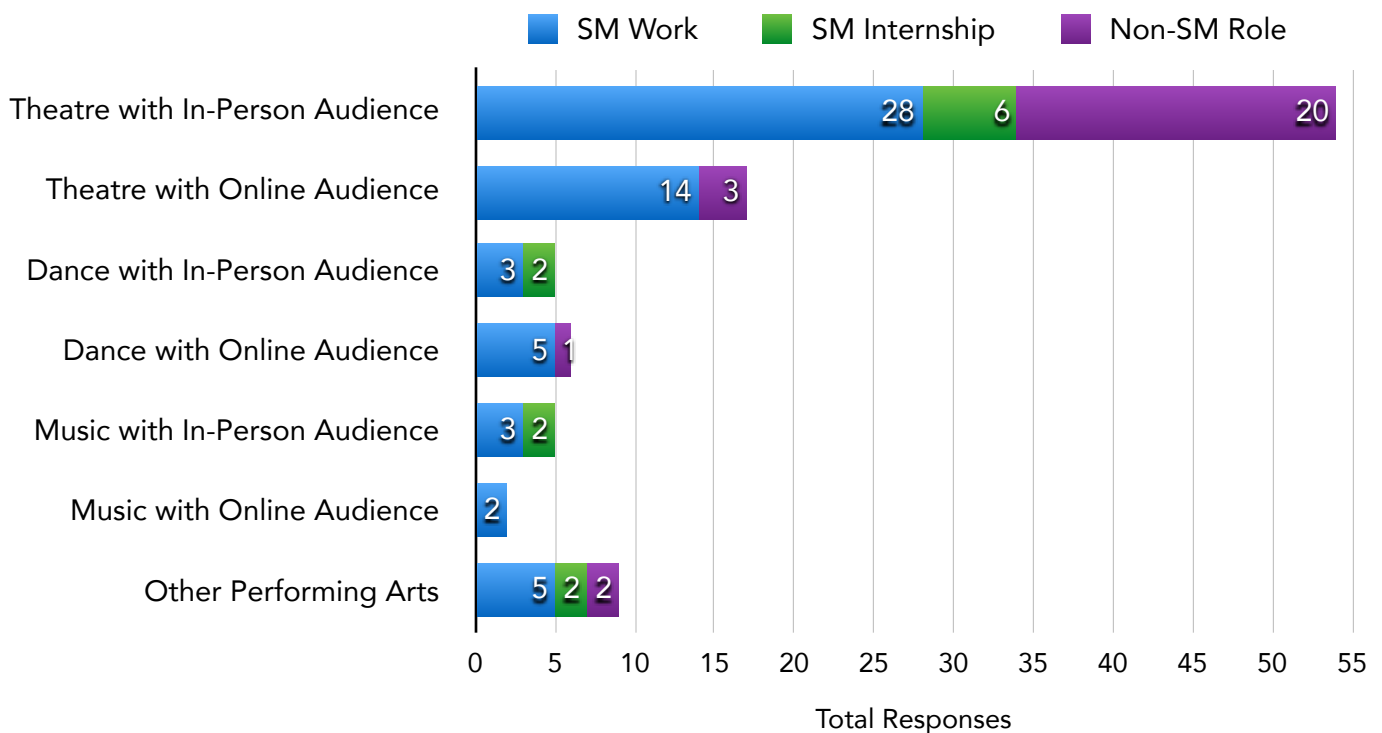
PART II: SECOND YEAR EXPERIENCES

The return of in-person performances has replaced the online jobs that participants held last year. In fact, when participants were asked whether they preferred in-person or online jobs (assuming the same pay, dates, co-workers, and employer), 91% preferred in-person work. In a separate question, only 1% of participants in March 2022 felt unsafe returning to in-person stage management projects.

Figure 3 shows both the performing arts genre and the type of position held from March 2021 through March 2022. The rates of internships have dropped in this second year post-graduation. Participants indicated all work in the past year, so it was possible to record both an internship and job in the same category.

(n=55)

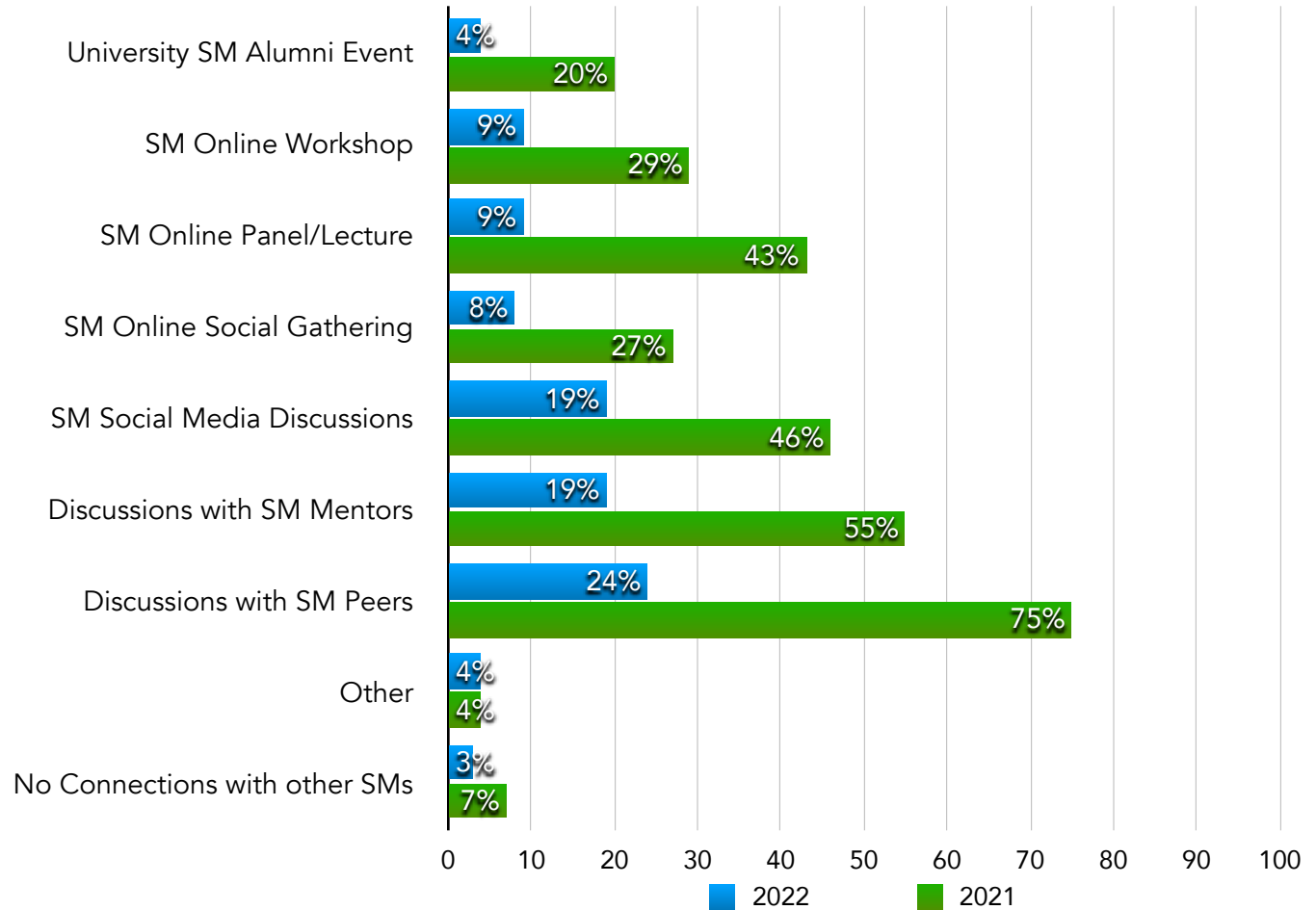
Figure 3: Work and Internships Since March 2021



The six participants who reported an internship were split evenly on internship compensation: a third earned \$100-250/week, another third earned \$251-500/week, and the final third more than \$500 per week. Half of the respondents also reported that the internship included housing and one received local transportation. Participants were divided 50/50 on whether this was fair compensation, but they all considered the internship valuable. Since these questions only applied to six individuals, readers are encouraged to reach the much larger 2021 SM Survey for a more complete view of internships.

Even when stage managers find work and/or internships, it can be difficult to stay connected to the larger SM community. **Figure 4** illustrates the points of connection made by SM2030 participants.

Figure 4: Connections with Other SMs Since Graduation



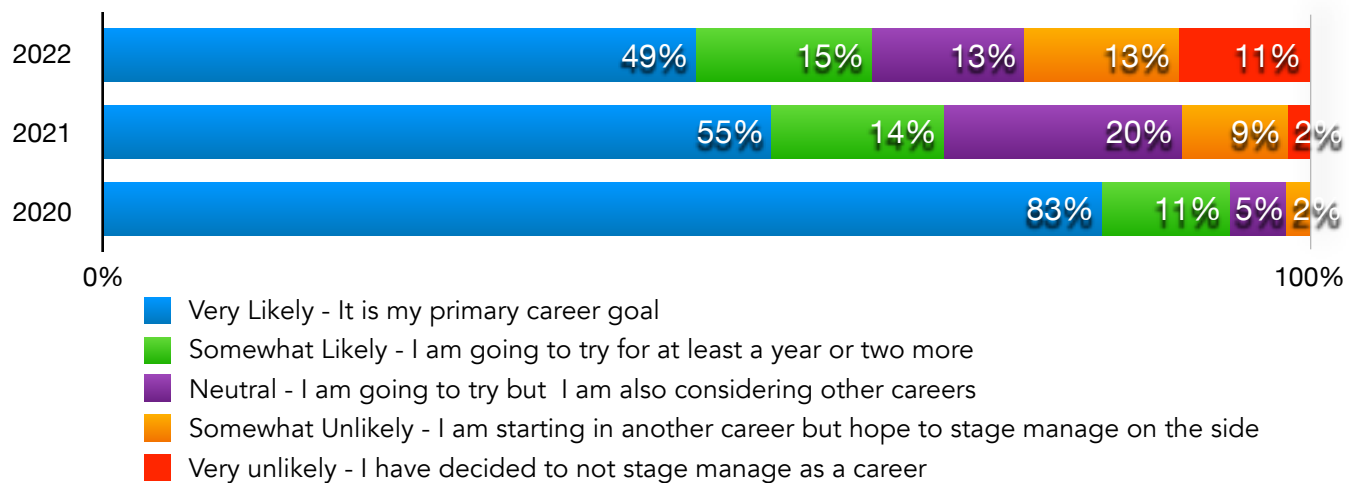
The data in Figure 4 is surprising on two fronts. First, survey participants reported much less engagement in all of the listed connection points in 2022. It could be expected that online engagement would be down after it spiked in the early days of the pandemic. But even discussions with mentors and peers decreased, whether online or in-person. Given this information, the second surprise is that the percentage of participants who reported “No Connections with other SMs” did not increase. It could be that participants remained connected but used fewer channels to do so. This conjecture is supported by a separate question that asked how connected participants felt to the stage management community. In 2021, 39% reported feeling disconnected, but in 2022, only 33% reported this disconnect. So despite fewer reported engagements, the level of isolation has not increased.

Every participant who indicated that they felt strongly connected to the stage management community reported having a stage management mentor. Last year, a quarter of respondents had a mentor and another 53% were actively seeking one. This year 51% reported having a mentor and another 31% is searching for one. One-on-one mentorship may be the solution to remaining connected to the overall community.

PART III: LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

As we emerge from the pandemic, the Class of 2020 has developed a clearer view of their future, including whether it includes stage management. Figure 5 compares 2022 (n=55) to 2021 (n=56) and 2020 (n=104) regarding whether participants believe they will pursue stage management as a career.

Figure 5: Likelihood of Pursuing Stage Management as a Career



A related question asked participants in which field they are searching for future work: while 64% are searching for jobs in stage management, 15% are pursuing other performing arts positions and 21% are searching outside of the performing arts. The most cited positions in the performing arts outside of stage management were arts administration, production management, and directing. Other fields of employment included education, law, hospitality, and human resource management.

Perhaps the biggest surprise of the 2022 edition of this study is the marked improvements in participant finances. **Figure 6** shows the current level of financial support participants have from their families/spouses/partners: participants have indicated greater financial independence, in part to improved personal savings (**Figure 7**); college loans (**Figure 8**) and overall debt (**Figure 9**).

Figure 6: Financial Support at Start of Career (2022 n=53, 2021 n=56, 2020 n=91, 2021 SM=151)

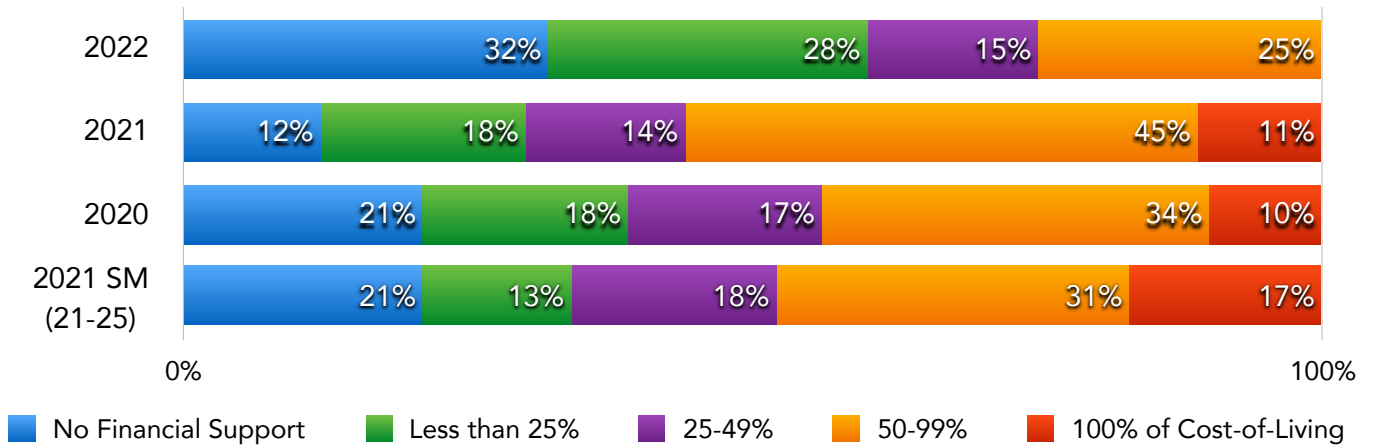


Figure 7: Personal Financial Savings (2022 n=53, 2021 n=56, 2020 n=92)

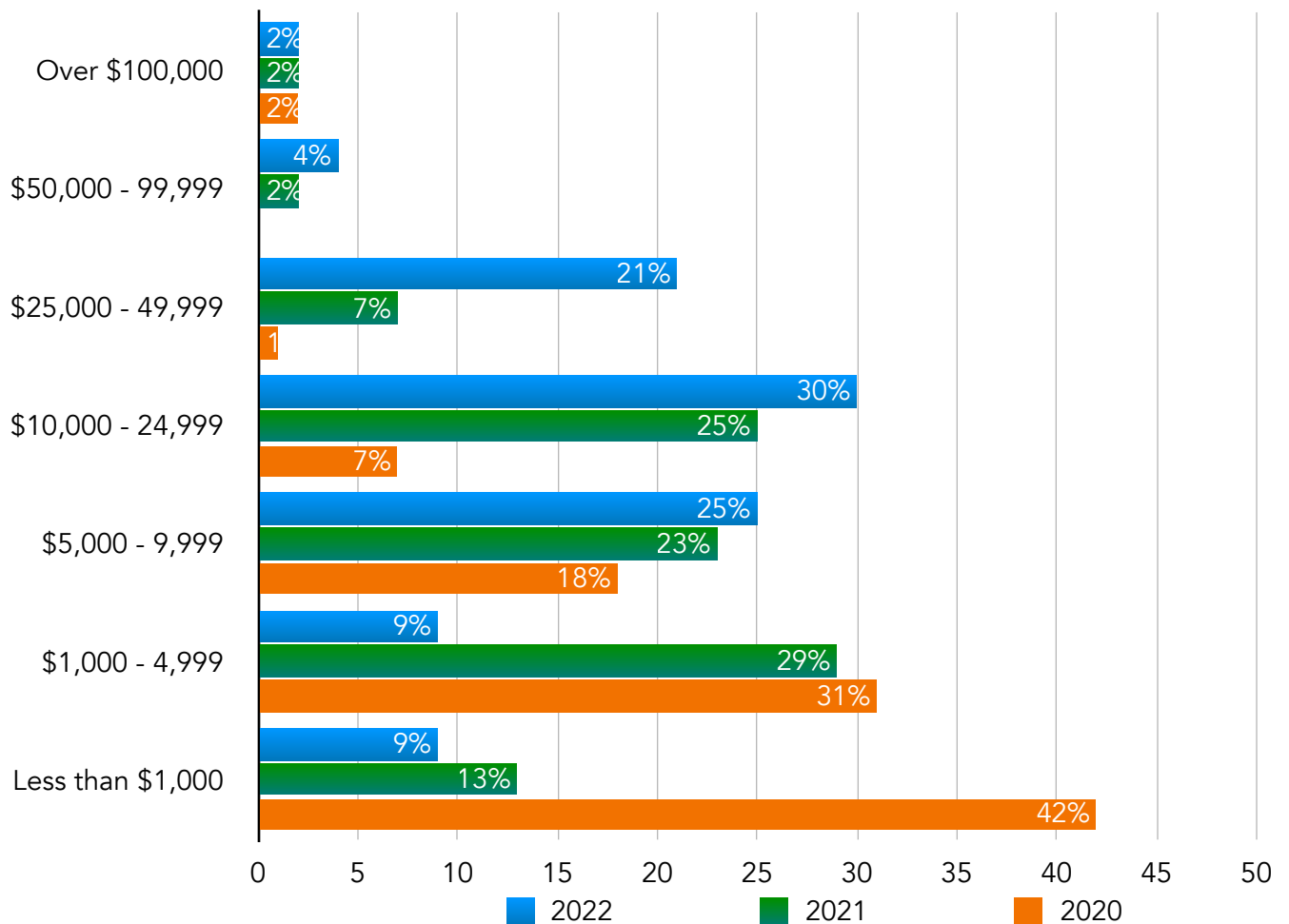


Figure 8: College Loans

(2022 n=53, 2021 n=56, 2020 n=92)

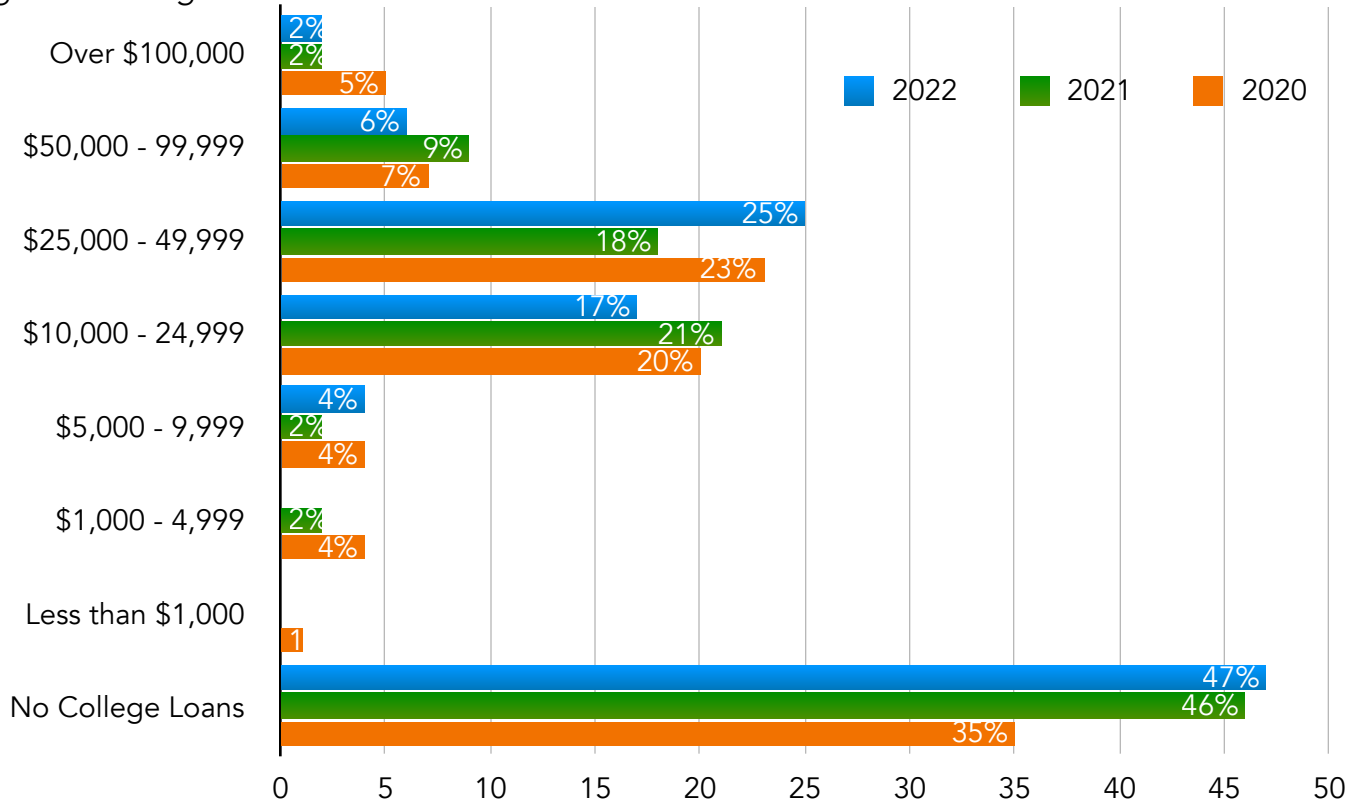
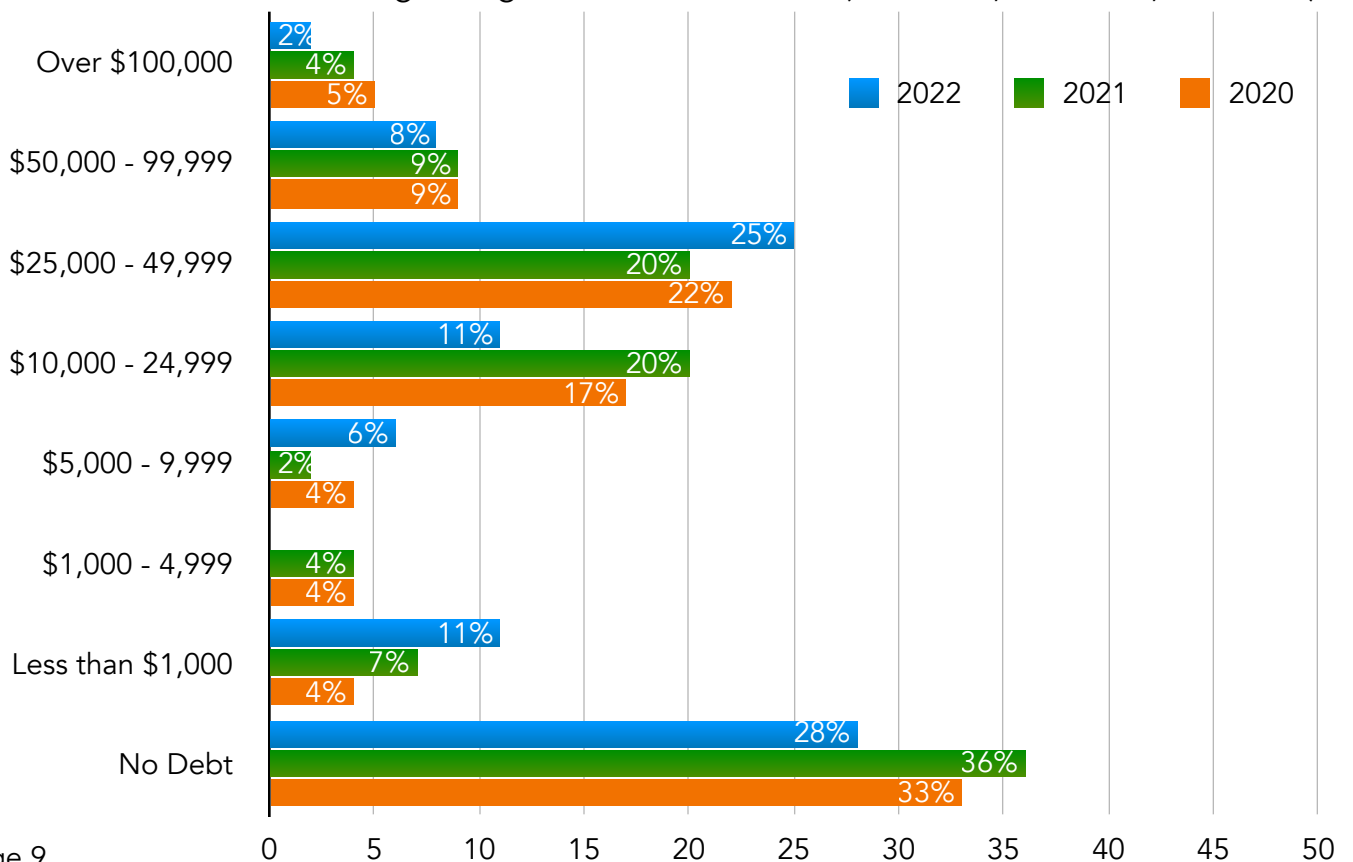


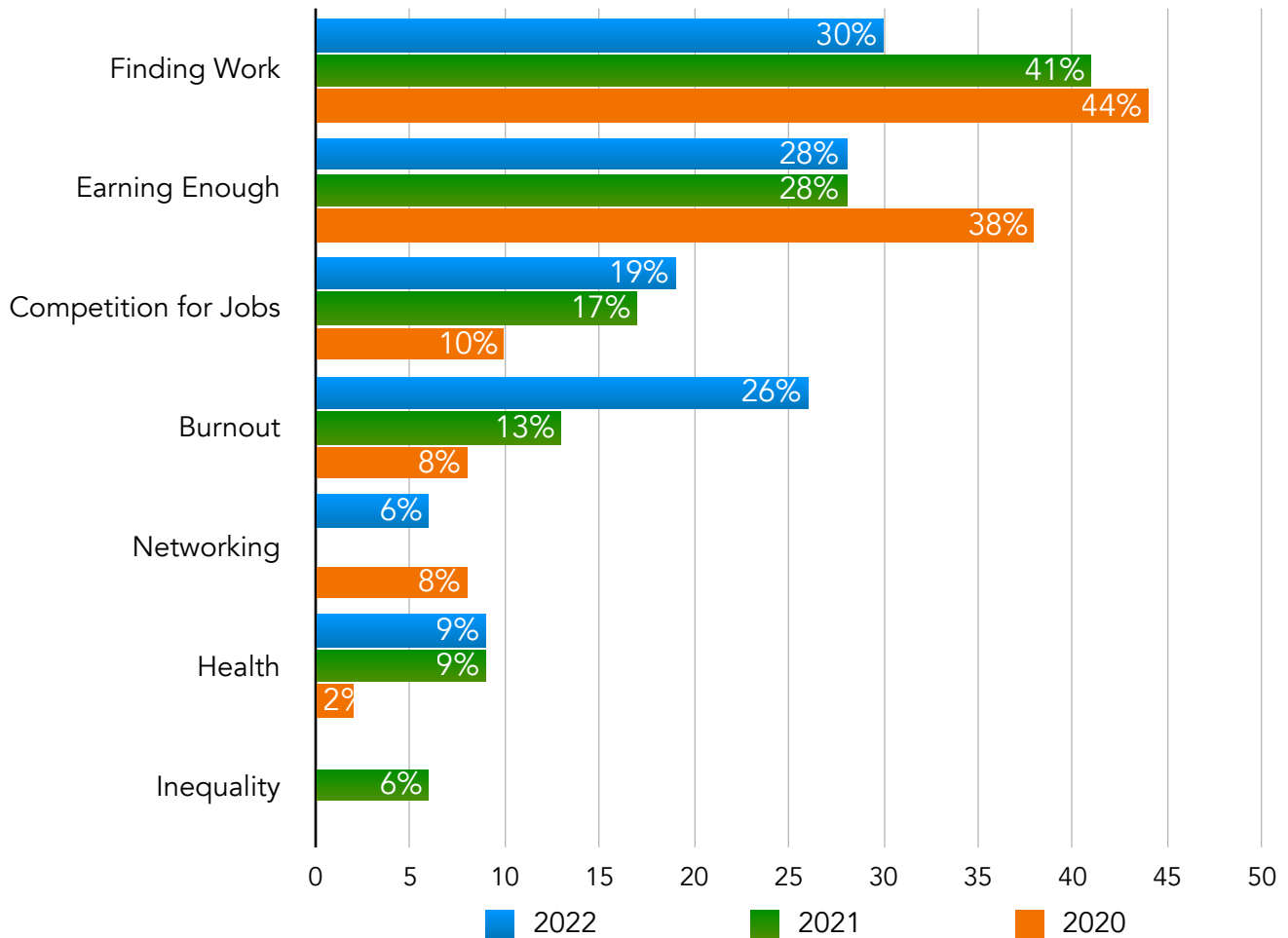
Figure 9: Overall Debt Including College Loans

(2022 n=53, 2021 n=56, 2020 n=92)



The final question was, "What is your biggest question or concern about stage management as a profession?" Some listed more than one concern; responses were coded into categories.

Figure 10: Biggest Question or Concern (2022 n=54, 2021 n=54, 2020 n=90)



As seen in Figure 10, finding work remains the top concern but burnout is already the second most cited concern in just two years after graduation. In 2021, a category was added for the systemic inequalities of the workplace and the profession, but no participant listed such a concern in 2022. Some concerns could not be narrowly categorized:

- I'm concerned about the lack of livable pay and long hours, especially in the realm of theatre which seems to pay so much less than its counterparts (ex// dance or opera). It's hard to take free time or days off as actual periods of rest when there is so much to do in so little time. Even when theaters encourage not working outside of the office, it hurts me as a member of the stage management team to set those boundaries, which makes it hard to keep them. I know a lot of people who burn out and it doesn't always feel like the work is equally compensated for.

- ...I've noticed that at least in the touring world that I am currently a part of... there is a large personnel shortage. Stage managers and crew members are being poached by other companies left and right, and I'm assuming it's because of the impact of people leaving the workforce after the pandemic. If I had to turn it into a question, it would be whether or not a mindset shift will now occur since many people who were once a part of the workforce have now left and what implication does that have on the younger generation of theatre makers.

Two years into their careers, 64% of the respondents are still prioritizing work in stage management. Overall, financial conditions have improved, but many of those fiscal gains were due to work outside of the profession. For those working in stage management, burnout is already looming large on the horizon. What did stage management and our industry learn from the "extended intermission" of the pandemic?

The next edition of the SM2030 Project will be in March 2024 as the study continues in two-year intervals until its close in 2030. If you participated in the 2020 study but did not receive an invitation to the 2022 study, please contact davidjmcgraw@sm-sim.com to update your email address. If you would like to be notified of future reports, please visit <http://smsurvey.info> and join the SM2030 Project mailing list.

It is the author's hope that this study will provide consolation to those facing career obstacles: you are not alone. The SM2030 Project will also hopefully inform industry leaders in their efforts to make this profession a sustainable career.