

SM2030 PROJECT



A LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF EARLY-CAREER AMERICAN STAGE MANAGERS

This fourth report of the SM2030 Project continues the ten-year longitudinal study of a cohort of post-college stage managers. The second and third reports tracked the impact of the global pandemic; this fourth report examines some of the lingering impact, but focuses on what it means to be an early career stage manager in the United States.

This study began with 81 respondents of the initial 2020 survey (Year 0) who agreed to participate in future studies. All participants met the eligibility requirements of graduating from an American college or university in the Spring or Summer of 2020 with the goal of pursuing a career in stage management. As noted in previous reports, 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.

The original cohort of 81 participants were invited to a second study in 2021 (Year 1): 56 members of the original group participated. In 2022 (Year 2), 55 members of the original group responded. Following Year 2, the study contacts the participants every two years. In 2024 (Year 4), 44 of the original 81 participants responded. Participants were asked to respond even if they were no longer pursuing careers in stage management to show what had changed in their career paths. It is possible some of the 37 who did not respond no longer felt this study applied to them, though there may also be issues of communication four years after the initial study.

Whenever possible, this report includes data from the previous editions of this study. The note “n=___” indicates how many people answered that specific question. Unlike the international Stage Manager Survey (www.stagemanagersurvey.com), minor fluctuations in responses should not be viewed as trends: a single participant could shift the data by up to 4% and, since all responses are anonymous in this edition, we do not know who continued or left after the last edition.

All reports of the SM2030 Project are available under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivatives 4.0 International License. You are free to share or post this report for noncommercial use as long as you link to www.stagemanagersurvey.com. I wish to thank Elon University’s Institutional Review Board for guidance in this study and access to the survey software. Most of all, I would like to thank the 44 participants who shared their thoughts and experiences so that we can all see the challenges this group of stage managers are facing.

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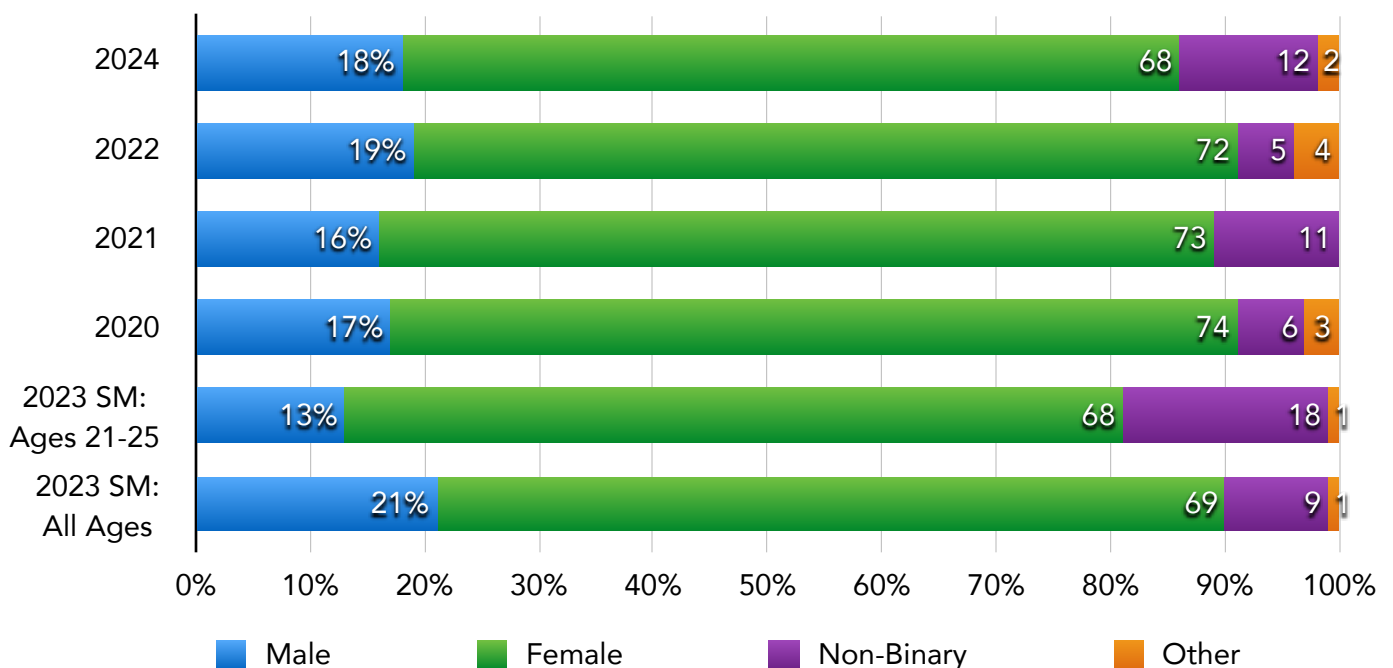
PART I: DEMOGRAPHICS

The SM2030 Project includes demographic questions for two primary reasons: (1) to check that the current group is as representative as the original group and (2) to see if there are indicators that certain identities are facing additional challenges. However, as noted in the Introduction, we should not place too much weight on minor changes given the extremely small sample size; we can use the much larger Stage Manager Survey to more confidently track small trends.

The ratio of participant gender identities has remained relatively consistent over the four years of the study. **Figure 1** compares the 2024 (n=44), 2022 (n=53), 2021 (n=56), and 2020 (n=98) participants, as well as the 2023 Stage Manager Survey segmented by ages 21-25 (n=373) and all ages (n=1602). The SM2030 Project offered “Other” gender identities whereas the 2023 Stage Manager Survey offered “Another identity” and “Prefer Not to Answer.”

Figure 1: Gender Identity of SM2030 Participants

(n=see above)



Another identity that this study tracks to determine whether the field is excluding groups of stage managers is disability. Among the 44 responses this year, 14% identified as having a disability and an additional 7% preferred not to answer. These numbers compare with 8% and 6% in 2022 (n=53) and 7% and 3% in 2021 (n=56). It should be noted that some participants may now identify as having a disability compared to when they began the study.

The third identity tracked by the study is race and ethnicity. The current U.S. Census categories are outdated and incomplete (and soon to be updated), but they are presently the best way to compare

stage managers to the larger population. **Figure 2** compares the four SM2030 studies (2024 n=44; 2022 n=53; 2021 n=56; 2020 n=98) and the July 2023 Census data (n=334M). Some participants chose to list more than one race or ethnicity. Overall, there has not been significant changes in the racial and ethnic identities of the participant pool. For comparison, the 21-25 age group in Stage Manager Survey (n=310) identified as 77% White and 23% BIPOC.

Figure 2: Race and Ethnicity

(n=see above)

	White	Hispanic Latino(a)	Black/ African-American	Asian	Native American	Pacific Islander	Multi-racial	Other	Prefer Not to Answer
2024	82%	12%	2%	0%	2%	0%	4%	0%	0%
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%
2023 Census	75%	20%	14%	6%	1%	<1%	3%	N/A	N/A

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, SM2030 Project participants were asked if they had applied to graduate programs in stage management for the coming year as graduate school enrollment could impact other questions in the study. None of the 44 participants had applied to graduate school for the upcoming year, though one had completed a graduate program. Additionally, the likelihood of applying in future years also dropped. Among 23 participants who answered this question, none reported being extremely likely to apply, 5% were somewhat likely, 32% were neutral on the concept, 14% were somewhat unlikely, and an even 50% were extremely unlikely to apply to graduate programs in the future. For this group of stage managers, a majority of whom earned a BFA or BA specifically in stage management, an MFA does not seem likely in the near future.

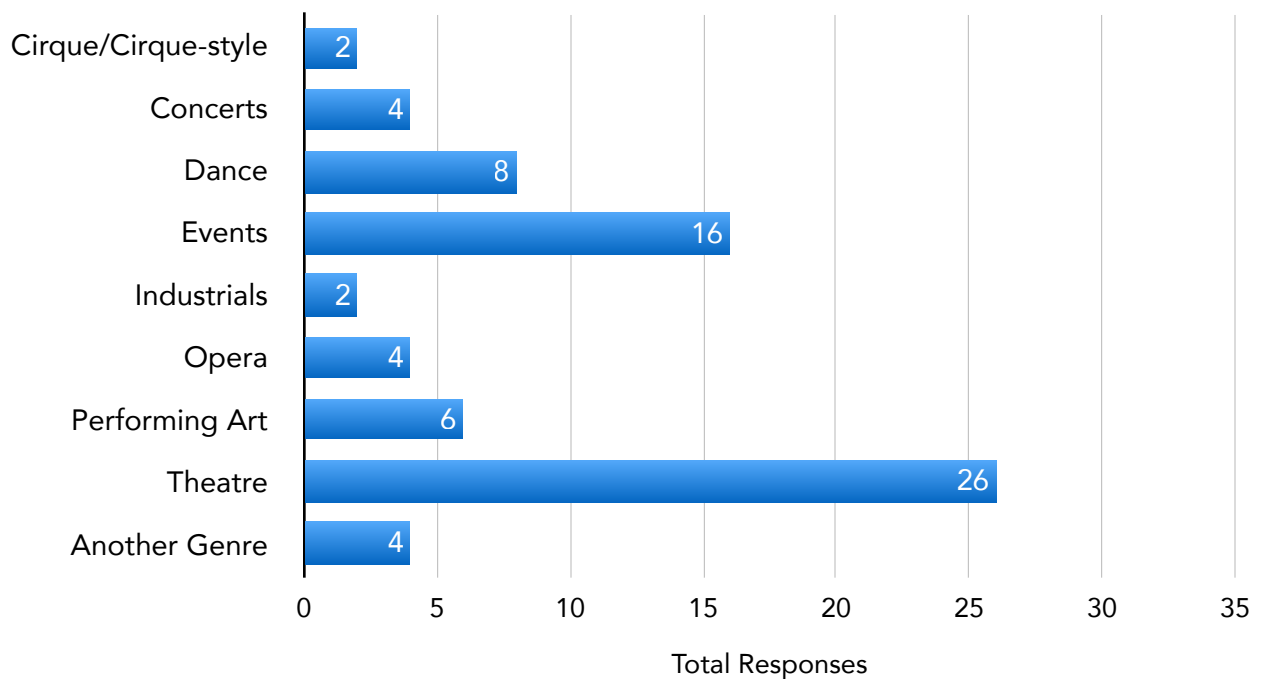
PART II: FOUR YEARS INTO THE CAREER

Is this Class of 2020 currently working in stage management? Among 44 responses to the question, “In what field are you primarily working or searching for future work?,” 45% reported stage management and an additional 18% reported “another performing arts field.” This marks a decrease since the 2022 study, in which 64% were working or pursuing jobs in stage management and 15% were focused on other performing arts positions. It is also likely that a number of the original 2020 participants who have not continued with the study have not continued with stage management.

Figure 3 shows the genres of stage management work this group has had over the past two years. “Another Genre” responses included company galas, experimental pieces, and magic shows.

Figure 3: Stage Management Role in Past Two Years

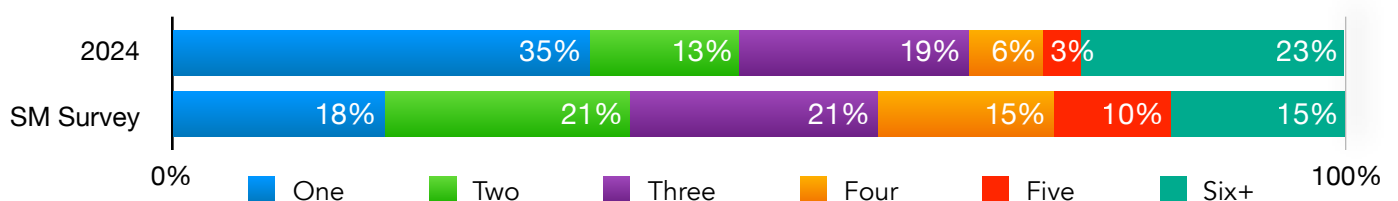
(n=31)



Investigating stage management employment over the past 12 months (compared against the 2023 Stage Manager Survey, n=1,342), **Figure 4** shows responses about the number of different employers.

Figure 4: Number of SM Employers Over Past 12 Months

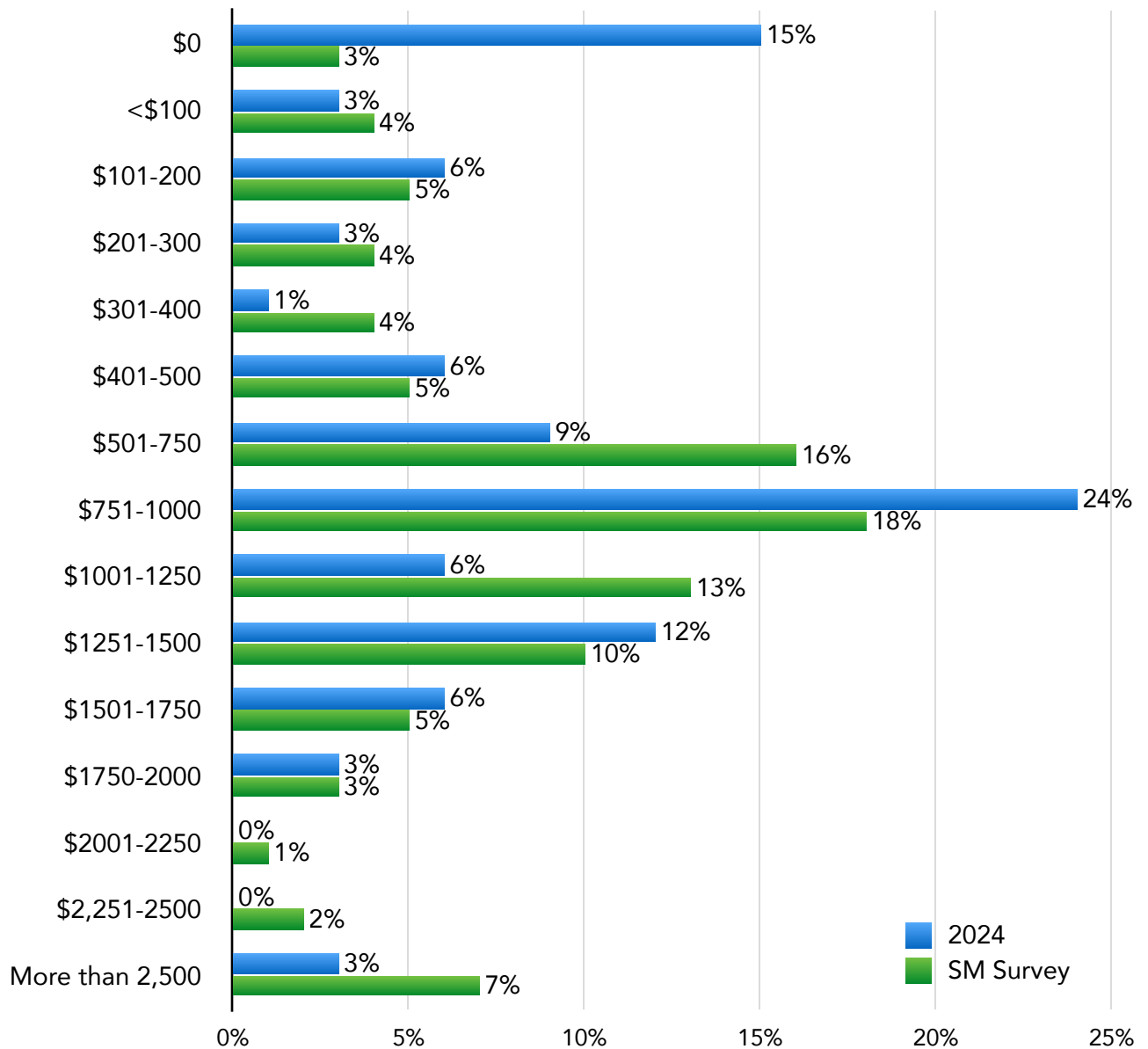
(n=31)



It is very interesting that this cohort reported much higher instances of single employer (whether a short or long contract) or six (or more) employers compared to the national survey. It is also interesting to note the weekly salaries compared to the Stage Manager Survey (n=846).

Figure 5: Weekly Pay on Most Recent Project

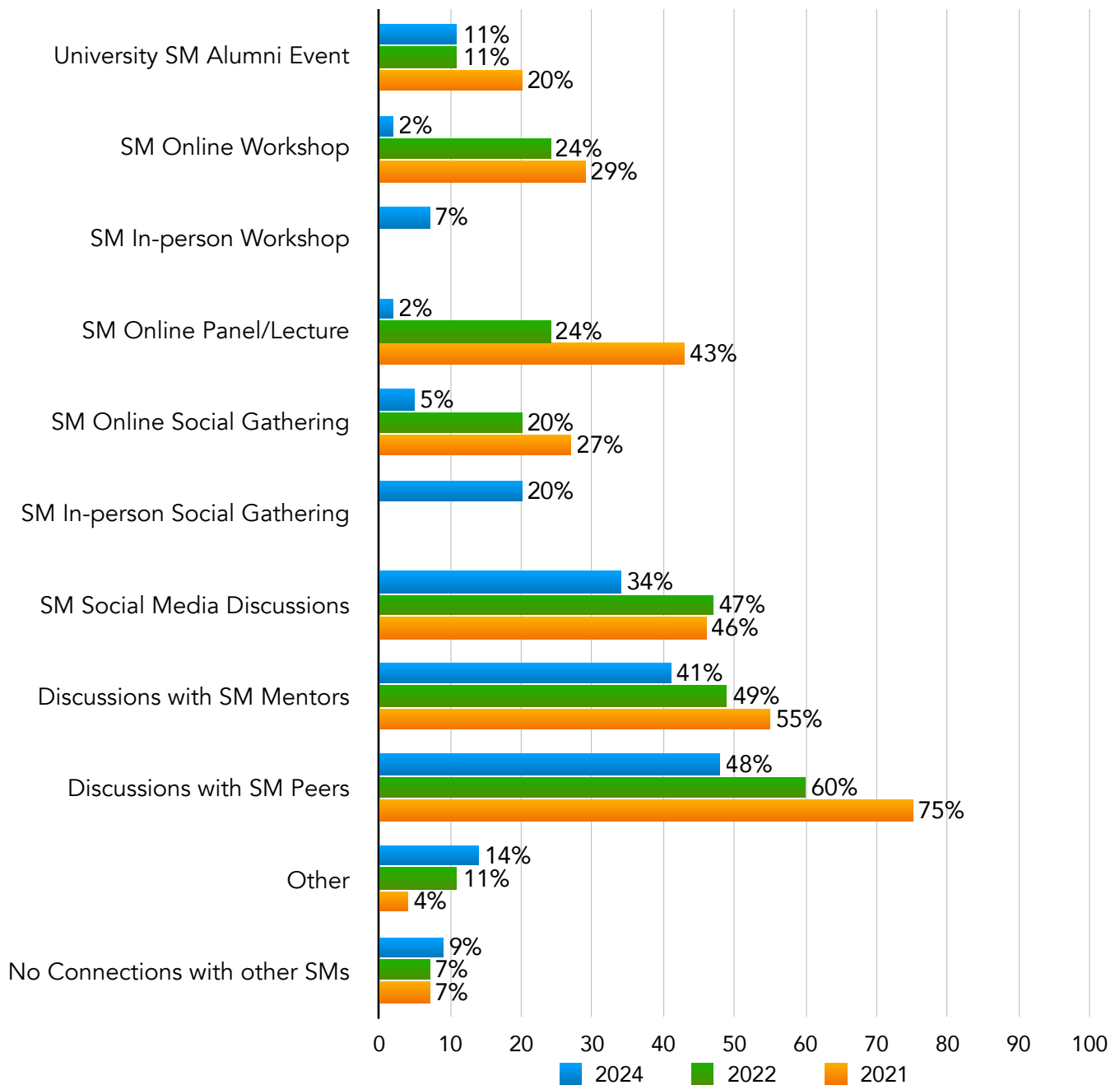
(n=33)



These reports of weekly pay do not include extra tasks such as running a board during a performance. Half of the 35 respondents reported running their own boards and a strong majority (75% for light board, 90% for sound board, 100% for video/projections, and 75% of running a combination of boards) did not receive additional compensation for this task.

Even when stage managers find work and/or internships, it can be difficult to stay connected to the larger SM community. **Figure 6** illustrates the points of connection made by SM2030 participants.

Figure 6: Connections with Other SMs in the Past Two Years (2024 n=44, 2022 n=55, 2021 n=56)

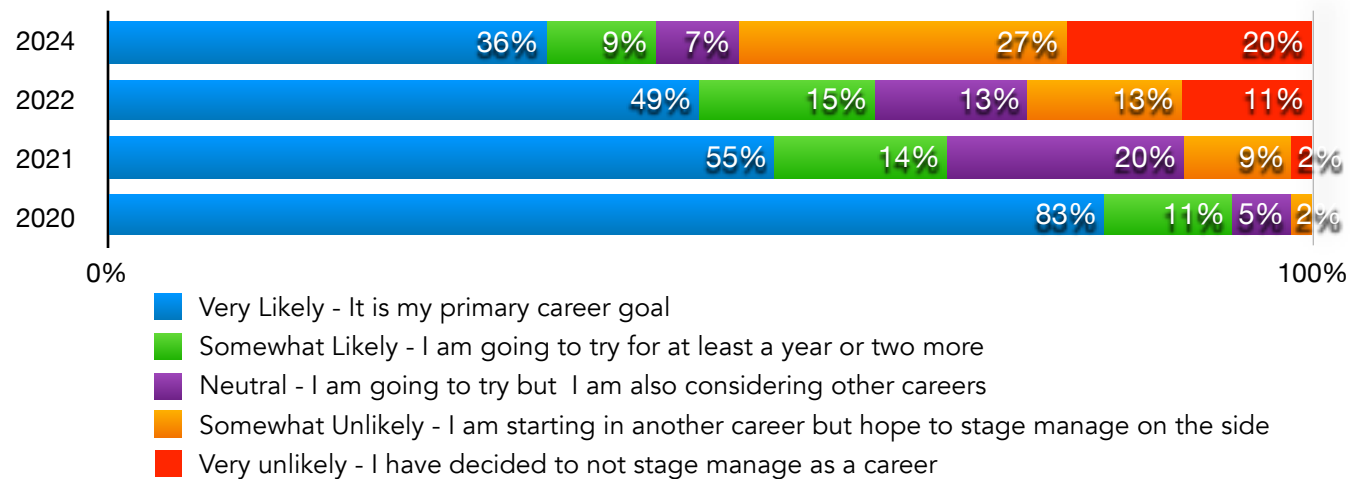


The question for Figure 6 was changed for the 2024 survey to ask about connections in the past two years, rather than since graduation, to see how the participants have interacted with other stage managers since the last survey. Three new options - In-person Workshop, In-person Panel/Lecture, and In-person Social Gathering - were added to reflect changes since the height of the global pandemic. "Other" reported connections were email and larger events such as USITT. It should also be noted that the 2022 report included incorrect percentages for the 2022 data versus the 2020 data. While there was a substantial drop in connections, it was not as drastic a change as was previously reported. These numbers have been corrected.

PART III: LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Perhaps the most important question of this study is “As of today, how likely are you to pursue stage management as a career?” While there was strong interest in the field even during the height of the pandemic, the Class of 2020 is showing a split as to whether stage management is the best career path for them. **Figure 7** compares the responses from 2024 (n=44), 2022 (n=55), 2021 (n=56), and 2020 (n=104); it should be noted that these percentages only reflect those who took the survey and not the entire 2020 group. The sample sizes are too small to analyze this question by gender, race/ethnicity, or disability.

Figure 7: Likelihood of Pursuing Stage Management as a Career (n=see above)



A reason this particular group from the Class of 2020 should celebrate is their continued improvements in their financial positions. **Figure 8** shows the current level of financial support participants have from their families/spouses/partners: participants have trended greater financial independence, perhaps in part to improved personal savings (**Figure 9**); lower college loans (**Figure 10**) and lower overall debt (**Figure 11**).

Previous editions of this report included data from the 21-25 age bracket from the Stage Manager Survey, but there could be significant difference in the financial standing of a 21-year-old vs. a 25-year-old, so this data is not included for comparison.

Figure 8: Financial Support at Start of Career (2024 n=44, 2022 n=53, 2021 n=56, 2020 n=91)

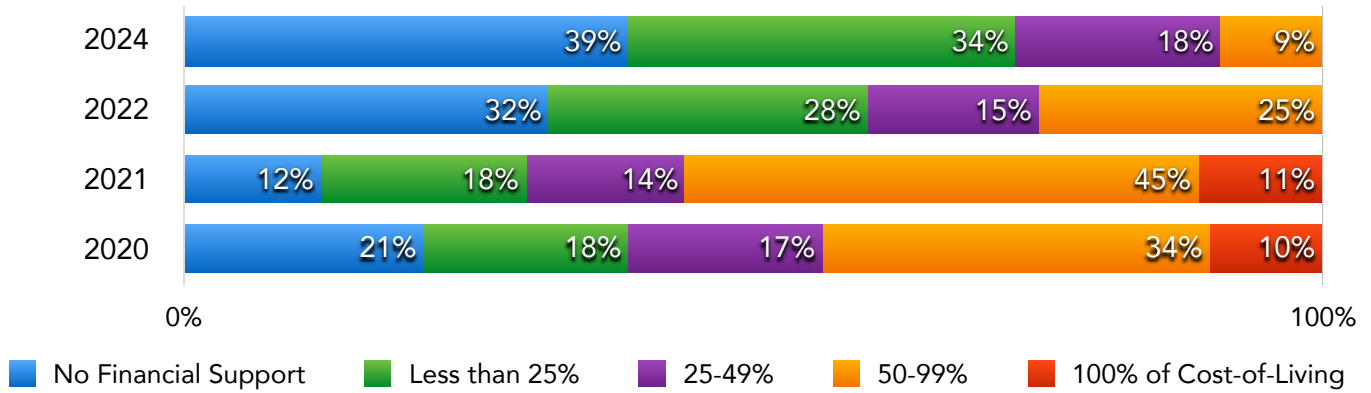


Figure 9: Personal Financial Savings (2024 n=44, 2022 n=53, 2021 n=56, 2020 n=92)

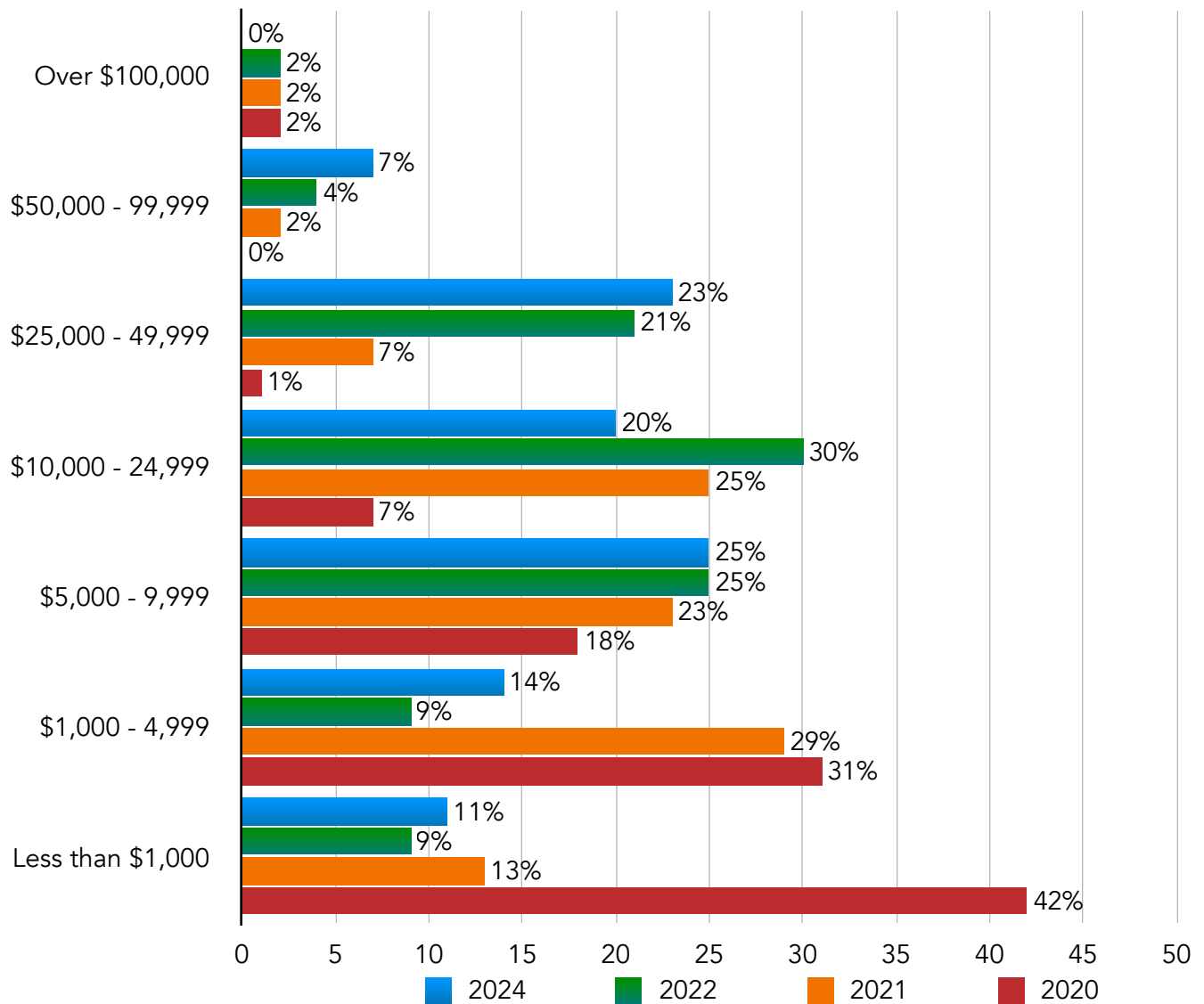


Figure 10: College Loans

(2024 n=44, 2022 n=53, 2021 n=56, 2020 n=92)

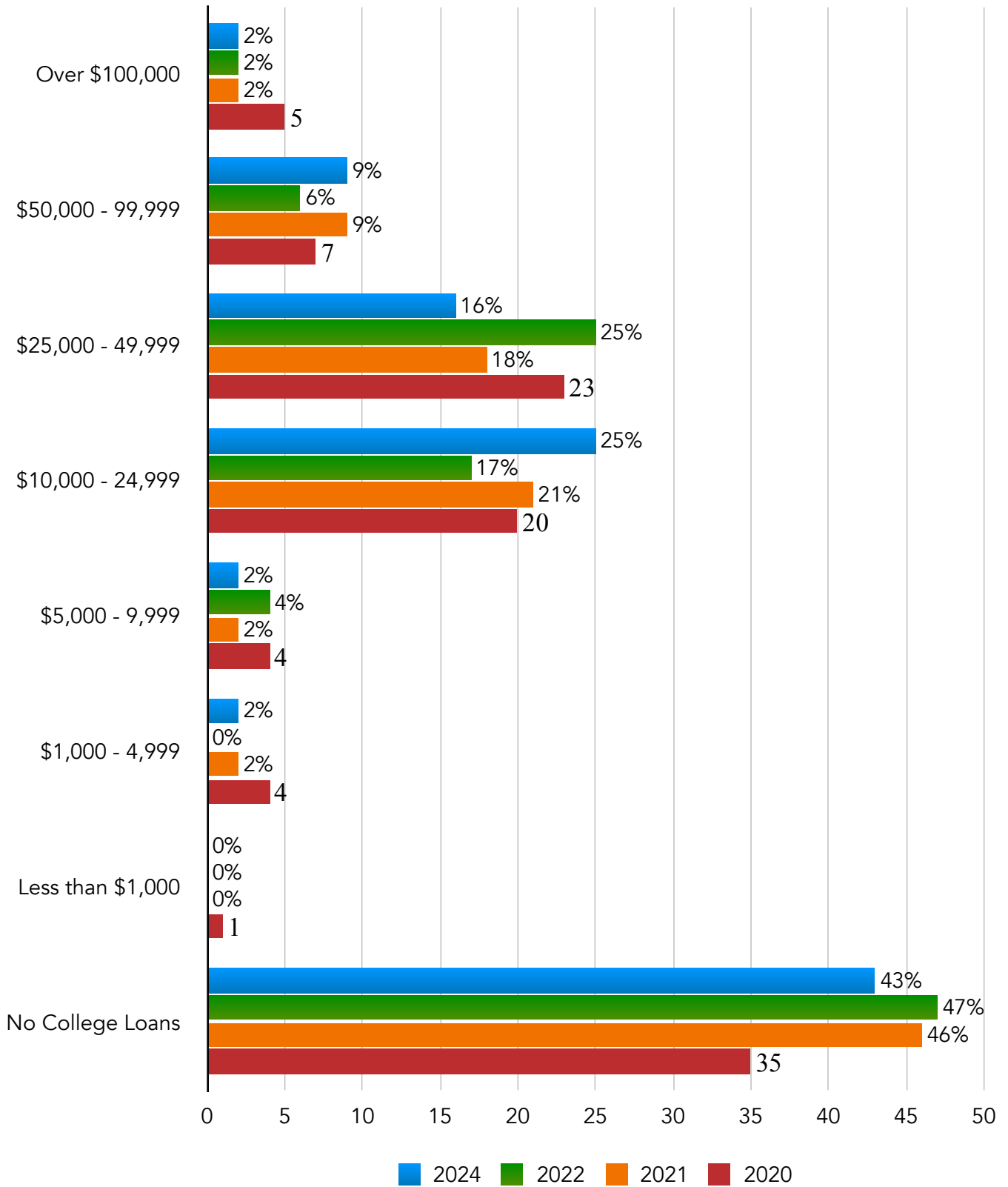
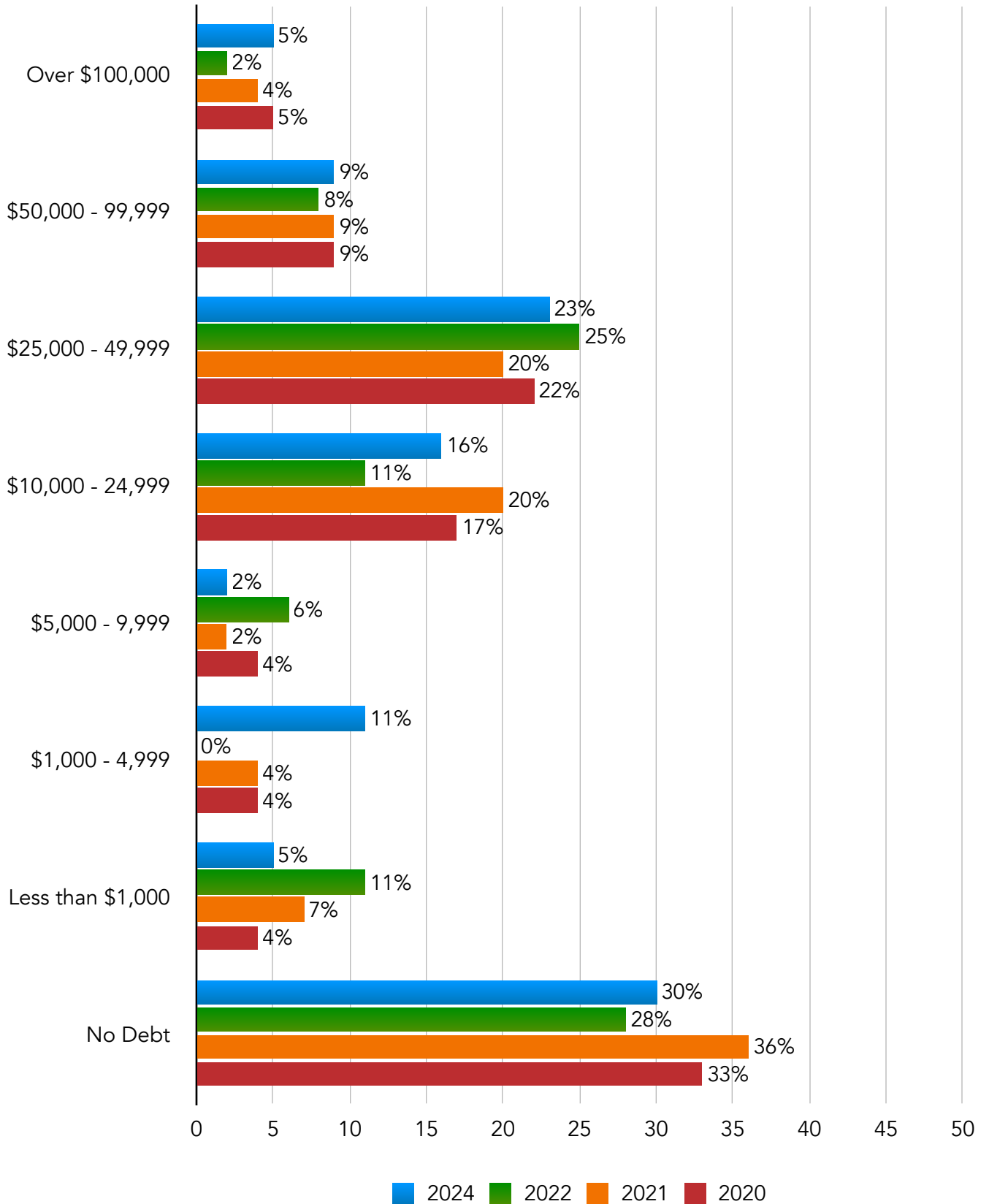
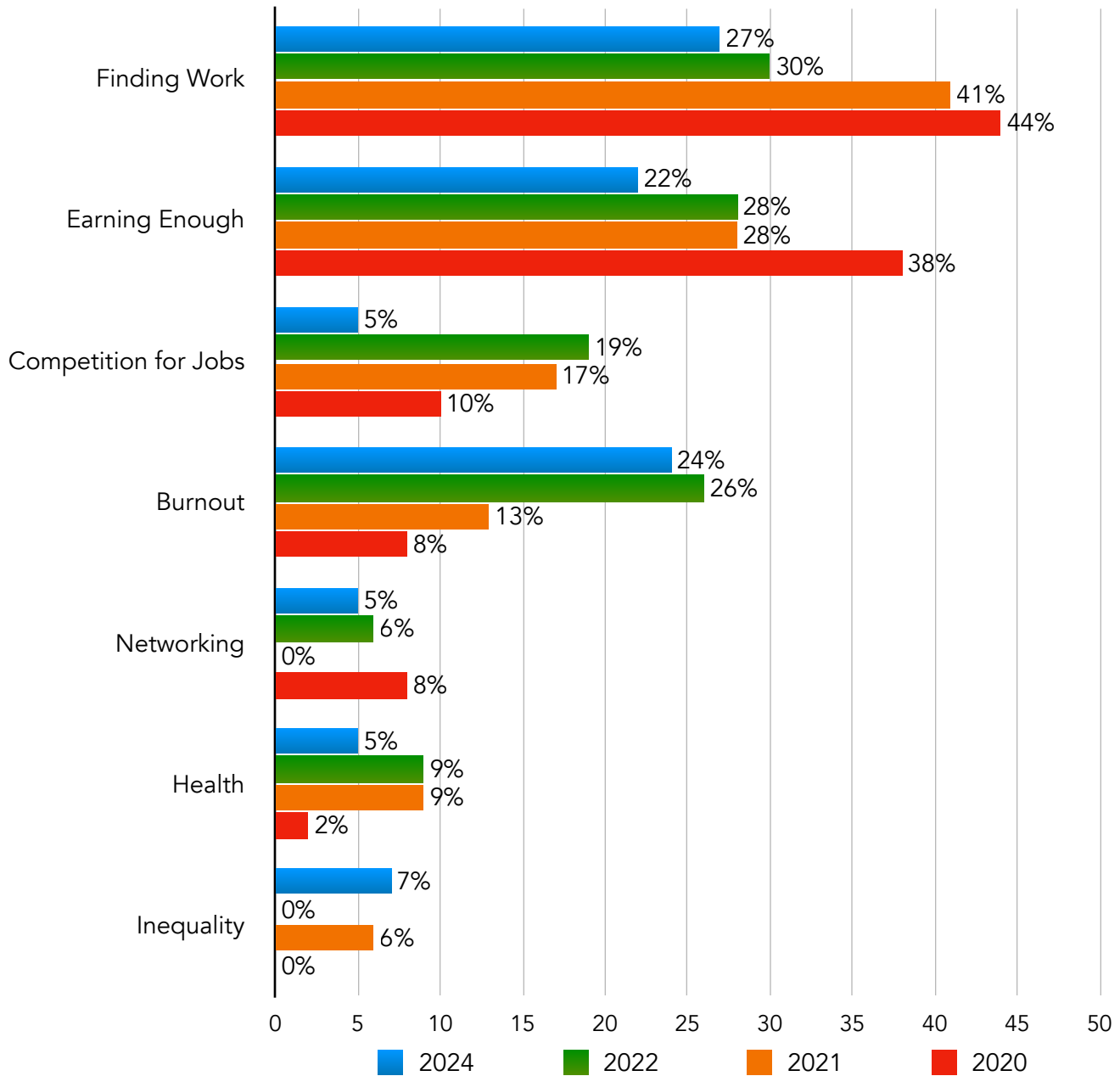


Figure 11: Overall Debt Including College Loans (2024 n=44, 2022 n=53, 2021 n=56, 2020 n=92)



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 12: Biggest Question or Concern (2024 n=41, 2022 n=54, 2021 n=54, 2020 n=90)



As seen in Figure 12, finding work remains the top concern but there was less voiced concern about competing with other stage managers for jobs. Burnout, which included concerns about work/life balance, remains high for a group just four years out of college. After not being a voiced apprehension in 2022, inequalities in the workplace and the profession returned as a concern. Some concerns did not neatly fit into any of these categories:

- The general public is unaware of how much work, effort, and skill it takes to be a stage manager. Thus, the job and, indirectly, the field is considered a less serious profession despite the greater importance the arts have on society.
- That it has an expiration date in terms of being "a young person's job"
- Teaching students a combination of soft-skills (such as emotional intelligence) is great, but it is still necessary for stage managers to gain hard skills as well (such as paperwork and calling)
- The fact that people say they appreciate the stage manager, but sometimes we get blamed for the responsibilities of other people.
- My biggest concern about Stage Management is how hard it is to be in this career and try to live in ONE PLACE! I am not someone who wants to travel a lot for work; I don't see the appeal of living out of a suitcase and keeping all my things in storage. I want to be able to settle down somewhere, own a home, and maybe even start a family! (what a concept!)
- I stepped away from stage management after graduating in Spring 2020. Between the giant stress of theatre post COVID 19 and personal health problems, I needed a stable job with good health insurance. It would be neigh impossible for me to go into stage management, the career I dreamed about and went thousands of dollars into student debt for, because I have no way to keep my head above water without somehow receiving significant financial support from others - something that's not an option for me.

At four years post graduation, fewer study participants are working or pursuing work as stage managers. This decrease likely occurs in every profession and the main reasons cited by these stage managers are not surprising: pay, work/life balance, and job stability. These concerns require industry-wide changes. In the short term, stage management mentorship has shown, among at least this group of stage managers, to be aligned with the likelihood of continuing in the field. Only 40% of study participants who are still working in the field (n=35) have a mentor, but those that do report much higher likelihood of continuing in the profession: 71% with mentors compared to 29% without a mentor. Moreover, 62% of participants who did not have a stage management mentor wanted one.

The next edition of the SM2030 Project will be in 2026 as the study continues in its two-year intervals until its close in 2030. If you participated in the 2020 study but did not receive an invitation to the 2024 study, please contact davidjmcgraw@gmail.com to update your email address. If you would like to be notified of future reports, please visit www.stagemanagersurvey.com and join the SM2030 Project mailing list.

One goal of this project is to provide current students with an understanding of the challenges they may encounter as they start their careers. While the SM2030 Project cannot provide "the odds" of making a career in stage management, certainly not in comparison with starting a career in 2020, it can provide a glimpse of what the future may hold. And, as many participants have noted, choosing the best path for yourself may involve leaving the one you planned as a student.