

UNDERScore THEATRE COMPANY

**A REFLECTION ON THE PROCESS OF
NEW MUSICAL DEVELOPMENT**

INTRODUCTION

Underscore Theatre Company was founded In 2011 In Chicago, Illinois as a home for new musical development. In the 10+ years of the company, Underscore produced an annual season of two or three readings and/or workshops, four to six new musical concerts, two mainstage productions, and six years of the Chicago Musical Theatre Festival. In the fall of 2021, on the heels of the Impact of COVID-19, Underscore underwent a 10-month strategic planning process that included a publicly-distributed survey and multiple small-group listening sessions with writers, composers, actors, Artistic Directors, producers, and theater-makers in the new work field.

In the summer of 2022, Underscore Theatre Company's Board made a decision to dissolve the company at the conclusion of the fiscal year. While Underscore will no longer operate, the Company felt the information garnered in the strategic planning process was undeniably valuable and wished to share these findings. This report offers a summary of the data received from the survey and notable reflections from the listening sessions. The process was led by consultants Dudley Voigt and Gregory Smith alongside Underscore's leadership team of Sebastian Fabál and Whitney Rhodes. Data was compiled by Bill Baker. Underscore's Board of Directors, founders, and staff hope that the sharing of this information continues to propel valuable conversations in the field of new musical development.



INCUBATION VS PRODUCTION

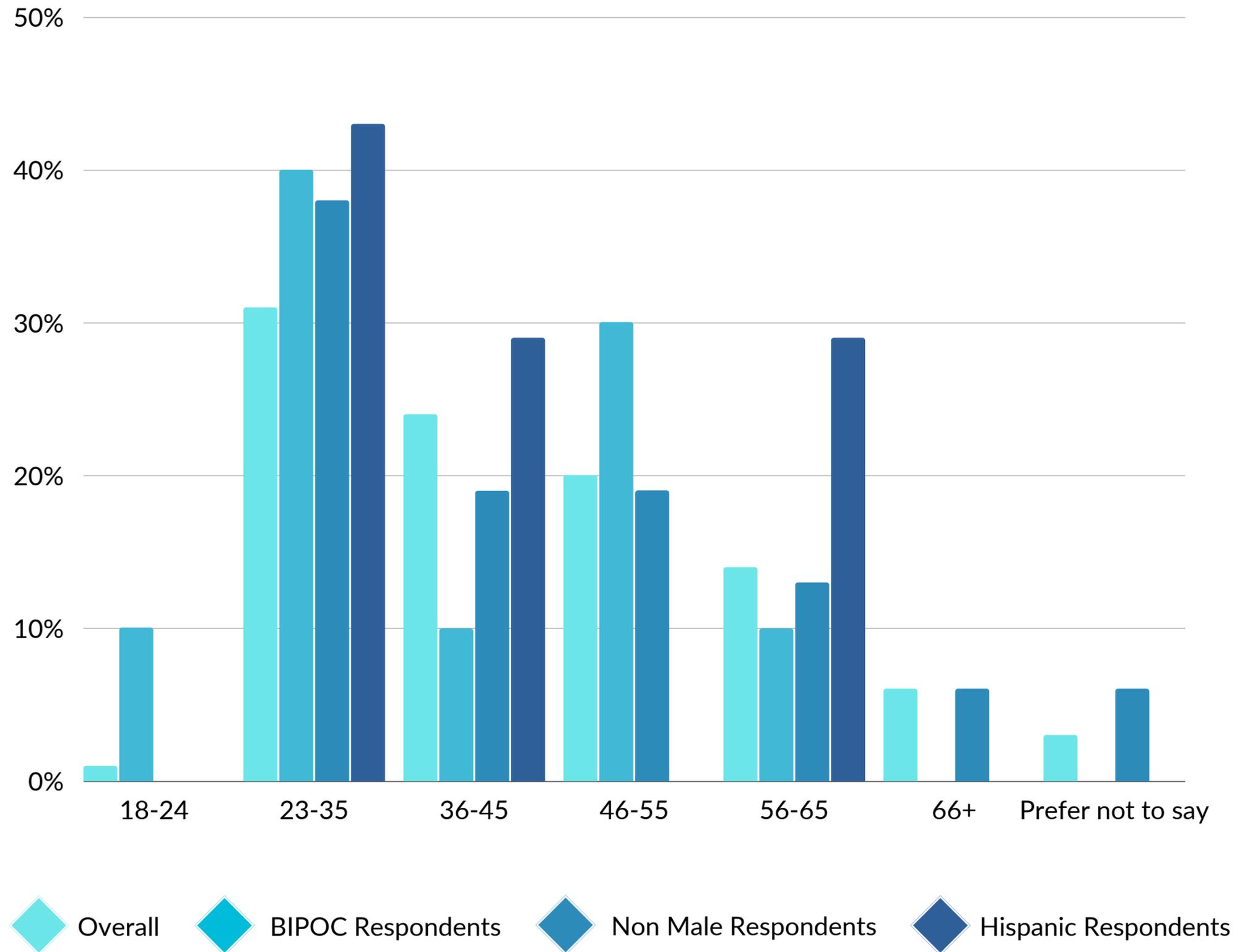
ACCESS, EQUITY, COMMUNITY

CAPACITY

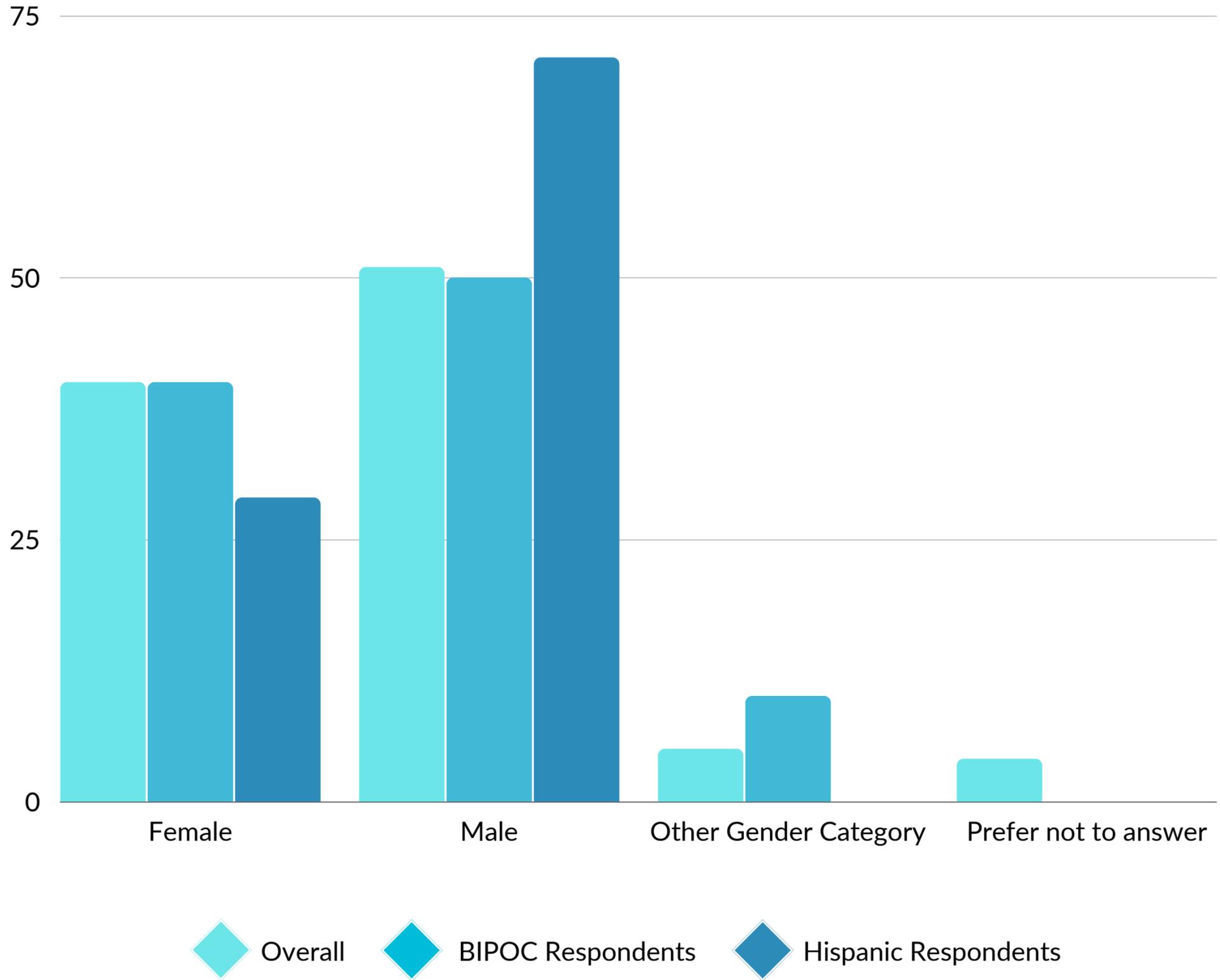
AREAS OF INQUIRY

These areas of inquiry were discovered through discussions between the strategic consultants and Underscore leadership. Audience cultivation was an additional area of inquiry, but the fact finding instruments were not reaching prospective audience members. The methods of data collection were a widely distributed public survey and curated small group, paid listening sessions.

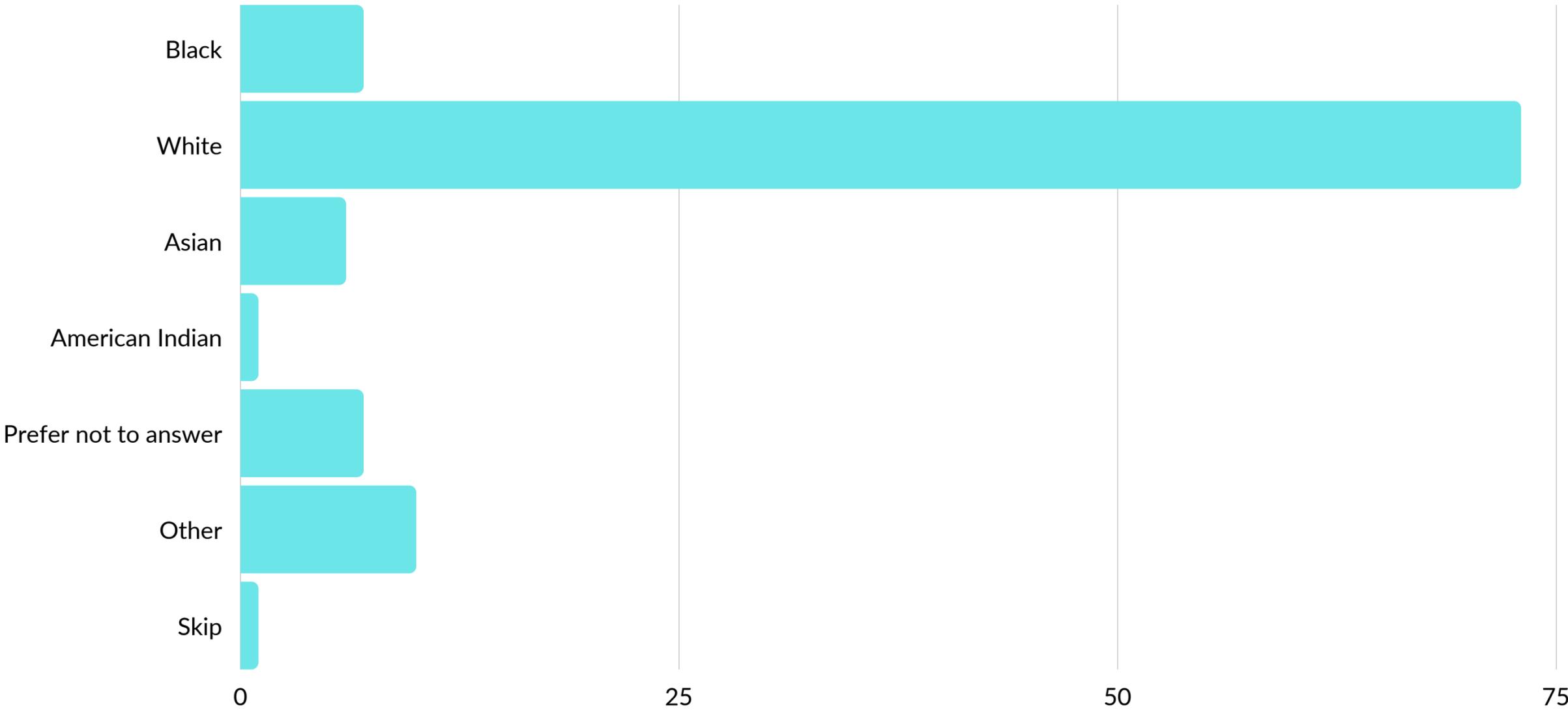
WHAT IS YOUR AGE?



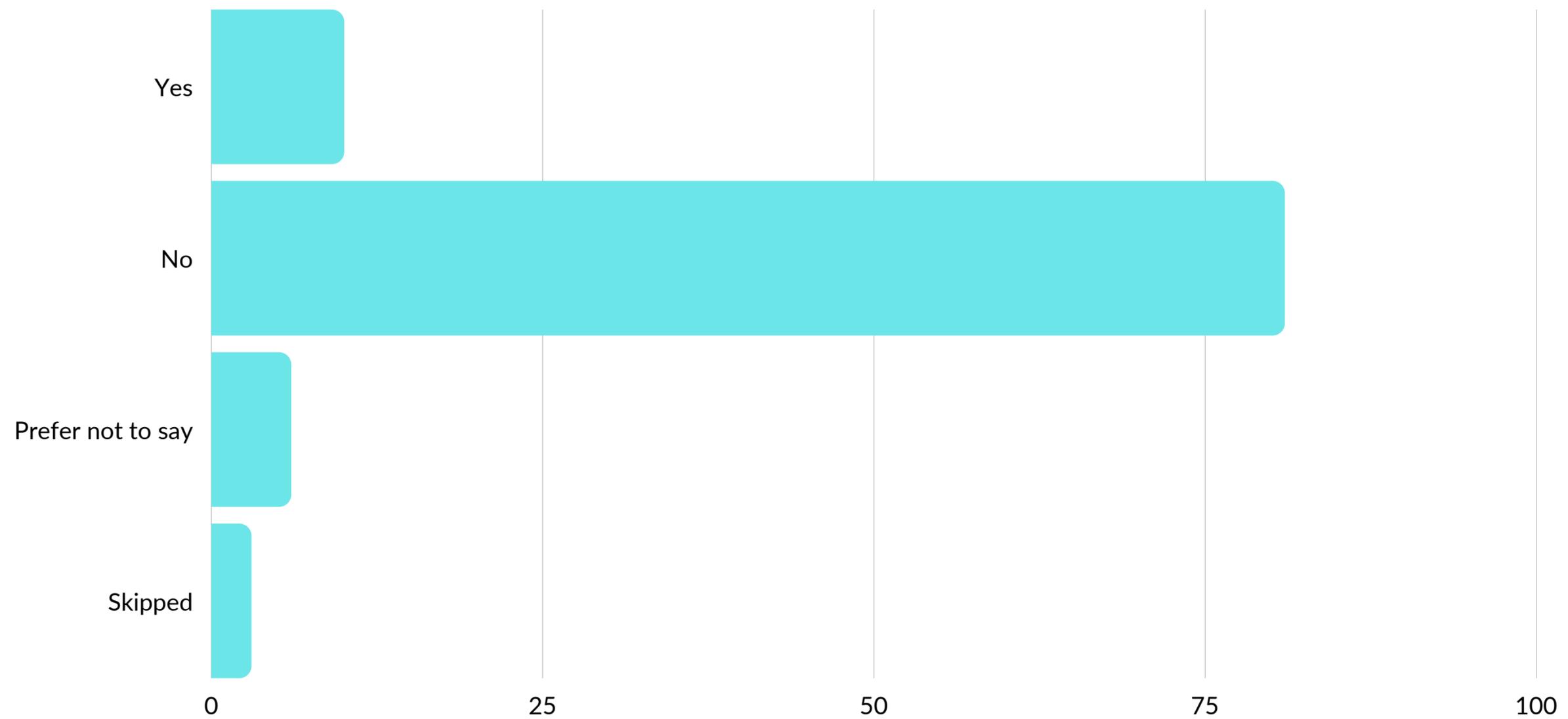
TO WHICH GENDER IDENTITY DO YOU MOST IDENTIFY?



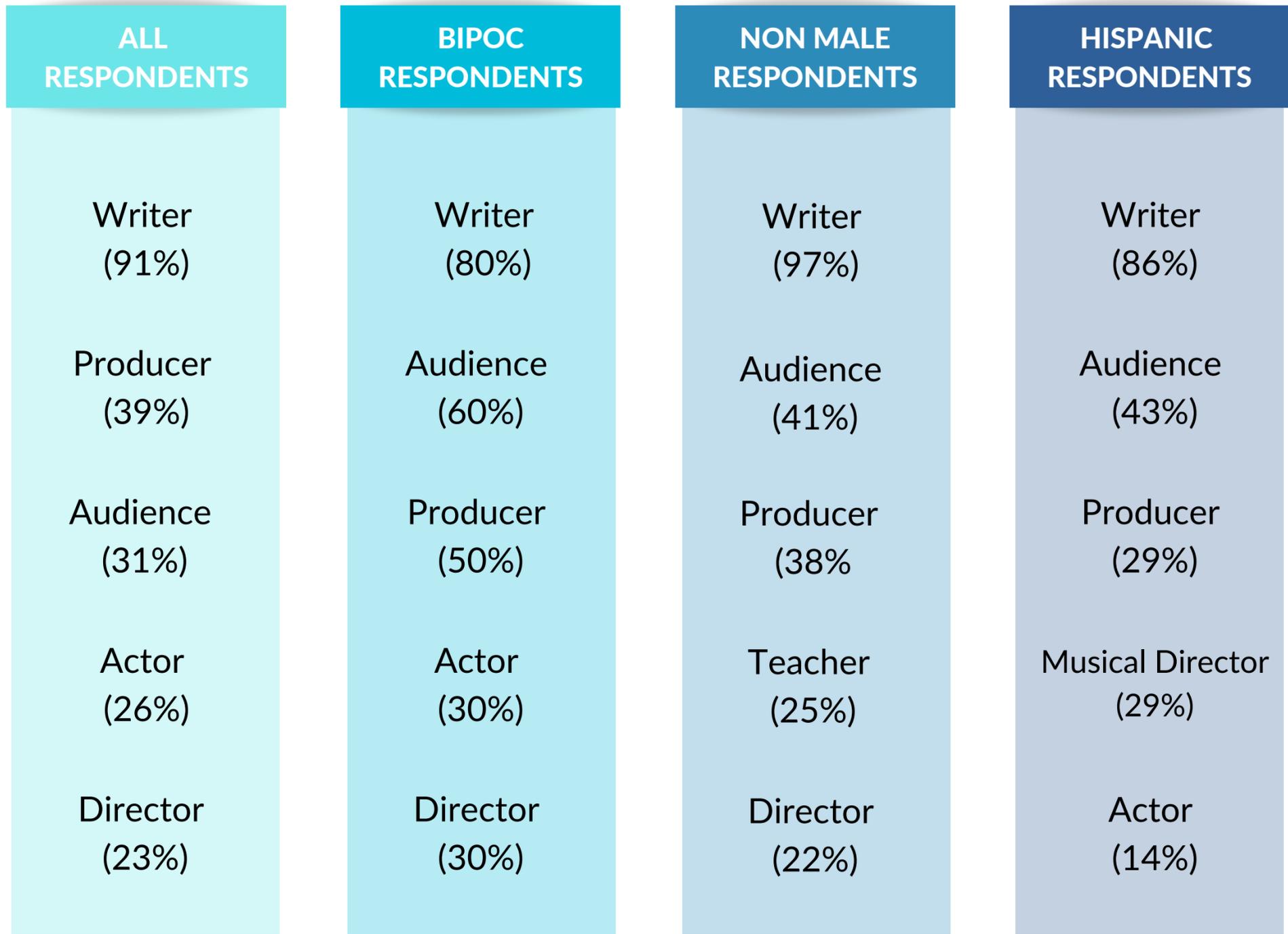
HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOURSELF?



ARE YOU OF HISPANIC, LATINO, OR SPANISH ORIGIN?



WHAT ROLE(S) HAVE YOU RECENTLY HAD IN DEVELOPING NEW MUSICALS? (TOP 5)



WHAT IS YOUR EXPERIENCE LEVEL WITH DEVELOPING NEW MUSICALS?

ALL RESPONDENTS

I'm in the process of working on my first musical.
(4%)

I've been a part of one new musical
(4%)

I've been involved in the development of multiple new musicals
(89%)

I support and attend new musicals
(3%)

BIPOC RESPONDENTS

I'm in the process of working on my first musical.
(0%)

I've been a part of one new musical
(10%)

I've been involved in the development of multiple new musicals
(90%)

I support and attend new musicals
(0%)

NON MALE RESPONDENTS

I'm in the process of working on my first musical.
(3%)

I've been a part of one new musical
(3%)

I've been involved in the development of multiple new musicals
(88%)

I support and attend new musicals
(6%)

HISPANIC RESPONDENTS

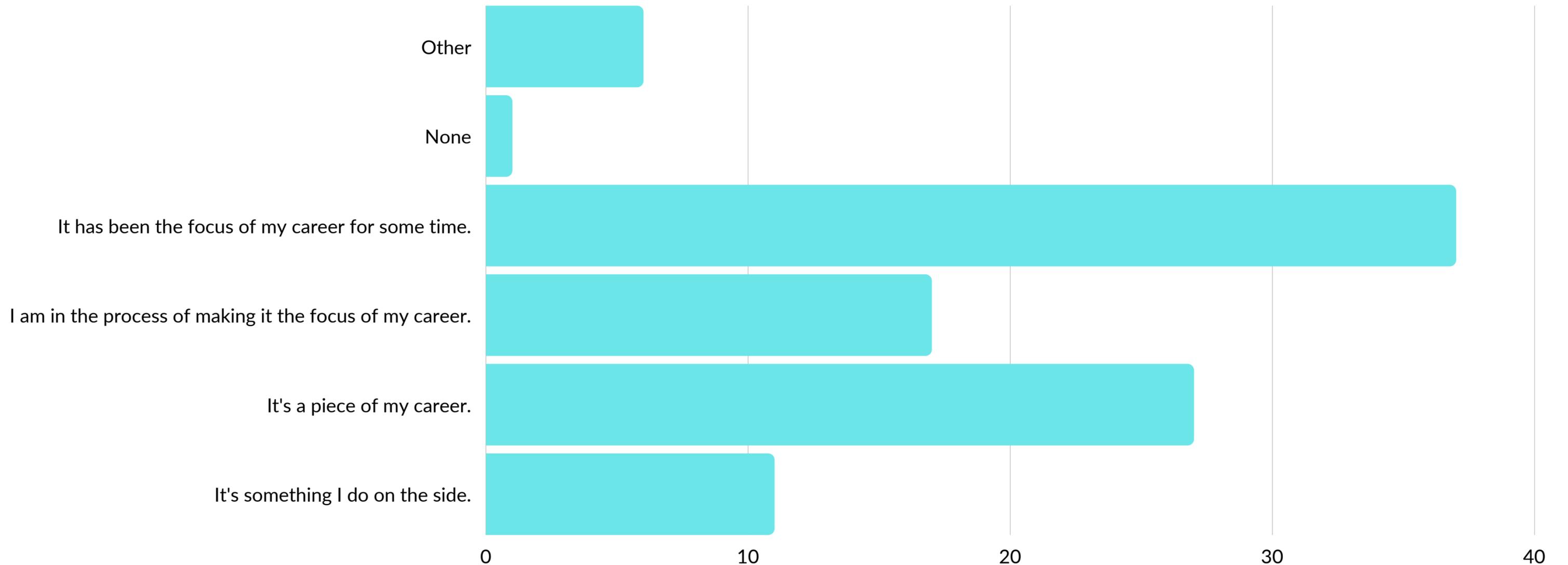
I'm in the process of working on my first musical.
(14%)

I've been a part of one new musical
(0%)

I've been involved in the development of multiple new musicals
(86%)

I support and attend new musicals
(0%)

HOW DOES THE DEVELOPMENT OF NEW MUSICALS FIT IN YOUR LIFE?





WHAT SKILLS DO YOU FEEL YOU UNDERSTAND WELL?



Writing Skills (60%)

Things like story structure, rhythm and pacing, sharpening scenes, etc.



Creative Process (50%)

Things like collaboration, managing creative conflict, taking feedback, etc.



Composition Skills (43%)

Things like lyric writing, song structure, music theory, music technique, etc.



Putting on the show (21%)

Things like working with actors, running rehearsals, self producing, etc.



Workshopping Written Work (21%)

Things like audience interviews, turning feedback into rewrites, etc.

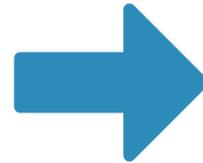


WHAT MAKES AN ORGANIZATION SUCCESSFUL OR NOT?



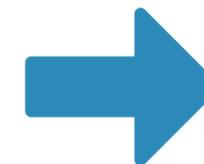
WHAT ARE THE TOP 3 SKILLS NEEDED TO SUPPORT NEW MUSICAL CREATORS? (RELEVANT THEMES THAT AROSE)

Approach to working
with artists - 44%



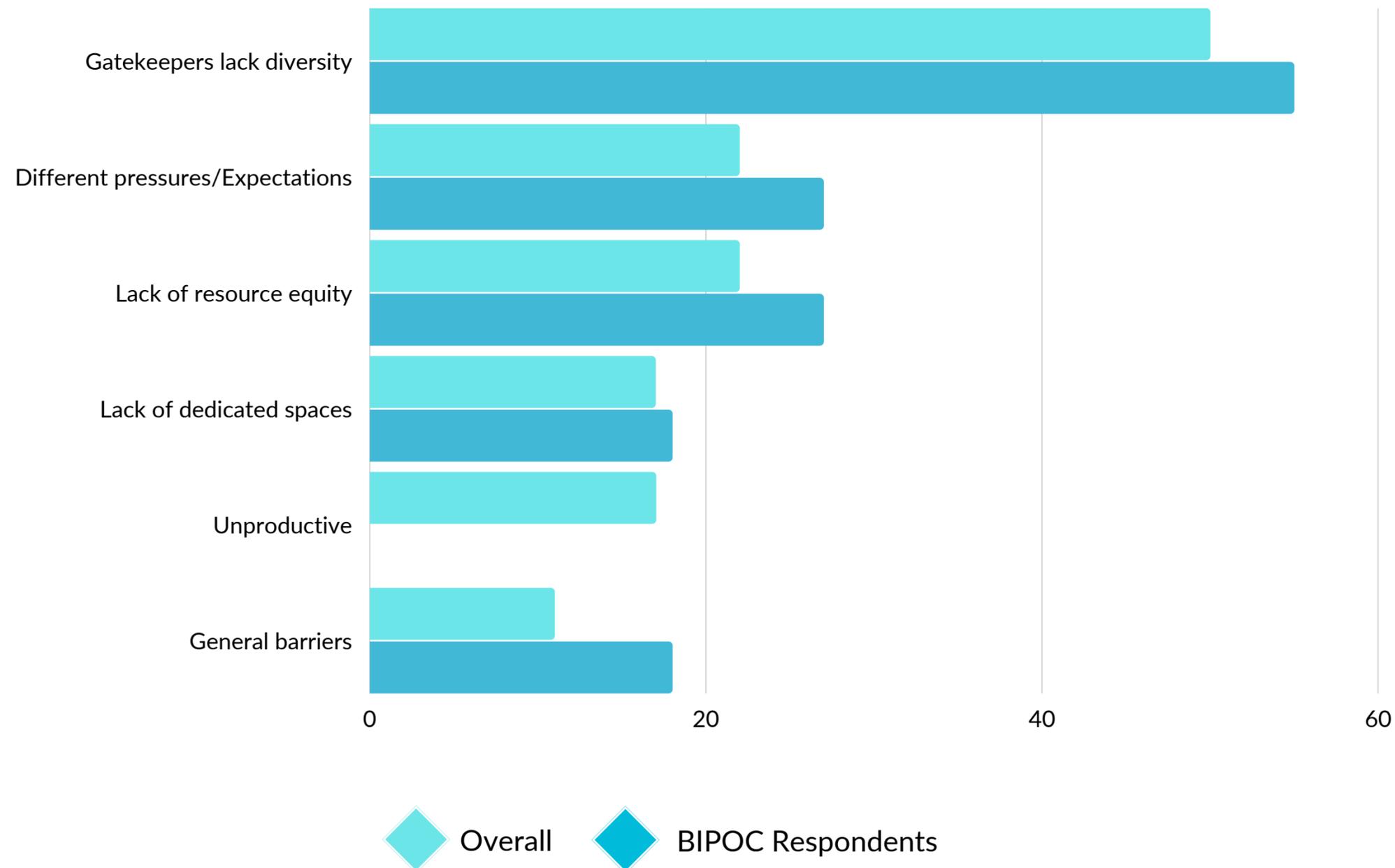
- "Giving honest feedback along with encouragement."
- "Willingness to let them write the bad version first."
- "Mentoring."

Understanding
Gatekeeper Role - 11%



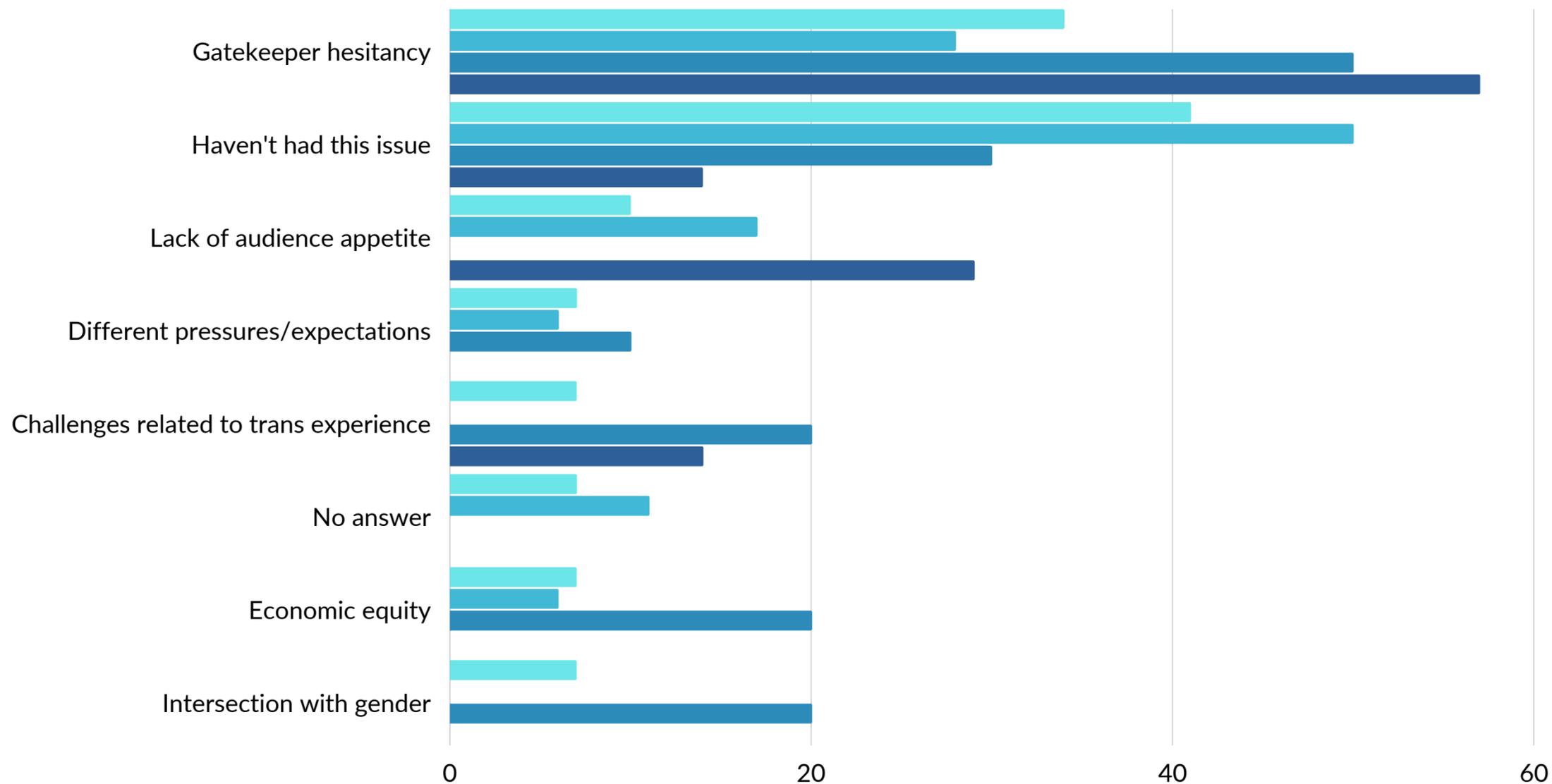
- "Amplifying new writers and fresh voices."
- "Seeing beyond commercial possibilities."
- "Casting as wide a net as possible in seeking out creators."

IF YOU IDENTIFY AS BIPOC, WHAT CHALLENGES OR GAPS HAVE YOU FACED IN DEVELOPING NEW MUSICALS?



- "Production spaces seem to cater to white audiences."
- "Selection committees are homogeneous."
- "Expectations of what an Asian story should be."
- "Pressure for work to focus on my background."
- "I can't afford opportunities that offer no pay."
- "No incubator forum for BIPOC individuals to discuss musical theater."

IF YOU IDENTIFY AS LGBTQIA+, WHAT CHALLENGES OR GAPS HAVE YOU FACED IN DEVELOPING NEW MUSICALS?



- "Unfamiliarity or discomfort with queer subject matter."
- "Queer shows are expected to represent something."
- "Audience attitudes are conservative in many places."
- "Transition means old work done under old name can't be used."

◆ Overall
 ◆ Male Respondents
 ◆ Non Male Respondents
 ◆ BIPOC Respondents



The following slides represent key thoughts from the small group listening sessions. These thoughts represent expanded reflection on the relevant themes gathered from the survey data. While the listening sessions each developed uniquely and mediators allowed the participants to effectively guide the conversations, the below questions focused the dialogue.

- In your opinion, what are the barriers in creating new musical theater work?
- What areas do you feel creators of new musicals need support in the creative process?
- How do you think an organization like Underscore might be of greater service in support of the creation of new musical theater?
- As far as being an asset to the field, what is more important—having opportunities and exposure to other creators/networks or to have specific training that adds to a creator’s toolbox?
- Rank the following items in order of importance
 - Connecting to other creators/networking
 - Opportunities to produce work
 - Workshops
 - Training
 - Understanding/connecting to money
- For artists of color and LGBTQA+ artists are there more specific issues that arise in developing new work?

INTENTIONAL SPACE FOR INCLUSION

Scenario: An artist of color was hired as a consultant to work with MFA students who are writing a new musical. It's a 2-year process that will culminate in a full production as a part of the program. The writers of the piece are two white women and the leads in the show are people of color. This artist has been hired as a consultant to facilitate and mediate the conversations that take place in the room and in support of the writers and the artists performing the piece.

"Especially if white creators, as they should, are attempting to create diverse opportunities for casting and hiring personnel - there's no guidebook or manual on being a consultant in these instances. However, I think they [the writers], feel better when I'm in the room as they're writing all these diverse characters."

INTENTIONAL SPACE FOR INCLUSION

"In order for us to make more spaces for more people we also have to change the way we work. In music theater every writer may not know how to compose: someone might actually be really good at hearing melodies, or writing lines, but I might need someone to actually put it into Sibelius software. How do you meet writers at different parts of their journey? And also how do you collaborate with artists, who, when new music is being created say 'I want to give you new pages, read 'em off the page', but that may slow down a process if you don't have performers who are as adept at being able to sight read music cold. I think as we try to find more ways to diversify the talent onstage and the talent creating the pieces, we're going to have to diversify the way in which we create the work. And that does require not just more financial resources, but some flexibility inside organizations that sometimes is difficult to find. If we want more diverse stories told we are going to have to recognize that that will require people with diverse skill sets. And that may not always be the way in which organizations have historically worked. So how do you make those adjustments to allow the work to thrive?"

INTENTIONAL SPACE FOR INCLUSION

"Access to resources...if we imagine that there are limited opportunities in the American Theatre for music theatre writing training, so we have to know that probably people of color are going to be an even smaller percentage of that. [...] Also, as we try to diversify and we bring in artists and collaborators from different fields, there may be a learning curve. How has music theatre traditionally been? What is the tension of introducing new people and changing the ways in which you work? Often times, if people have not been working inside of those, in some cases, rigid structures, and they want to introduce 'Hey here's how I create' and the rigid structure says 'Well this is how we do it', there may be some conflict there. 'I may not be as adept in some of the software or sight reading but I have a lot to contribute to the development of the piece'. How can you create a structure that allows for those different expertise[s] to have space?"

INTENTIONAL SPACE FOR INCLUSION

“The art form is obsessed with trauma. As a Black artist, sometimes I don’t want to express my trauma. I often have to defend why it’s ok to write about other things.”

“The people assessing quality don’t look like us. Most people on selection committees are old and white.”

“You have to resist the pressure to be watered down for mass-appeal, which harms the work.”

CULTIVATING ARTISTS

CULTIVATING THE NEXT GENERATION OF NEW MUSICAL PRODUCERS AND SUPPORTERS

"One of the things that's necessary for development of new musical theater that goes on to be produced is producers with a bit of a vision for something new and some skills for shepherding new projects. I was wondering if Underscore could possibly cultivate producers so that we are cultivating the business side as well as the creative side. Perhaps partnering with the Commercial Theatre Institute or another producing entity to create a mentorship program."

CULTIVATING ARTISTS.

CULTIVATING ACTORS WHO UNDERSTAND AND HAVE THE SKILLSET FOR THE NEW MUSICAL MAKING PROCESS.

"The process became all about getting the material learned and I couldn't throw any changes at them or really workshop my piece. The 29-hour reading only works with amazing, consummate professionals who are good readers and smart script analyzers."

"Actors that are skilled with performing new works and who understand the new works process is another need. That's another component that they could develop. It's a special thing, knowing how to be in a new work process. When talking about education and classes - that could be a class offering."

CULTIVATING ARTISTS

THE GIFT OF TIME

"Being able to go to an artist and say 'What would be most helpful to you at this point in time?' If you aren't beholden to a specific structure, or a long tradition of doing it one specific way or a lot of hierarchy, you might be able to provide more dexterity."

"Some of the most valuable relationships/time I've spent at organizations has just been time. For any organization to just say, 'Hey, here's a little bit of money and here's a week where you can be in the room together and just work on this.' That's super super useful. It seems really simple, but it's something that doesn't happen all that often."

CONTACTS

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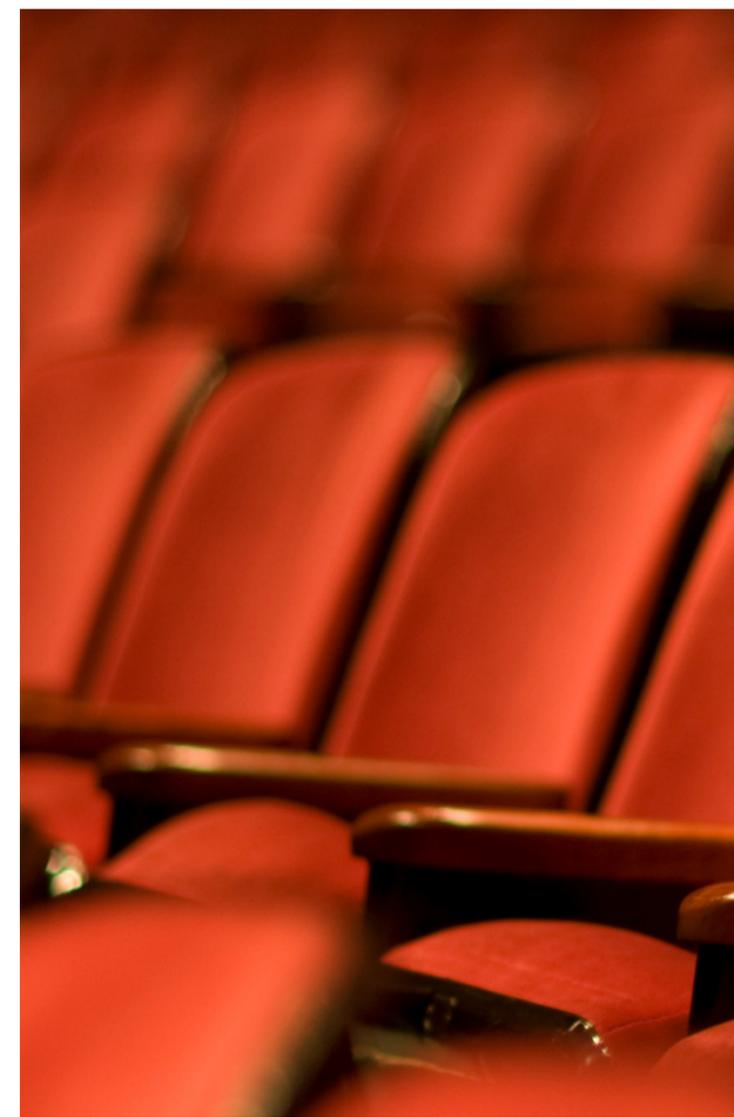
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THANK YOU
