

SM2030 PROJECT



A LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF EARLY-CAREER AMERICAN STAGE MANAGERS

The SM2030 Project was designed as a ten-year longitudinal study that follows a group of American stage managers from the same career starting point: graduation from college. Study eligibility 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. An undergraduate degree is not a requirement for working as a stage manager but this educational milestone was used to identify participants of approximately the same age and experience level. The original goal of the SM2030 Project was 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. An unanticipated use of this study is to examine the impact of COVID-19 on the profession: the participants began this study in February 2020, one month prior to the pandemic halting nearly all performing arts projects in the United States.

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. Given the career and personal trauma created by the pandemic, there was some doubt that the study could continue. The Year 1 study was redesigned to be very short to not create more harm and hopefully to reveal to the Class of 2020 how others are also struggling in this most unusual first year post-graduation. A series of four emails were sent to this group of 81 in February 2021 to invite them to participate in the Year 1 study. Remarkably, 56 respondents returned to take part in the next edition of the study.

Not all participants answered every question; the note “n=___” indicates how many people answered that specific question. This report compares some of the original 2020 responses to the responses of the participants in 2021. Please note that these comparisons are by percentage of responses and the 2021 participants are a subset of the 2020 group. Moreover, 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 “2019 SM Survey”) to determine how this newest group of American stage managers differs from a broader sampling of the profession. These comparisons will also be made by response percentages but will include the number of responses from each group for the question.

This study would not be possible without the bravery and generosity of the 56 members of the Class of 2020 who, despite the unforeseen struggles of a global pandemic, volunteered their time to share their experiences and their thoughts moving forward.

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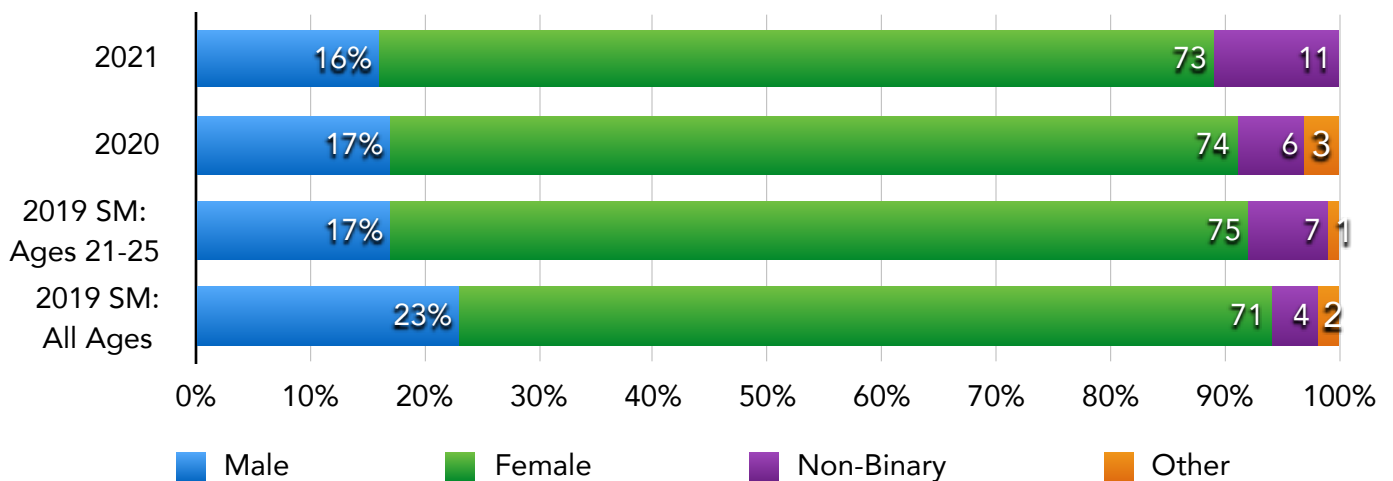
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PART I: DEMOGRAPHICS

Each of the four invitations sent to the original 2020 respondents (who provided contact information) encouraged participation even if the recipient had since decided to not pursue stage management. The primary reason for using the same group of participants is to study not just those who continue in the field but also those who choose to leave it. Nevertheless, some of the 25 participants who listed their contact information in 2020 but did not take part in the 2021 study may have chosen to not participate if stage management is no longer a priority. The Year 1 study therefore repeated some demographic questions to search for disparities in who continued in this study. Those disparities may be limited to this study or they may indicate obstacles to a career in stage management.

Gender identity remained relatively constant between Year 0 and Year 1 of the study. **Figure 1** compares the 2021 (n=56) and 2020 (n=98) participants, as well as the 2019 SM Survey segmented by ages 21-25 (n=332) and all ages (n=1388). The most notable change is the decrease in “Other” and the increase in Non-Binary gender identifications.

Figure 1: Gender Identity of SM2030 Participants



Participants in both 2020 and 2021 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.”

SM2030 participants also identified their race and ethnicity using the categories defined by the US Census. These categories allow this study to compare with larger studies, but it should be noted that the US Census has a problematic history in how it defines race and ethnicity and these categories do not reflect the full range of identities. **Figure 2** compares the two SM2030 studies (2020 n=98, 2021 n=56) 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.

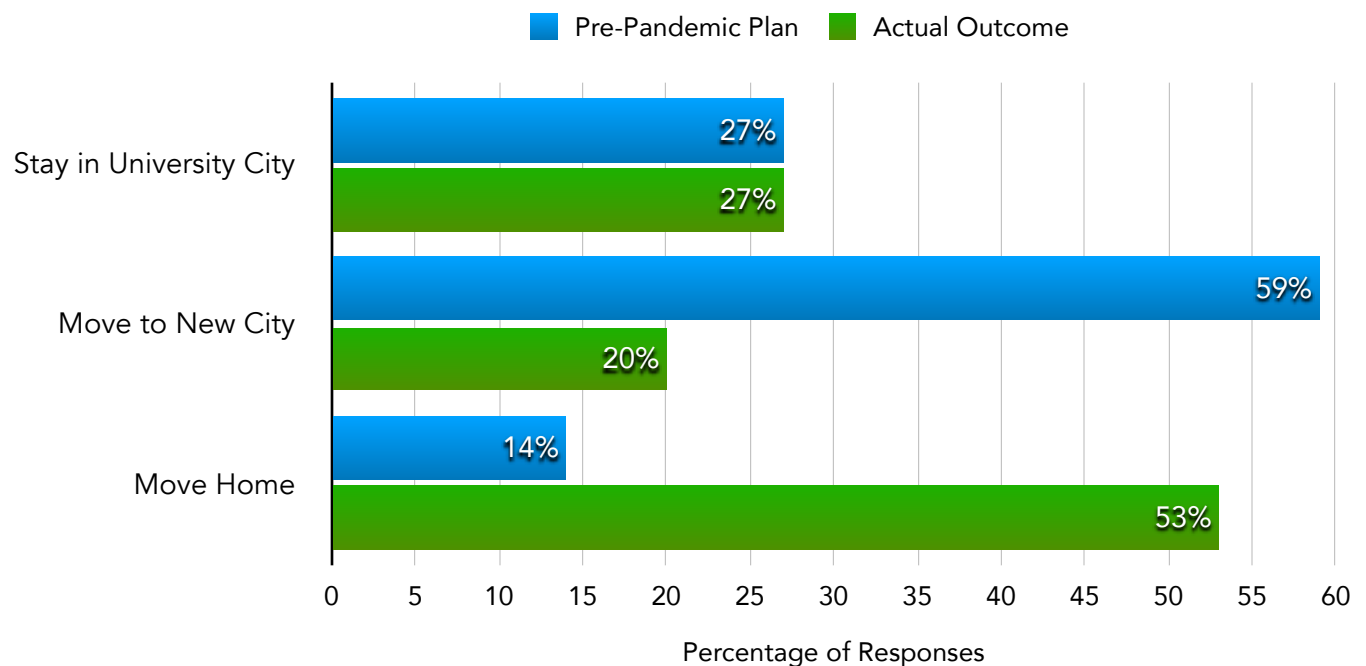
Figure 2: Race and Ethnicity

	White	Hispanic Latino(a)	Black/ African-American	Asian	Native American	Pacific Islander	Multi-racial	Other	Prefer Not to Answer
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%
2019 SM: All Ages	86%	6%	2%	4%	1%	0%	6%	1%	1%

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

Survey participants were also asked where they moved after graduation. In the original February 2020 study, half of those participants (n=104) planned to return to their home state to look for work in their first year after college, while 36% planned to look elsewhere and 14% had not yet decided whether to return home. **Figure 3** shows both the pre-pandemic plan and the actual moves that happened post-graduation.

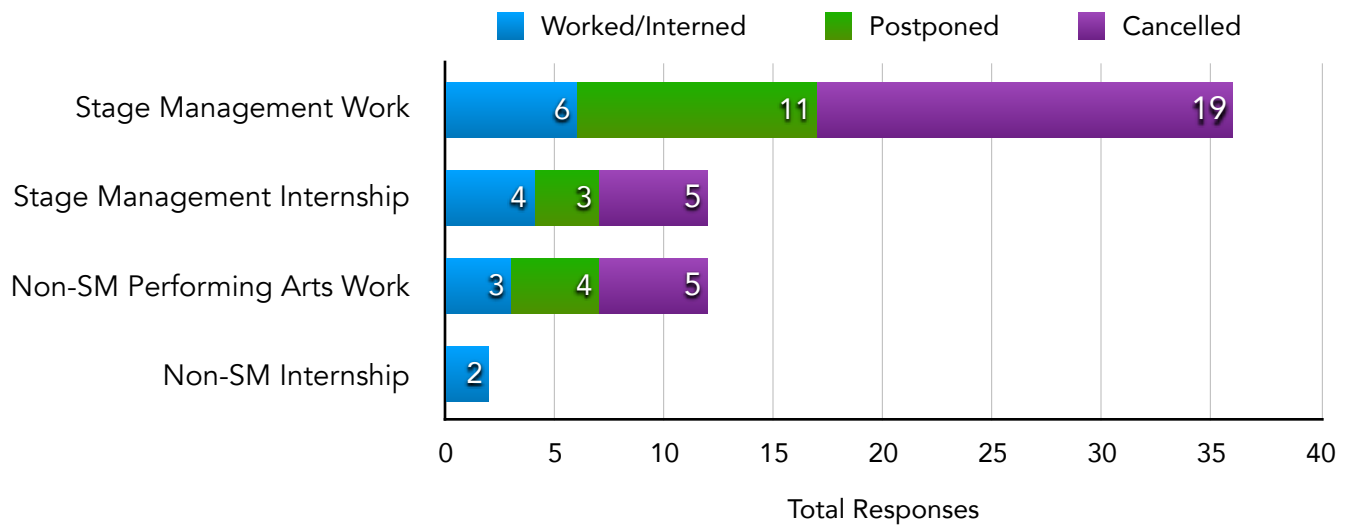
Figure 3: Location Plans Prior to Pandemic and Actual Outcomes (n=56)



PART II: FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCES

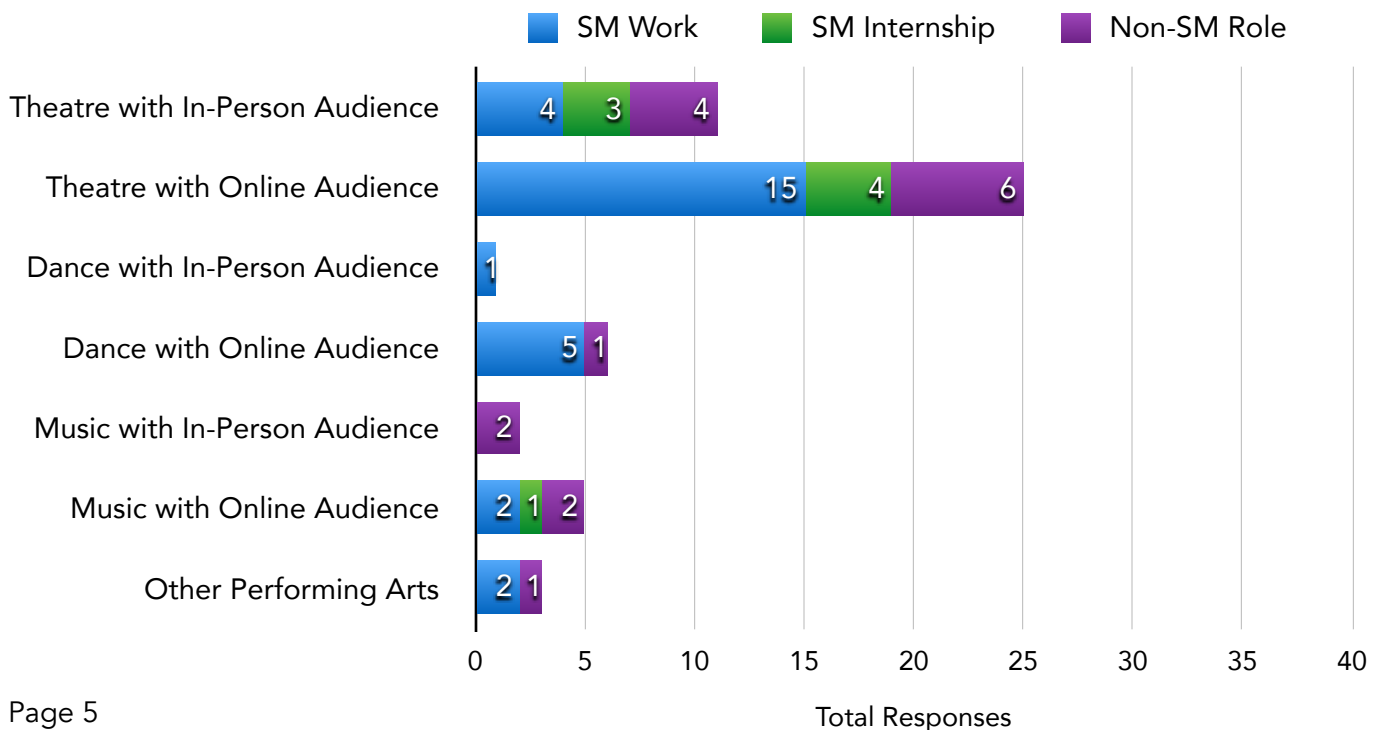
Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, 43 of the 56 survey participants had already secured post-graduation projects (others were still in the application/interview process). **Figure 4** identifies the projects that participants had been offered as of February 2020 and what happened to those offers.

Figure 4: Post-Graduation Offers and Actual Outcomes (n=43)



Despite the postponement and cancellation of so many projects in Spring 2020, some participants have found work. **Figure 5** illustrates the type of work/internships held through February 2021.

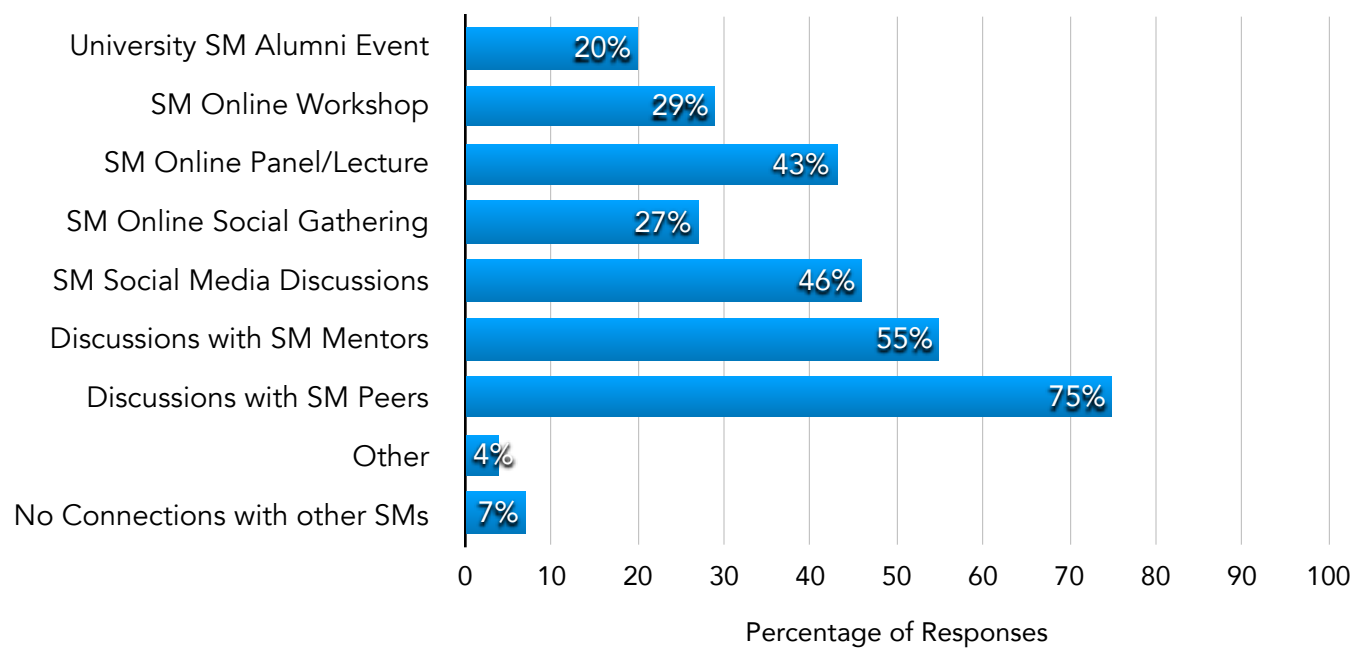
Figure 5: Work and Internships Since the Start of the Pandemic (n=56)



The percentages in Figure 5 are based on the 56 participants who answered the question; some participants had multiple projects. The “Other Performing Arts” projects included opera, special event, and film projects. For the six participants who had interned in stage management during the first year of the pandemic, one earned less than \$100/week and the other five earned \$100-250/week. This small group were split evenly on both whether the internship compensation was fair and whether the internship was valuable; prior to the pandemic, this group had found all internships useful.

One of the major challenges of living through the pandemic was finding ways to stay connected during a time of isolation. **Figure 6** illustrates the points of connection made by SM2030 participants.

Figure 6: Connections with Other SMs Since Graduation (n=56)



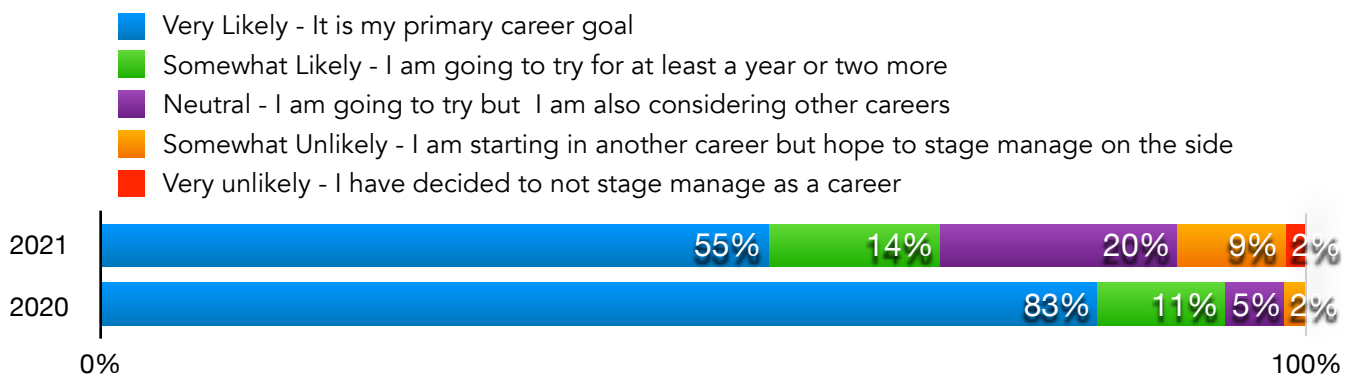
Despite these efforts to stay in contact, 39% of participants reported feeling disconnected from the stage management community while only 5% felt strongly connected. Social media yielded the lowest percentage (3.8%) of participants feeling strongly connected; the most successful points of connection were online social gatherings (20% felt strongly connected), followed by an online panel/lecture (13%) and discussion with a mentor (10%). Only a quarter of participants have been successful in finding a post-graduation mentor; another 53% are actively seeking a mentor. Without the in-person projects during which bonds are normally created, how will the stage management community welcome its newest members?

Historically, economic downturns have produced higher enrollment in graduate programs of all fields as workers try to both weather the storm of job loss and to train for higher level positions. But the pandemic has drastically impacted not only the work environment but also educational systems. Only 3 of 50 responding participants had applied to graduate school for the 2021-22 academic year. Of the remaining 47 responses, 30% were somewhat or extremely likely to apply to graduate school in the future, which roughly matched the original pre-pandemic response to this question.

PART III: LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The first year after college is normally the time when career expectations are reconciled with the realities of entering the workforce. But the pandemic has prevented the Class of 2020 from even testing the waters of working full-time as a stage manager. Therefore the results of **Figure 7**, which compares the 2021 and 2020 responses of the likelihood of pursuing a stage management career, should not be surprising. As of February 2021, 36% of participants (n=56) were still pursuing work in the performing arts, but not in stage management. Some of those other professions included production management, electricians, scenic art, and administration.

Figure 7: Likelihood of Pursuing Stage Management as a Career (2021 n=56, 2020 n=104)



One factor identified by many participants in determining whether they would continue to pursue stage management is whether they can afford to do so. The “extended intermission” in the industry has forced people to work in other fields and some may choose not to return. Others are trying to make family support and savings last as long as possible. **Figure 8** shows the current level of financial support participants have from their families/spouses/partners, compared to the 2020 report and 2019 National Stage Manager Survey (ages 21-25). **Figure 9** compares personal savings between 2020 and 2021 participants; **Figures 10 and 11** make the same comparisons for college debt and total loans.

Figure 8: Financial Support at Start of Career (2021 n=56, 2020 n=91, 2019 SM=257)

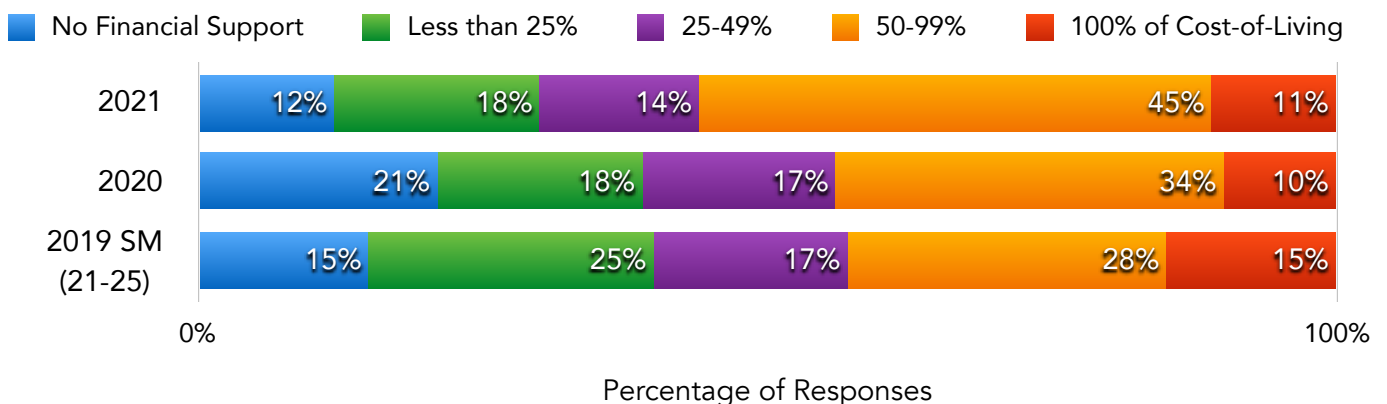


Figure 9: Personal Financial Savings

(2021 n=56, 2020 n=92)

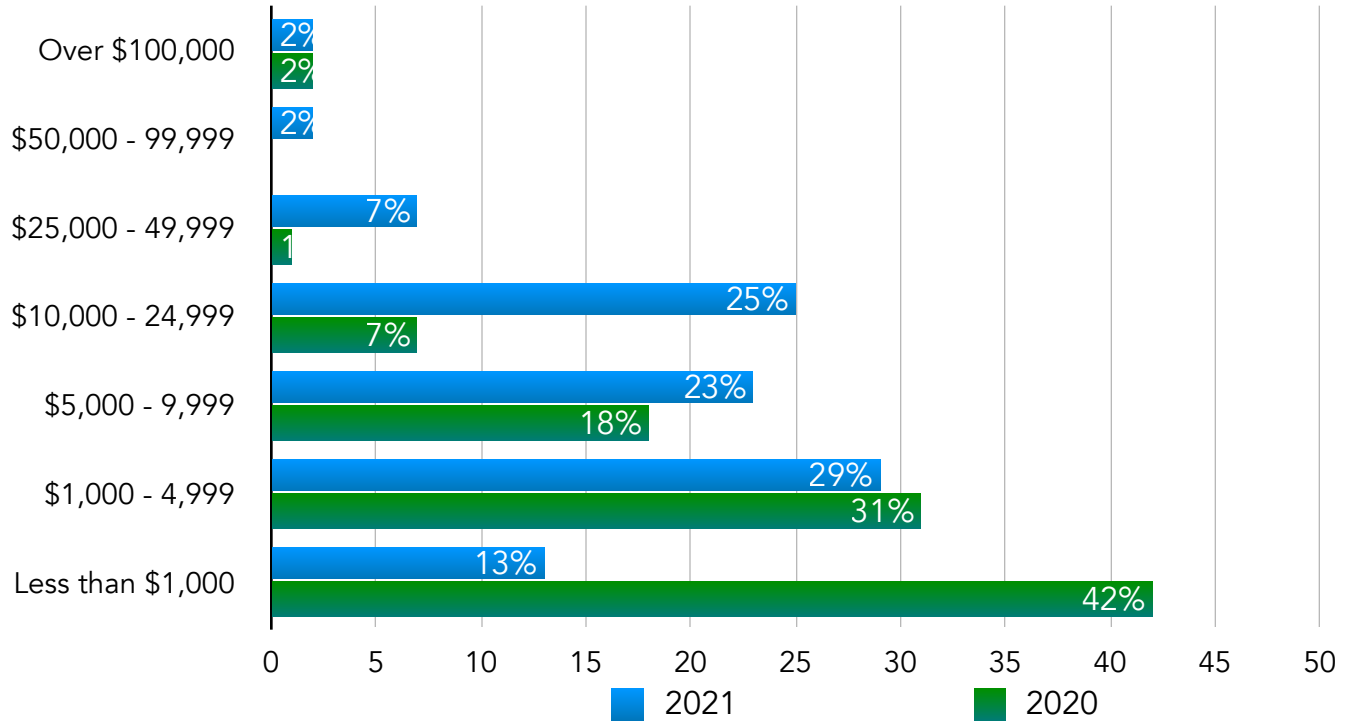


Figure 10: College Loans

(2021 n=56, 2020 n=92)

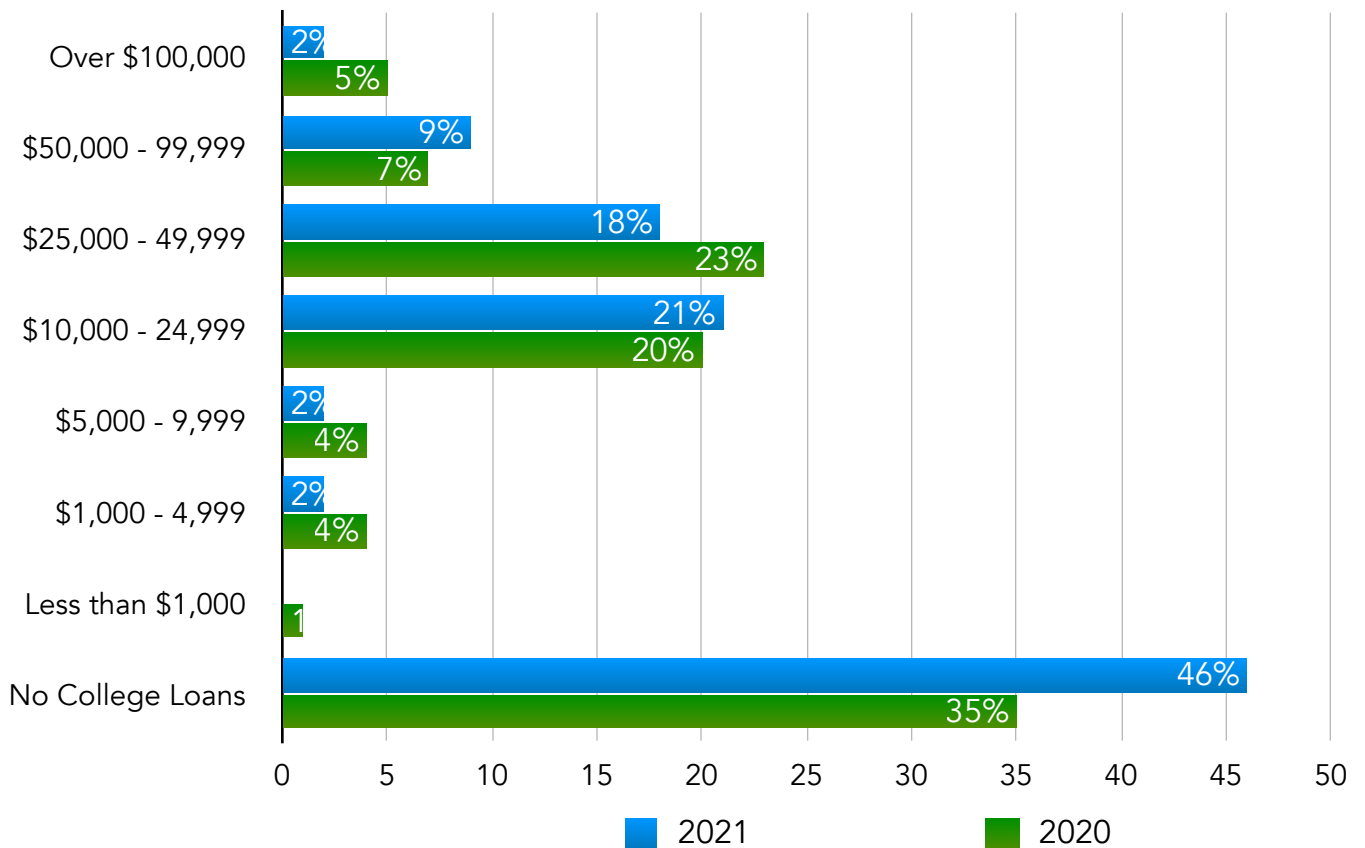
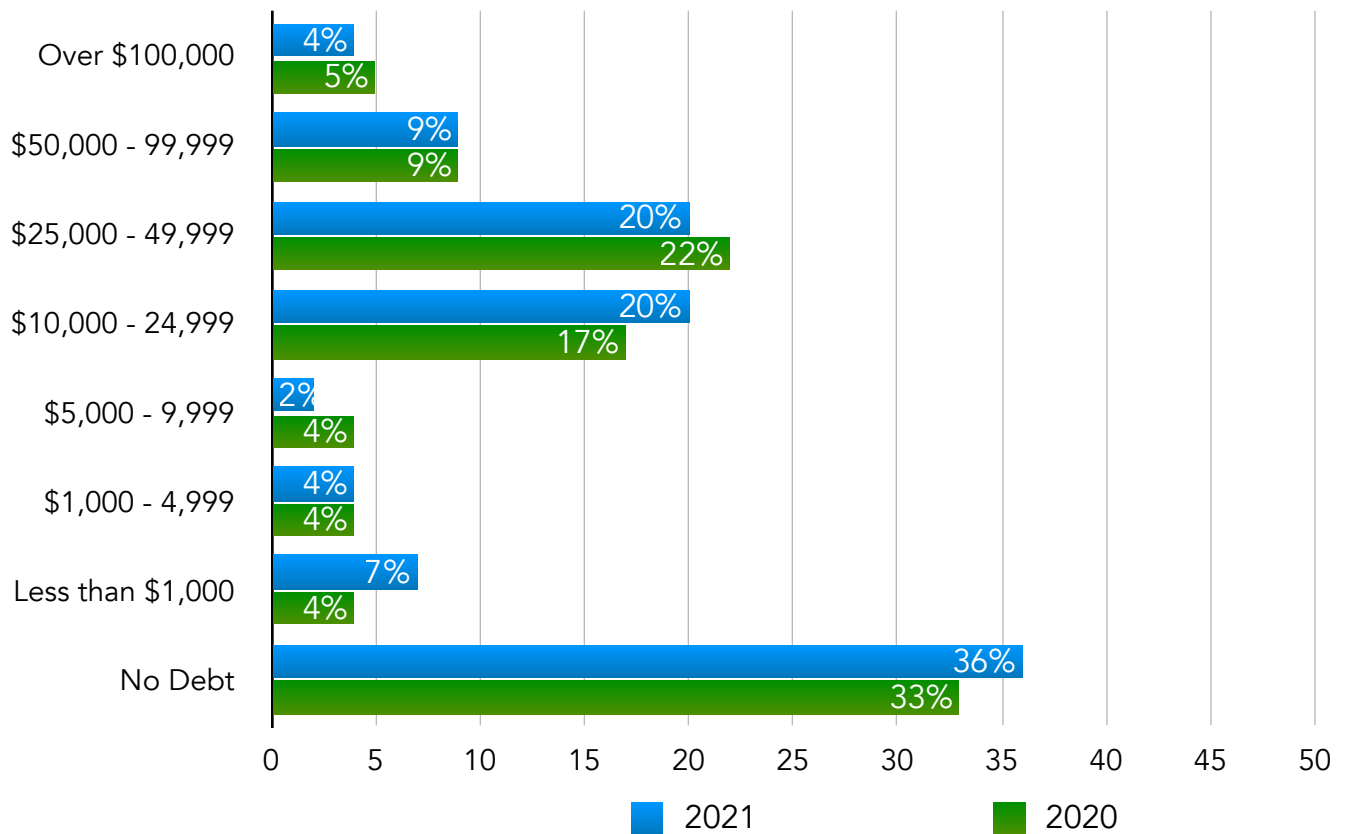


Figure 11: Overall Debt Including College Loans

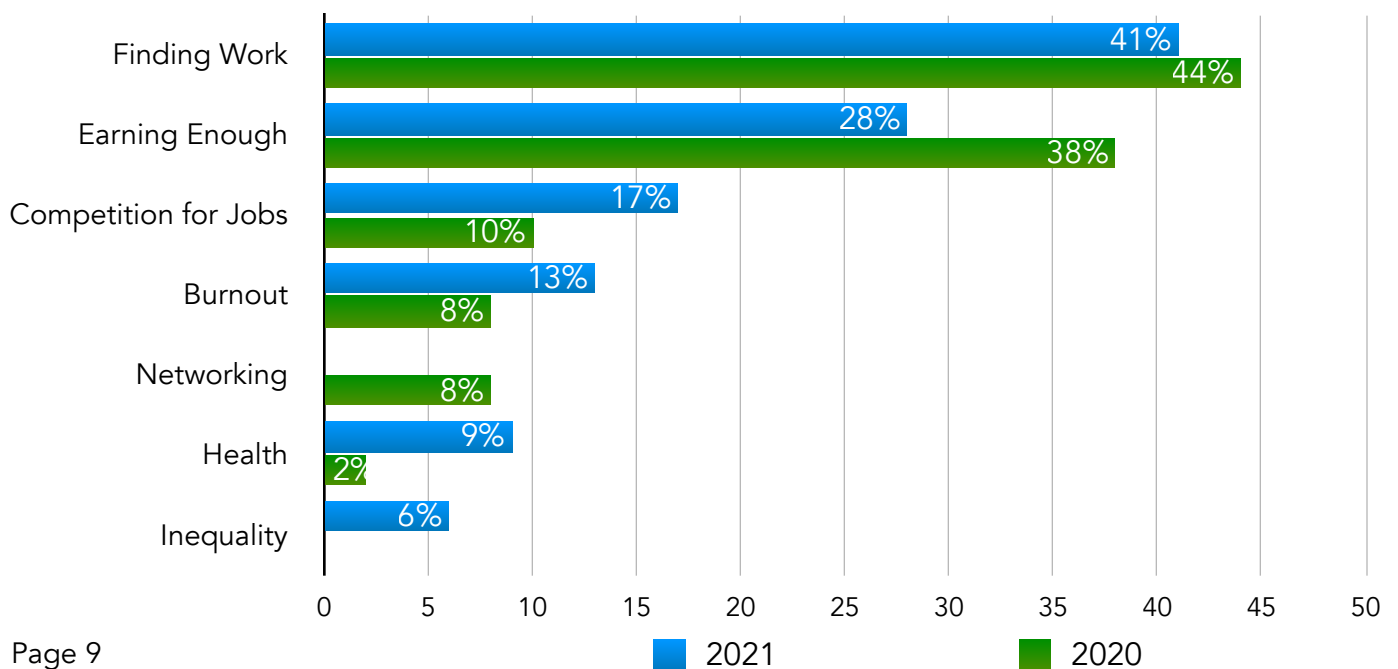
(2021 n=56, 2020 n=92)



The abbreviated 2021 study ended with one essay question: what is your biggest concern about stage management as a career? All but two participants responded and some listed more than one concern; responses were coded into categories. **Figure 12** compares responses from both years of the study.

Figure 12: Biggest Concern

(2021 n=54, 2020 n=90)



As seen in the graph, finding work remains the top concern; competition for jobs and the need for wellness/safety have increased in frequency. The newest category of concerns is based on comments about the systemic inequalities of the workplace and the profession. Individual responses, while fitting within broad categories of concerns, also revealed the depth of apprehensions:

- Instability. I knew going into theatre as a career that I wouldn't make a lot of money, but I would get to do what I loved. Looking back, this seems like a naive dream now, with the huge impact the pandemic has had on the entertainment industry and along with some current movements (like ending 10 out of 12's and getting fair compensation for theatre internships and work), I imagine that the theatre world after Covid will look different -hopefully better, safer, and fairer for all involved.
- The pandemic has removed the part of theatre that makes it special: large audiences gathering and watching a live event. I fear theatre might be on its last leg.
- The pandemic brought to light a lot of the toxicity and instability there is in the theatrical world. I honestly can no longer picture myself working in the field I thought I couldn't live without a year ago.

While 55% of respondents are still pursuing stage management as their primary career, others are already looking elsewhere and the decision of some 2020 respondents to not participate in this study may indicate that still others have already left the profession. There is unfortunately no data on the first-year career choice in "normal" times, but sudden decline during the pandemic is troubling. Is this decline temporary or permanent? Established stage managers have suffered greatly, but they at least have their resumes when work reappears; the Class of 2020 were not able to move into the entry-level positions and will shortly be competing with the Class of 2021. Will this group of early career stage managers recover as venues reopen or will they be left behind?

The SM2030 Project will continue with a new study in February 2022 with an invitation being sent to all participants of the 2020 original study. After the two-year mark, the study will continue at two year intervals until its close in 2030. If you participated in the 2020 study but did not receive an invitation to the 2021 study, please contact davidjmcgraw@sm-sim.com to update your email address. If you would like to read the full initial report and watch video interviews of the original participants, please visit <http://smsurvey.info> and join the SM2030 Project mailing list.

It is the author's hope that this study will provide comfort to those starting their careers in knowing they are not battling the challenges alone. The SM2030 Project will also hopefully provide the information needed by educators and stage management leaders to best serve the newest members of our community.