Southern California Theatre Alumni Survey Executive Report

Survey Overview

The Southern California Theatre Alumni Survey was designed by Center Theatre Group to better understand the scope of career training currently being provided to early-career theatre artists, technicians, and managers, both within and outside of higher education institutions. We were also curious about what career-related skills students felt were critical to their success in pursuing a live theatre career, as well as any barriers they identified to entering that field.

The anonymous survey was released on June 27th, 2018 and collected responses for a month, closing on July 20th, 2018. The survey collected over 300 responses from alumni representing more than 30 college and universities.

The survey asked participants to answer a series of questions related to career preparation offered in theatre programs within colleges/universities across Southern California. For the purpose of this survey, Southern California was defined as Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, or San Diego Counties. Participants were also asked demographic questions, the focus of their highest degree obtained in theatre, and from which college/university they received their degree.

The survey was distributed through a variety of outreach methods in order to get a comprehensive pool of participants. Outreach included posting on social media (mainly college/theatre specific Facebook groups), reaching out to higher education partners to distribute the survey through the institutions' alumni networks, and targeting individual alumni to call on their social connections.

Included below is an overview of the data that resulted from the survey. In addition to the raw numbers, the data has been segmented to deconstruct and explore the layers that can be found when identities are isolated. This has been done in an attempt to understand the intersecting barriers faced by individuals when pursuing careers in live theatre.

Introduction: Love, Passion and Resilience

The data tells a story of passion for craft, love for theatre, and resilience in the face of obstacles.

Almost universally, participants agreed that there were gaps in their education when it came to career readiness; however, in the same breath was an enduring love for theatre that continues to drive their career and life goals. In fact, 73% of participants are still pursuing a career in live theatre. Their deep appreciation for theatre was learned in the classroom and through the opportunities provided by those who shepherded them through higher education.

This love translates to resilience and flexibility, as participants continue to shift and mold their careers to meet the demands of the field. Many survey respondents have expanded their career goals from what they initially studied (e.g. Acting) to a broader focus (e.g. Acting/Producing/Writing/Online Content Creation). A participant who graduated with a degree in directing said, "I started teaching at the college level and found it very rewarding. I am still directing, but teaching is a primary career goal." Here, we see the flexibility often necessary to sustain a life in the arts, as well as what seems to be a natural broadening and shifting of career goals as students leave the academic environment.

Our task – in both the professional theatre field and within higher education institutions – is to continue instilling an enduring love for theatre, while enhancing curriculum and career training to better prepare students to step directly from higher education to the workforce.

Data Highlights

While there are many ways to examine and discuss the results of the survey, the following information stands out as particularly illuminating or surprising.

- When asked about the career-related training they *did not* receive on-campus that would have been most helpful, a strong majority of participants list financial literacy training and other financial management-related skills, including knowledge of contracting, taxes, and negotiation, as what would have been the most beneficial.
- Correspondingly, the greatest challenges participants identify in pursuing a career in live theatre are finance and lifestyle-related; top challenges include low pay and unreasonable work/life balance.
- The intersections of identity influence access to resources within higher education and the ability to stay within careers of live theatre post-graduation. For example, 40% of participants who identify as first-generation college students identified "ability to see live theatre" as something that would have better prepared them to enter in their career; this may speak to issues around equity and access, and the high cost of seeing live theatre.
- Employing segmentation to the question of who is still working in live theatre yields interesting information regarding access and privilege. People who identify as white and/or Caucasian have the largest percentage (82%), across survey breakdowns, of people who are currently working in live theatre. This is in comparison to self-identified people of color (66%), low-income students (75%), first generation (65%) and female-identified persons (71%).
- Those who leave the field of live theatre do continue to be involved with theatre in a variety of ways, from maintaining freelance work to being regular patrons of the arts.

Survey Requirements

Participants were asked to take the survey only if they fulfilled ALL of the following requirements:

- Graduated with an AA, BA, BFA, MA or MFA from a theatre program (with the word theatre or drama in the title). This included graduating from a two year/community college, but did not include certificates of achievement.
- Graduated from that program within the past 10 years.
- Upon graduation from college/university, had the intention of pursuing a career in live theatre, or live theatre + a related career.
- Participants did not have to currently be working in theatre.

Participating College & University Alumni

Center Theatre Group received survey responses from alumni from the following colleges and universities:

- American Musical and Dramatic Academy
- Biola University
- CalArts
- Cal Poly Pomona
- CalArts
- California Lutheran University
- California State University, Fullerton
- California State University, Los Angeles
- California State University, Long Beach
- California State University, Northridge
- Chapman University
- Concordia University
- East Los Angeles College
- Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising
- Glendale Community College
- Los Angeles City College
- Loyola Marymount University
- Occidental College
- Pasadena City College
- Pepperdine University
- San Diego State University
- Santa Monica College
- Scripps College
- University of California, Irvine
- University of California, Los Angeles
- University of California, Riverside
- University of California, San Diego
- University of La Verne
- University of Southern California
- Whittier College
- Woodbury University

Demographic Breakdown

The following data presents the demographic breakdown of the survey participants.

Gender identification was 66.7% female-identified and 32.31% male-identified, with two respondents who wrote in a different gender identity.

54% were between the ages of 20-29, 34% between the ages of 30-39, with all other age brackets making up the remaining 10.5%.

26% of participants self-identified as first-generation college students (the first in their family to attend college). 31% self-identified as coming from a low-income background.

32% of participants graduated six to ten years ago while 16% graduated within the past year, with the remainder graduating between one and six years ago.

The ethnic breakdown of participants is demonstrated below:

- White or Caucasian: 71.6%
- Latinx: 14%
- Two or More Races: 12%
- Asian or Asian American: 6%
- Black or African American: 4.9%
- Native American or Native Alaskan: 2%
- Race not listed (please specify): 1.2%
- Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander: .31%

Overall, demographic data seems representative of both the constituency surveyed (recent graduates) and the theatre field, which is predominantly female, especially within entry-level positions. However, the very large percentage of White or Caucasian applicants (71.6%) is notable given the ethnic diversity of Los Angeles County.

Workforce Readiness Questions

We asked each participant to first answer two questions with identical answer banks: “What types of career preparation **did you receive** at the college/university through which you received your degree?” and “Did you seek career training **outside of the college/university** through which you received your degree?”

Paired with these questions was a list of Workforce Readiness Skills & Training. This list has been generated through conversations with field practitioners, higher education partners, and both current and former students.

The final question in this section was “Are you currently working in live theatre?”. Those who marked “yes” were taken to a page with questions regarding their experience working in live theatre and the obstacles they may have faced. Those who marked “no” were taken to a separate page, which asked questions about why they left the profession and what would have enabled them to stay longer.

These two groups were both asked what career training **they wish they had received**, using the same list of Workforce Readiness Skills & Training.

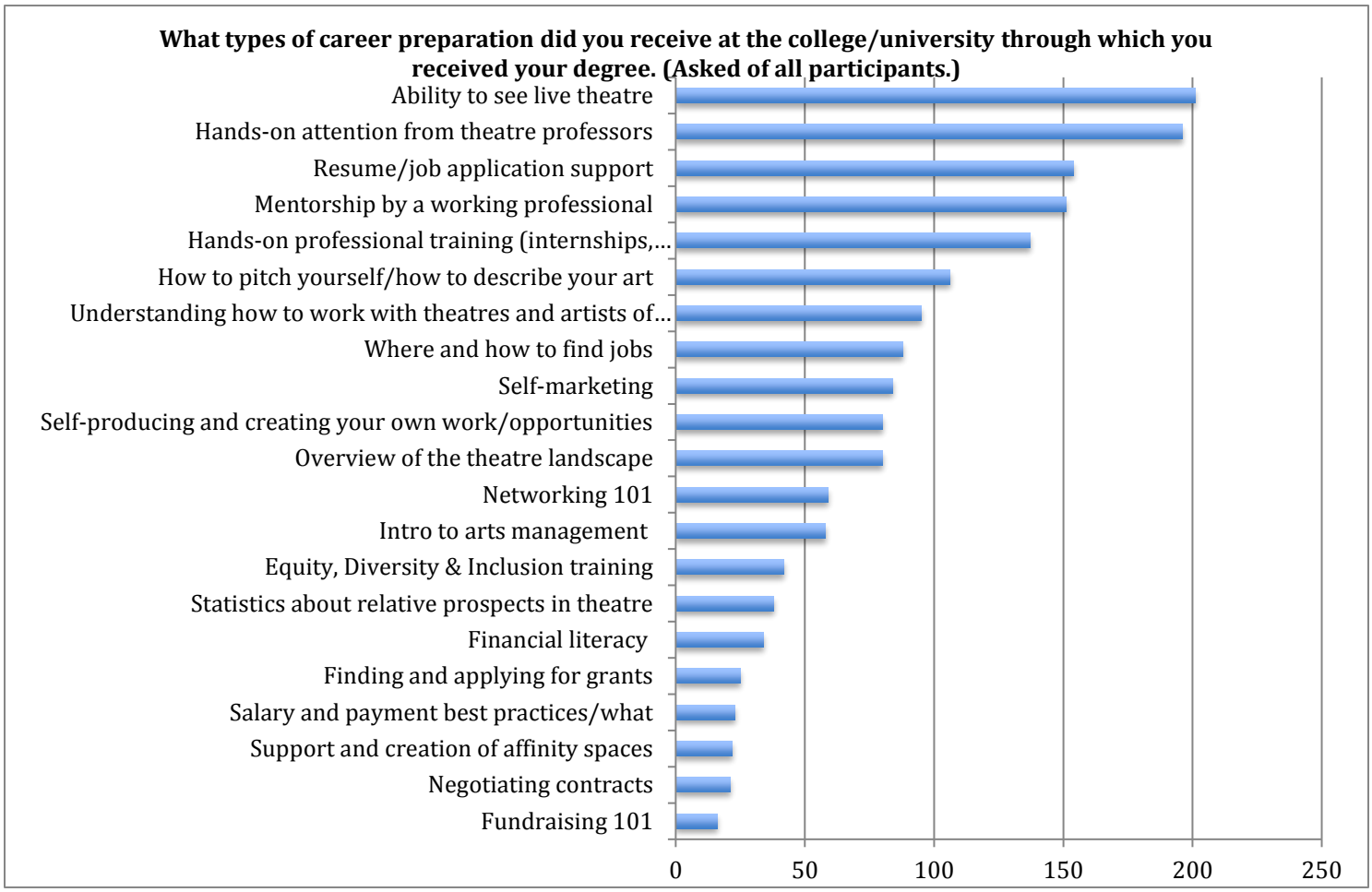
These answers to the questions and the bank of workforce readiness skills and training are shown below.

Workforce Readiness Skills & Training Options

- Financial literacy training/tax best practices/handling money, especially for independent contractors
- Salary and payment best practices/what to ask for
- Negotiating contract and contract basis/international Visas
- Finding and applying for grants and research money for arts-related projects
- Overview of the theatre landscape of various cities- union structure, number of professional productions, number of Equity contracts & which houses offer EMC point, etc.
- Where and how to find jobs in your specific area
- Fundraising 101
- Statistics about relative prospects in theatre, including areas of need or growth for theatre companies
- Equity, Diversity & Inclusion training: anti-bias, anti-racism, anti-discrimination
- Intro to arts management or administration in general (regardless of career aspiration)
- Network 101
- Support and creation of affinity spaces for students from marginalized groups to prepare them for bias and racism in the field, including training in self-advocacy, protest and understanding your rights and value.
- How to pitch yourself/how to describe your art or the art you want to make (elevator speech)
- Mentorship by a working professional
- Self-producing and creating your own work/opportunities
- Resume/job application support
- Hands-on professional training (internships, apprenticeships)
- Understanding how to work with theatres and artists of varying budgets/doing more with less
- Individualized and hands-on attention from theatre professors- especially those working in professional theatre as well within your college/university program
- Ability to see live, professional theatre off-campus to develop personal taste and understanding of the local theatre scene

Career Training Students Accessed On-Campus

The following chart outlines the career training that alumni reported receiving through their college or university. It is important to note that we asked students what they participated in, *not* what was available.[1]



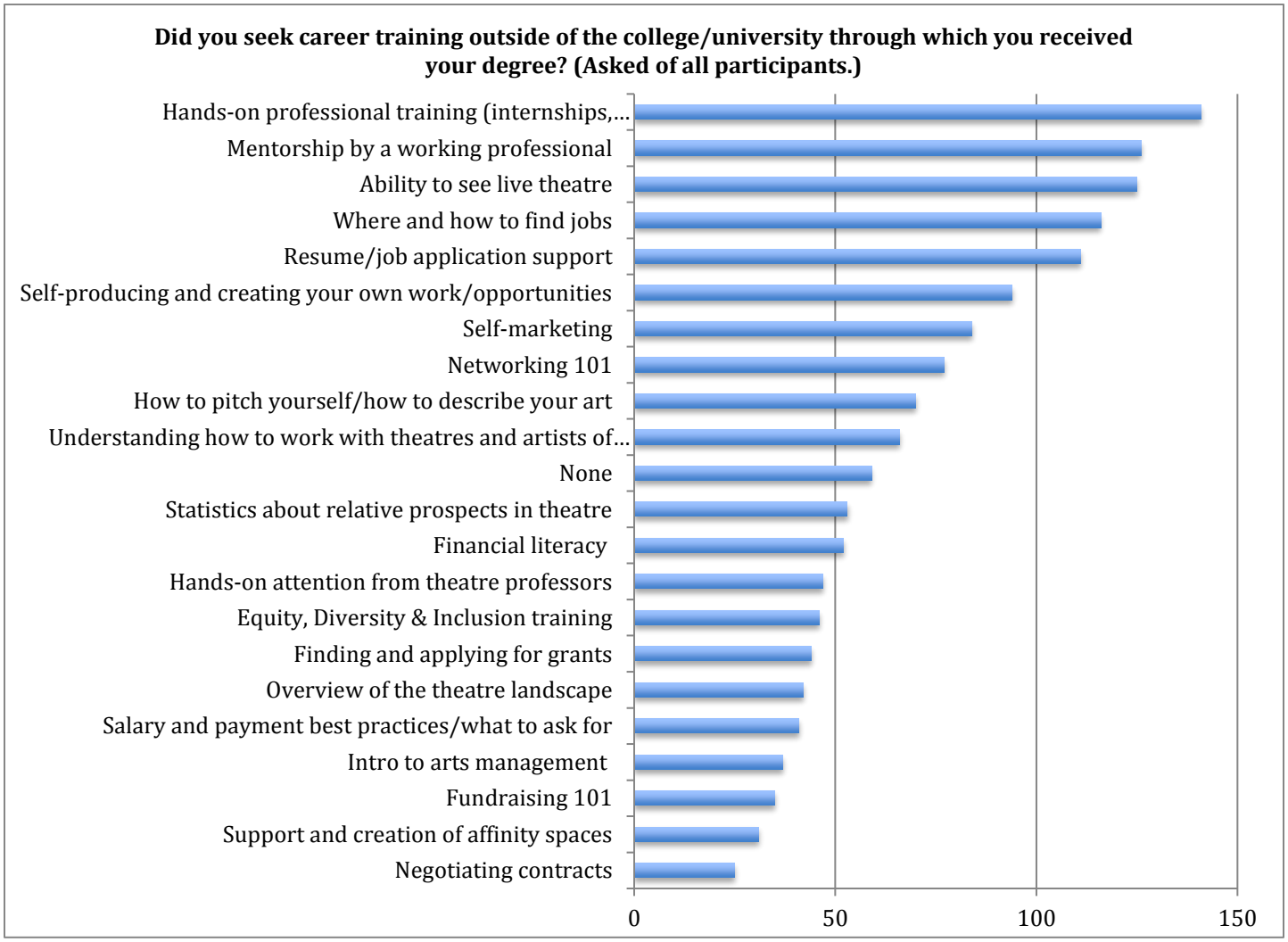
Responses seem aligned with what we know of a theatre student's typical experience on-campus, with a focus on seeing theatre, attention and mentorship (presumably by faculty and staff), and basic resume/job application support.

However, although "ability to see live, professional theatre off-campus" tops the list, it is important to note that only 72% of respondents selected this option. It is unclear why 28% of students are unable to see live professional theatre while pursuing their degree. We imagine economic factors, such as the high cost of tickets, as well as emphasis placed on participating in and seeing campus productions, as well as geography or accessibility may contribute.

[1] Please note that although we have included as much text as possible in each chart, you may need to refer to the list of "Workforce Readiness Skills & Training Options" on page 5 for full text for each selection option. Note that the x-axis on all charts represents the number of responses received; respondents could select as many options as desired.

Career Training Students Sought Off-Campus

The following chart displays alumni responses to the career training they sought on their own, off-campus, while they were pursuing their degree.

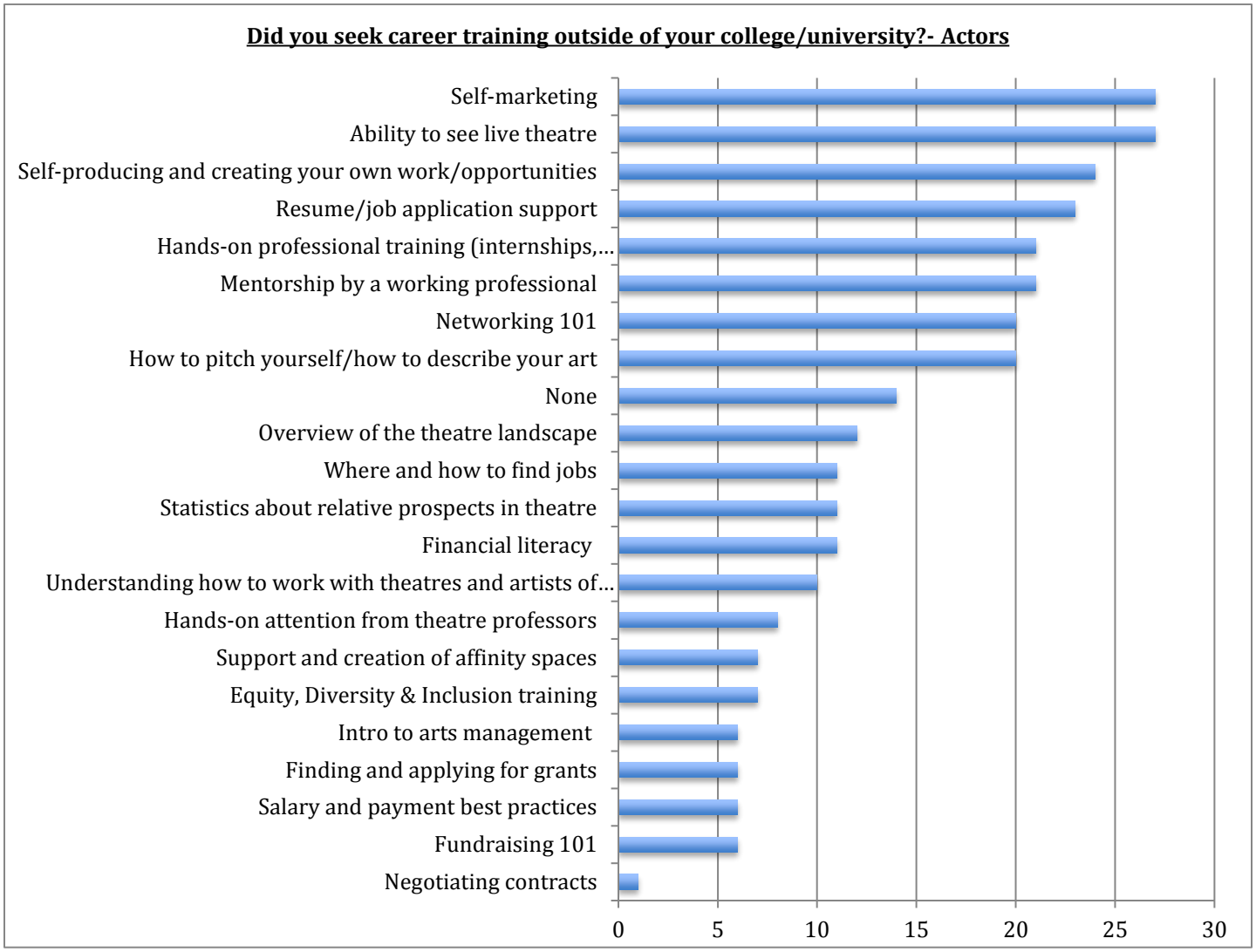


The first few responses focus on professional opportunities such as internships and mentorship, emphasizing the critical need for the theatre field to provide these opportunities for diverse students. While some local programs exist, including the Los Angeles County Arts Internship Program and opportunities at individual theatres, we recognize a pressing need to expand these opportunities and provide stipends/reimbursement whenever possible to eliminate economic barriers to participation.

Similarly, many students report seeing professional theatre on their own, outside of their degree programs. While there are affordable ticket options for students at many theatres, this is a potential area where economic barriers can prevent some students from accessing invaluable career training. Seeing live professional theatre helps students become aware of the local theatre ecology, which is directly tied to not only job prospects, but also the development of a theatre student's taste and artistic focus.

Career Training Students Sought Off-Campus: Actor Snapshot

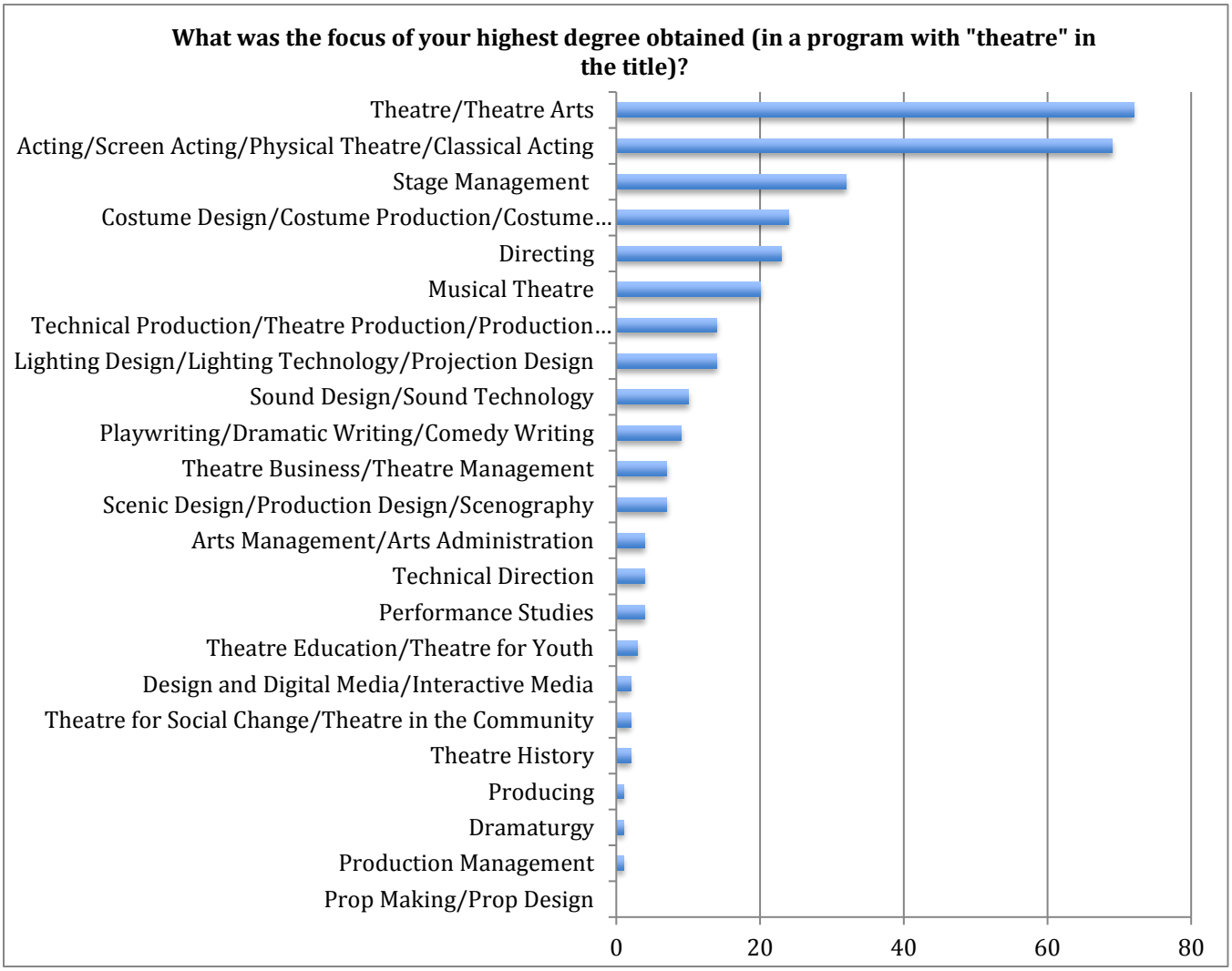
Isolating those who self-identify as actors shows a different focus for students' off-campus training.



Note the greater emphasis placed on building connections and creating work, as well as self-marketing, which may include branding, setting up a website, and other tools for self-promotion. All of these options appear far down on the list of what students accessed on-campus, and we might assume that many alumni paid for these services sought off-campus.

Majors/Focus of Participants

The following graph shows the breakdown of the focus of respondents' highest degree obtained within the field of live theatre. The majority of respondents graduated with either a general theatre degree or an acting degree. Note that some options received only one or two respondents. Consistent with our understanding that there are no local programs that offer a degree in Props, we had zero respondents with that degree path.

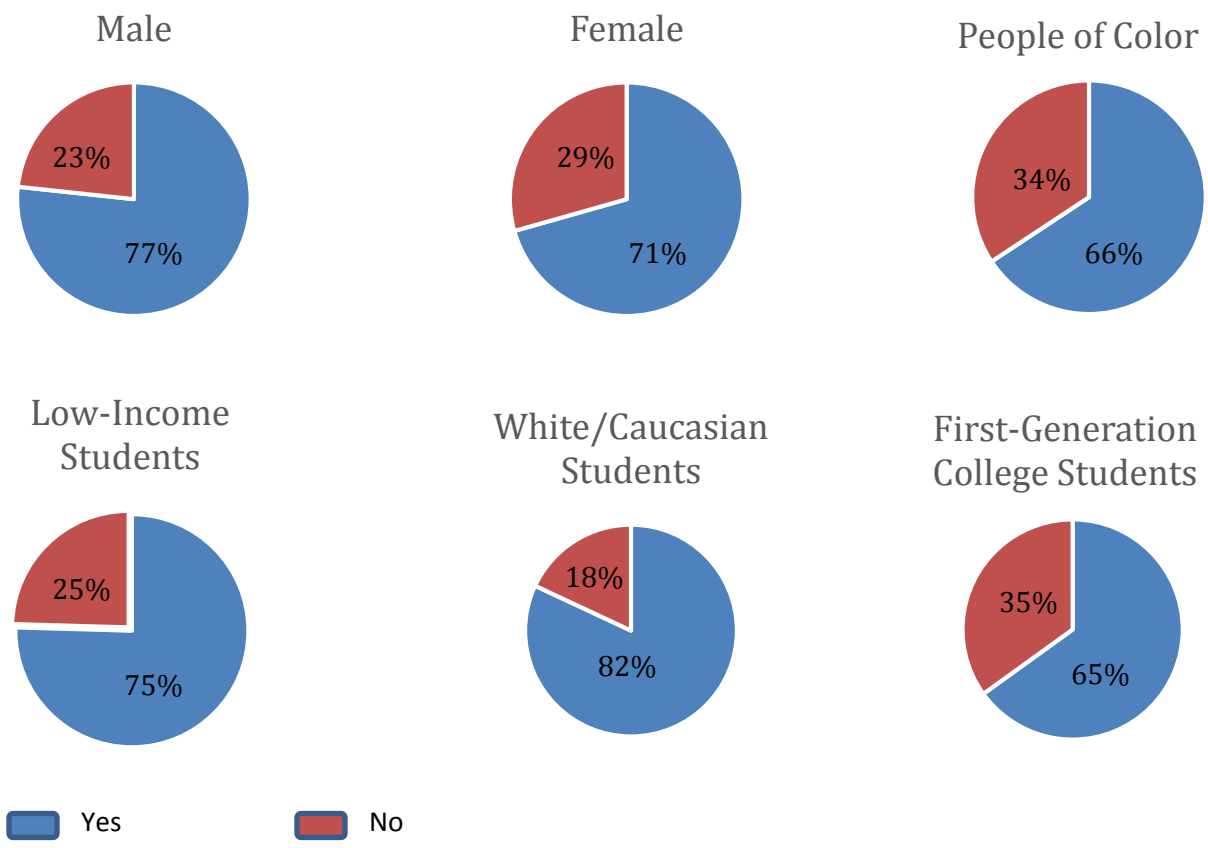


This drastic curve within the graph demonstrates theatre students' overwhelming focus on a small range of theatre careers. As an employer, we see the results of this curve played out daily: we receive far more applicants for positions and opportunities that involve performance and design than for those focused on management, producing, or design technology. The chart also illuminates specific hiring challenges for fields such as technical direction, props, and certain areas of arts management.

"Are You Currently Working in Live Theatre?" Segmentations

73% of survey participants answered the question "Are you currently working in live theatre?" in the affirmative. Given the widespread perception that theatre is a very competitive field, we found this data heartening. We should note, though, that respondents did not have to be making the majority of their income from live theatre to respond yes; many told us they were pursuing a theatre career while also teaching, holding a "day job," or also working in the film/TV/entertainment industry.

Segmenting the data by self-reported gender, ethnicity, and economic identities points to crucial issues of access and privilege in the live theatre field. This lens not only further contextualizes the data, but also invites conversations regarding equity, diversity and inclusivity.



Note that people who identify as white and/or Caucasian hold the largest field retention rate at 82%. First-generation college students and people of color show the smallest retention rates, at 65% and 66%, respectively. This may be due to systematic privileges such as access to resources and generationally-inherited wealth. We can also look at the theatre field's ongoing conversations around equity and parity in everything from the selection of plays to culturally-appropriate casting to diversity in leadership. Economically, there is an expectation of poverty for theatre artists, especially early-career artists, which may drive first-generation college students from the field.

Respondents Currently Pursuing a Career in Live Theatre: Changing Focus

We included an open-ended question asking whether alumni's career aspirations had shifted in the years since graduation, and if so, what the shift had been. For those who have stayed within the field, we see a natural broadening of career paths. This seems to be for economic reasons, to better control and further their artistic goals, and/or to apply the valuable skills gained through theatre education to other fields.

A sample of participants' responses regarding how their goals have changed follows:

"Yes. With little knowledge [of the field], it has taken too long to try and achieve my goals. I still work in theatre, but also have a main job which makes taking on more theatre jobs harder."

"Yes, while I originally wanted to focus solely on acting I am now also producing, editing, and writing. I found a deeper desire to be involved with creative control and development."

"My goals now are to work consistently and put myself into different kinds of performing including physical theatre, Shakespeare, film/TV, immersive theatre, and especially cruise ships."

"Yes, they've expanded to include production management, [but] in fields of film, events, festivals, weddings, and concerts."

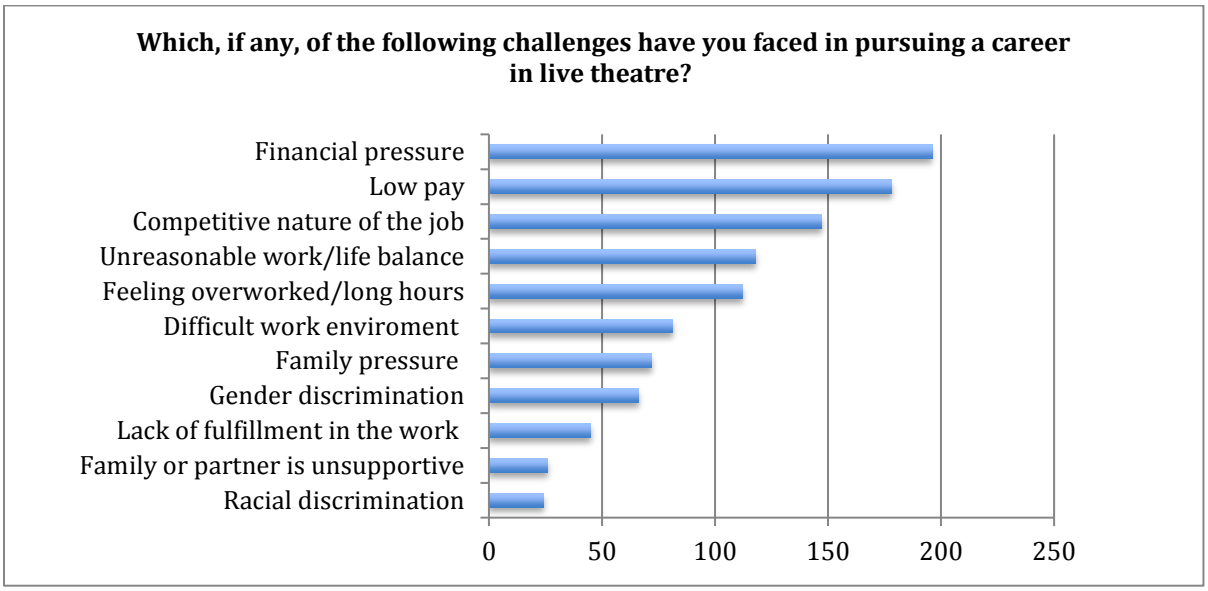
"Yes. I am not interested in just auditioning for roles. I desire to be a part of every aspect of production - from conception through post/curtain."

These quotes illustrate the most common themes in these responses for the students who had experienced a career shift. Taking on a "day job" can be a necessity, especially for those who feel unsure about how to pursue their theatre career. Many people expand their focus to include career opportunities in for-profit entertainment and related fields. Many others act out of a desire for more creative opportunities, and learn to produce, create content, and/or direct in addition to performing, writing or designing.

Broadening the scope of one's focus can not only help an emerging theatre practitioner take charge of their career, but can also tap into the value of a theatre education by applying it to related fields.

Respondents Currently Pursuing a Career in Live Theatre: Challenges

We asked alumni to identify the challenges they have faced during their time in the field, using a bank of options. They also had the opportunity to clarify or add additional information in an associated comment field.



The following quote is representative of some of the write-in comments for this question:

"In order to take opportunities like apprenticeships/internships/unpaid assistant work which lead to networking and connections, you either have to be independently wealthy, have family, financial support, or live with 6 people in a hectic home environment."

There are clearly major issues surrounding the economics of working in theatre. Coupled with a culture of overtime, sacrifice and martyrdom, and few paid training opportunities, we see the difficulties faced by those who come out of a theatre program and try to step directly into this field. Additional information about the financial realities of a live theatre career, as well as support around finding jobs, salary negotiation, and cultivating work/life balance, may be beneficial to students hoping to transition into theatre careers.

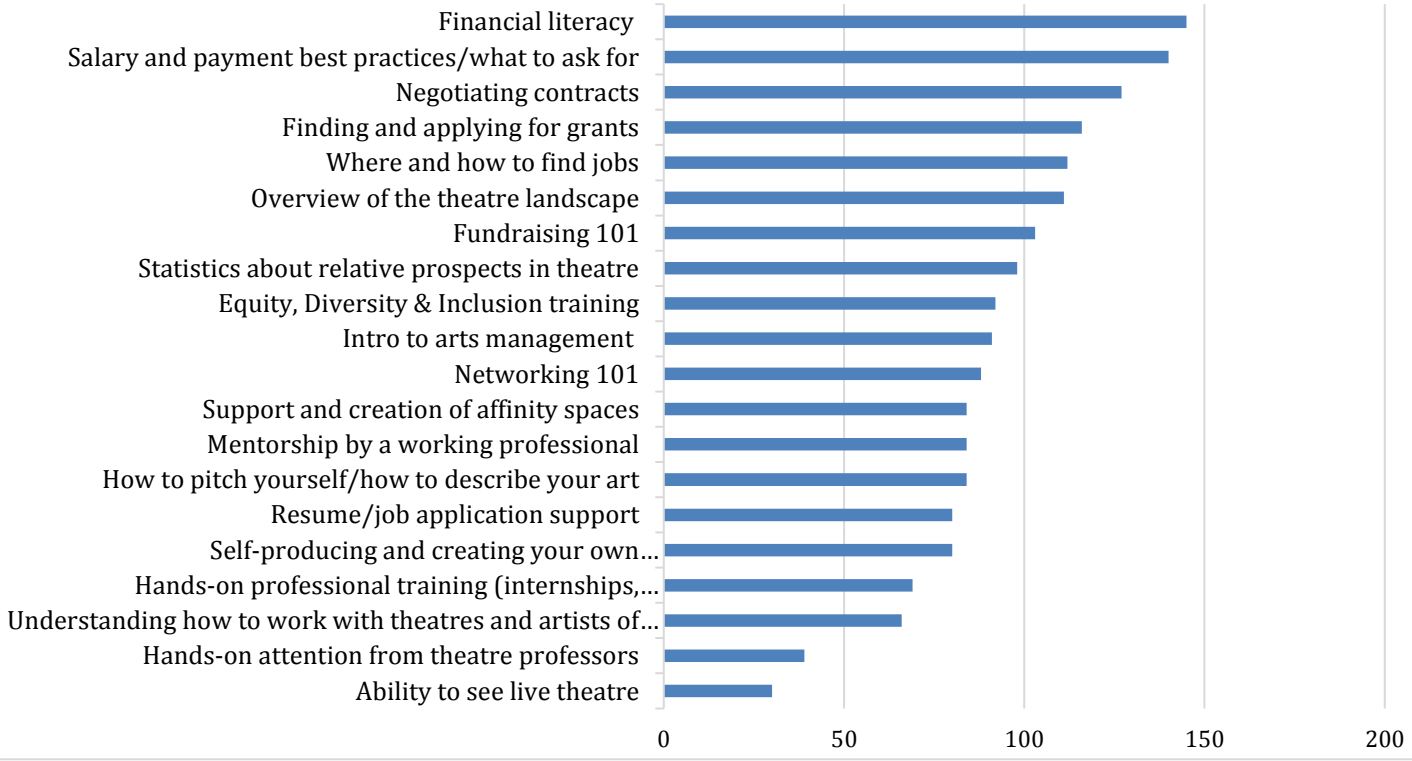
There may also be room for conversations about the information provided to students about the range of jobs within live theatre. There are certainly career pathways within live theatre that are more financially stable, less competitive, and more supportive of work/life balance; however, these may not be visible to students, especially at the undergraduate level.

Regarding segmentation by identity groups, while the top two responses remain consistent for each group, there are subtle but important differences farther down the list. For example, pulling data for women of color shows "Family pressure" jumping to #3. This could indicate the gendered and cultural challenges that women of color face when navigating the workplace.

Respondents Currently Pursuing a Career in Live Theatre: What Career Training Would Have Been Beneficial?

Alumni respondents were asked to consider the types of career training *not* offered on their campus that could have better prepared them for their career in live theatre. They were provided with the same bank of options as in the first two questions about workforce readiness skills. Interestingly, we see much less of a curve in this graph; a significant portion of people selected many, if not all, of the available responses.

What career training NOT offered by your school could have better prepared you to enter into this career? (Asked only of those who marked that they were currently pursuing a career in live theatre.)

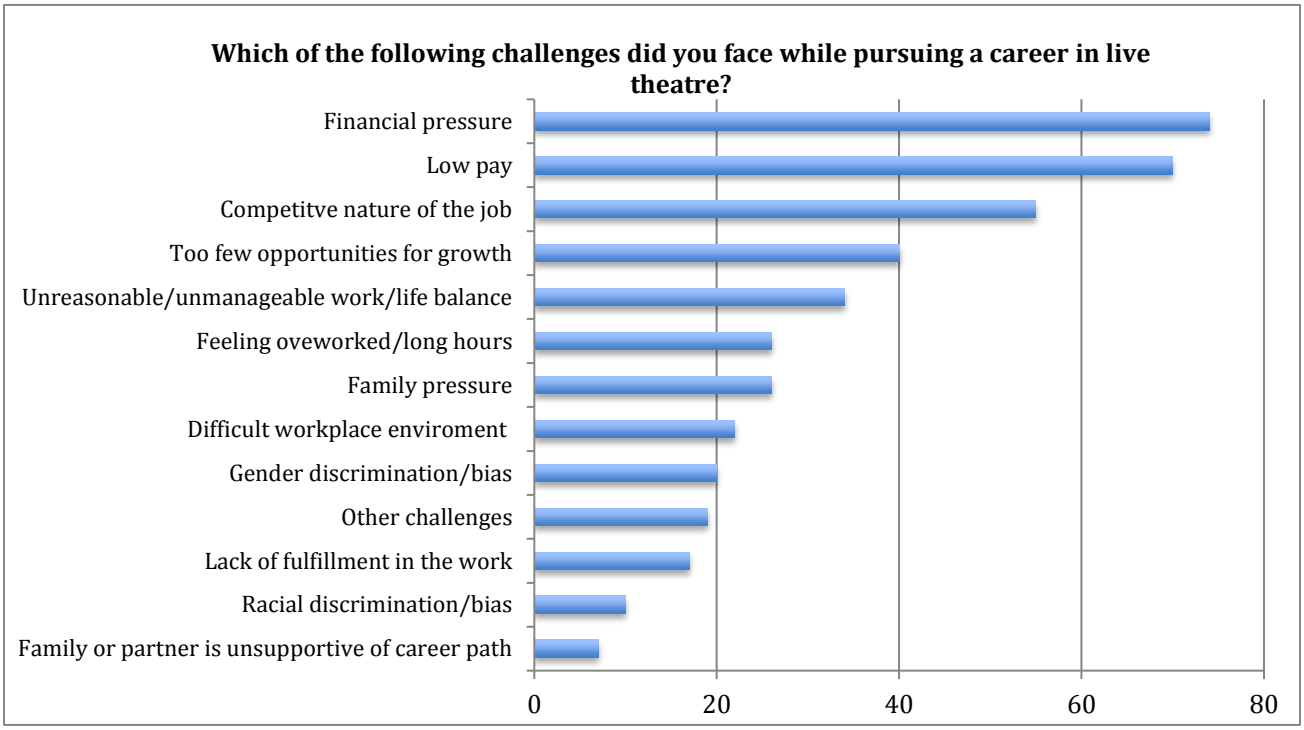


This is possibly the most striking data set from the research study. Overwhelmingly, the focus is on finances: the economic realities and necessities of making a life in theatre. The top six responses are directly tied to understanding how to ask for and manage money. While alumni reported additional needs, including a better understanding of the theatre landscape and what jobs are available within it, the emphasis on financial literacy cannot be ignored.

Toward the bottom of the list, we see options like the ability to see live professional theatre, mentorship, and hands-on professional training. We should not infer from the chart that respondents do not see these as important; rather, these were the top responses for what students *did receive* on-campus, and therefore were not relevant to the question asked. Instead of shifting focus away from the career training already provided, our challenge is to layer in additional training and support focused on the economics of theatre, as well as how to find rewarding jobs in the field.

Respondents No Longer Pursing a Career in Live Theatre: Challenges

We asked those no longer pursuing a career in live theatre about the challenges they faced while they were in the field. In addition to the bank of options, we included a comment section; respondents identified lack of health insurance, parenthood and conflicts with "day jobs" as additional answers to the question.



We see general alignment between this chart and the responses of those still working in live theatre. However, we see a jump in "too few opportunities for growth," which can certainly be a reason to pursue options elsewhere.

We should also note that both gender and racial discrimination appear on these charts. While some of the challenges identified by respondents -- especially the competitive nature of jobs in theatre and the economics of the career path—may be directly connected to the financial realities of the nonprofit theatre field in particular, gender and racial bias should have no place within theatre workplaces. This is clearly an area that needs to be examined and addressed within professional theatres.

Respondents No Longer Pursing a Career in Live Theatre: What Would Have Kept Them Here?

We asked those who had left the field to reflect on what career training not provided on-campus or sought off-campus might have enabled them to remain in the live theatre field.

While many of the top responses still focus on economics and finances, we see a major jump in "where and how to find jobs." This does seem to be a topic that could be addressed, either on- or off-campus, in basic career training for theatre professionals. However, it should be noted that this is more nuanced than simple resume and job application training, as jobs in theatre are often secured through networking, mentorship (which is also in the top responses), and word-of-mouth/personal recommendations.

"Negotiating contracts" appears in the second position, which may speak to both self-advocacy/understanding one's worth, as well as basic understanding of how to function as an independent contractor.

Remembering that first-generation college students, people of color, and women leave the field at higher rates, this chart contains valuable information related to equity, diversity and inclusion. Information related to finances, where and how to find jobs, and access to networking opportunities may only be available people coming from a certain level of privilege.

Respondents No Longer Pursing a Career in Live Theatre: Career Shifts & Continued Involvement

Of course, not everyone who left the field of live theatre did it unwillingly, or expressed either regret or sadness about their career shifts. Many people's career paths veer from their higher education course of study as they discover new passions and interests in the workforce. Respondents are working in a variety of fields, from education to the entertainment industry to event production; this points to the many valuable and transferrable skills gained through theatre education.

We asked those who left the field if they remain involved in theatre in some way. The majority said yes. Many continue to volunteer at local theatres, are active patrons, and/or sometimes take "side gigs" to fulfill creative urges.

Even those no longer pursuing a career in the field continue to find joy in the art form. While is it unreasonable to expect everyone graduating with a theatre degree to make their career in the field, it is gratifying to think that studying theatre instills a deep and lifelong love for the work in the vast majority of students.

Conclusion

Throughout the data, there are clear themes, including the importance of financial literacy training, the economic and lifestyle challenges of the field, and the need to address barriers to entry presented by lack of privilege. There are areas where the professional field can step up and do better, and aspects of career training that may need to be integrated into higher education for aspiring theatre practitioners.

We also see that while there are challenges to working in live theatre, people are driven to stay in the field, and are finding innovative ways to make their life in the arts. This passion and love deserves to continue to be cultivated both within the classroom and outside of it, as we work to build, support and sustain a new generation of theatre professionals.

We hope that this research will inform conversations about how to bridge the gap between school and work, and how higher education and the professional field can work together to build a stronger, more diverse workforce.

Lead Researcher: Naima Orozco-Valdivia, Student, Pitzer College
CTG Staff Lead: Camille Schenkkan, Next Generation Initiatives Director, Center Theatre Group