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Defying Gravity

Conversations with Leaders from Nonprofit Theater

A Report Prepared for the
National Endowment for the Arts by Anna S. Caruso

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DISCLAIMER: This report summarizes the ideas and experiences of participants in 12 listening sessions the NEA held to gather insights about recent challenges, potential strategies, and successful innovations within the nonprofit theater sector. Participants included representatives from nonprofit theater and related industries. This report is provided as a resource for the theater field. The NEA does not endorse, or otherwise express any opinion on, the content of the report. The information contained in the report neither represents the NEA’s current grantmaking policies or practices, nor is it intended to be incorporated into NEA’s future policies or practices.

Introduction

This report distills and analyzes key themes from 12 listening sessions that the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) convened in the spring and summer of 2024. The NEA's Theater & Musical Theater division, in consultation with the agency's Office of Research & Analysis, held the sessions for the purpose of gathering information and insights about the state of the nonprofit theater sector, the challenges it is experiencing, and any innovations it may be pursuing that can guide the sector's future practices.

The sessions included a wide range of field representatives throughout the U.S. nonprofit theater ecosystem, including theaters of various budget sizes, recently closed theaters, Black, Indigenous, Theaters of Color (BITOCs), labor union leaders, arts journalists, and others.¹

In each two-hour listening session, participants were provided with four main prompts, and then were invited to engage each other in conversation. The prompts covered the following topics²:

- The most pressing challenges for participants' organization and the field, including systemic issues underlying surface issues or well-known problems the field (e.g., staffing, funding, and audiences).
- Examples of new ways of working in their organization, or elsewhere in the field, that have been successful post re-opening, including the elimination of practices or introduction of new innovations.
- Areas of expertise lacking at their organization or in the field that are needed to succeed.
- Possible approaches or strategies toward creating the future of the industry if broader external conditions could be addressed.

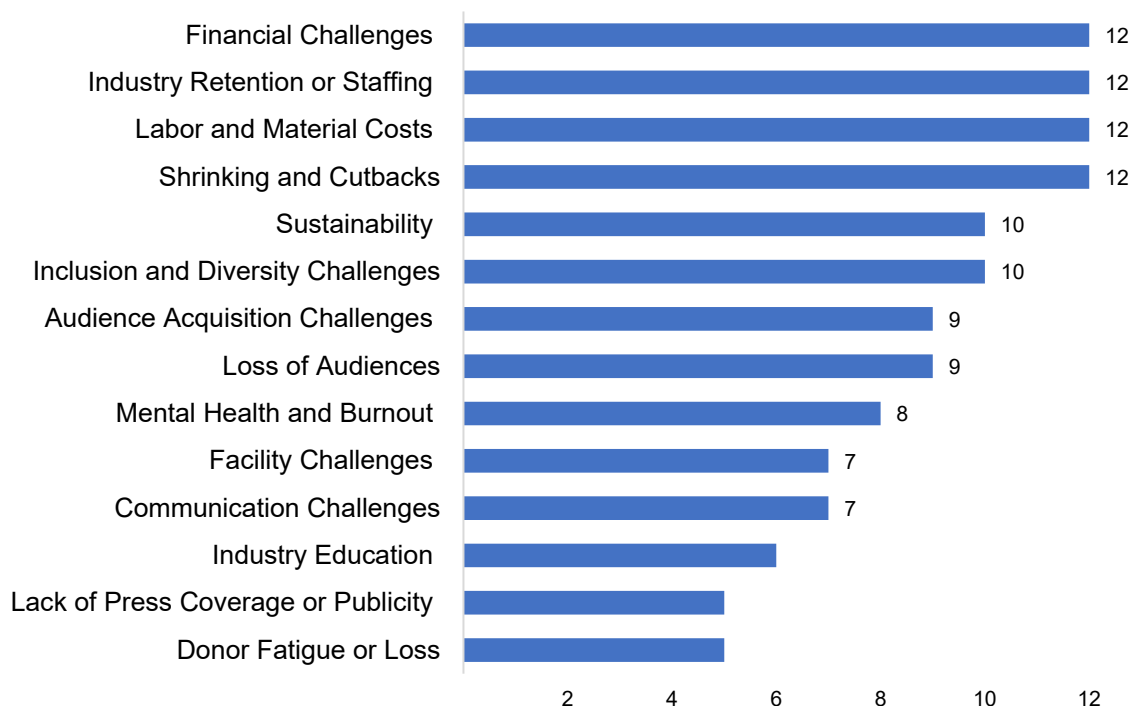
In response to these prompts, participants identified longstanding pressures, as well as challenges that have emerged since or have become exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (see Figure 1). Across the listening sessions, participants described a radically different epoch for the nonprofit theater industry. Concurrent with the pandemic, but also predating it, were enormous shifts in public engagement with media and technology that have affected how people consume arts and culture. These changes, such as the rise of social media for information-sharing or the use of streaming platforms for accessing entertainment, also have had acute consequences for how theaters reach audiences through marketing and programming. At the same time, changes related to technology and media have had effects on how people work today, with ongoing implications for many theater organizations and their workforces.

¹ For a full list of the types of field representatives, grouped by listening session, and a brief summary of the analytical approach, see the "About the Data" section at the end of this report.

² For a full list of the prompts and their wording, see the "About the Data" section at the end of this report.

Figure 1: Most Frequently Discussed Challenges across Listening Sessions

The most frequently cited challenges across the 12 theater listening sessions, shown in terms of the number of sessions in which those themes were discussed.

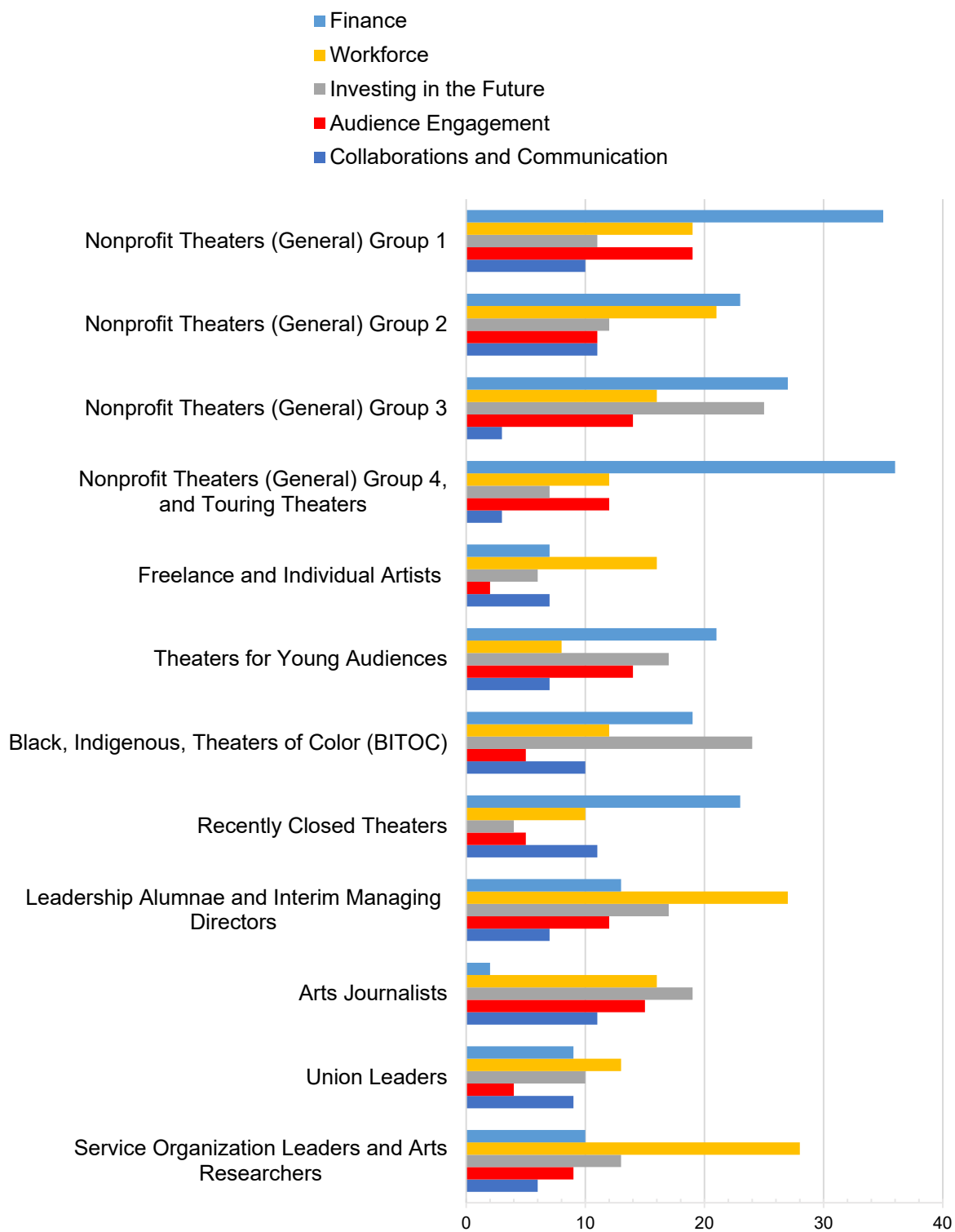


Beyond these transformations, more gradual and systemic changes have also impacted the sector. Participants voiced concerns ranging from navigating local and national political landscapes to grappling with social justice issues to addressing climate-change-related concerns such as extreme weather events or extreme heat. For all these challenges, many theaters have been agile in designing and implementing new practices and iterating bold strategies to strengthen the field's future.

The nonprofit theater sector represents an impressive range of organizations, demographic groups, communities, business models, and operational abilities. Throughout the listening sessions, participants throughout the country reported similar challenges and aspirations for the sector, but their emphases tended to differ by the type of field-representative group they inhabited (see Figure 2). These differences were often referenced in the sessions themselves, with multiple participants stating that solutions for the sector are not “one-size-fits-all,” even if the “fundamental issues in the field are fairly pervasive,” according to one participant. To honor this complexity, this report will focus on novel practices and strategies that arose from the experiences of individual theaters, but which hold promise for exploration or pursuit at the regional or sectoral level.

Figure 2: Frequency of Themes by Field Representative Group

This chart shows the frequency of the five overarching themes within each of the 12 listening sessions.



Findings from the Listening Sessions: Major Themes

I. Finance

Financial issues represented the largest overarching category of discussion across all 12 listening sessions. Participants offered questions, challenges, and strategies with reference to fiscal structures, revenue, grants, donations, sales, and financial planning. Some of these themes may also be applicable to other categories of findings, such as audience engagement or future thinking, but the category was distinct enough to be listed separately. Indeed, many participants named finances their greatest concern. As one participant said, “Without funding, none of the other priorities are viable.”

Challenges

Many of the financial challenges theaters reviewed in the listening sessions were pre-existing but gained urgency during or after the pandemic. Such challenges related to infrastructure or facilities (e.g., rentals and repairs) and omnipresent cash-flow issues. Participants cited a general lack of grants and other financial support mechanisms to address problems with buildings and facilities. Further, the pandemic saw a major increase in donor fatigue and donor loss, with concomitant shifts in funders’ priorities and in how many theater organizations receive philanthropic support.

Participants in all 12 listening sessions also referenced the growing costs of labor and the standard of living. Theaters struggle with being able to offer salaries competitive with those in other industries, such as universities, which often have better or more consistent pay and benefits. Moreover, inflation and supply-and-demand issues have increased the cost of materials, such as for set design. These post-pandemic challenges have accelerated financial stress for nonprofit theaters.

Strategies and Innovations

Emerging Strategies

Despite challenges, theaters in the listening sessions said that they have been exploring, adapting, and implementing new ways of working. Many participants said the subscriber model of ticket sales already had been losing traction for several years, and the pandemic eroded it further. This strain has impacted theater’s financial planning, with one participant saying, “Knowing that we were going to have a big infusion of cash at a particular time of the year—we just don’t have that anymore. So, there’s not that stability we’ve had for so many decades.” Another participant noted that having a steady and consistent subscriber base would ensure “people in the house. It adds word of mouth and those are our best donors as well. So, to lose those individuals has a real domino impact.” Some participants said they have found initial success from making changes to their subscription models, such as implementing auto-renewals or letting audiences build and curate their own subscription packages.

Theaters also have explored different forms of tiered pricing. Although each organization had its own approach to this strategy, in many cases the general admission tickets were sold at a minimum of two levels: one was a more accessibly priced ticket, while one or more other levels of admission were priced higher. Levels of pricing were based on seats (i.e., view or desirability) or on other factors, such as being a student or some other qualification process. Some theaters found success in raising the price of the higher-tier tickets, and others found that what drove their “ticket sales up the most is selling more tickets, not selling them at a higher price.”

In addition, participants tried diversifying their revenue streams by putting on events and trainings, and/or by pursuing other non-programmatic deals such as investing in real estate and renting space to other groups. Regarding these types of models, one participant said, “Investing in that kind of strategy would actually lead you to long-term return on all of the things we talked about: the people side, the money side, the audience side, the art side, etc. All of it is tied together.”

Lastly, listening session participants suggested exploring innovative fundraising practices through audience or community engagement. One suggested strategy was to spend more time cultivating legacies and planned giving or building endowments by encouraging financial planning in the broader community—approaches that may require devoting additional staff time and expertise to donor cultivation and finance.

Strategies for Funders

During these sessions, participants exchanged ideas on how funders could step up to address theaters’ fiscal challenges. Here, the most prevalent subtheme was an appeal for support of multi-year general operations or opportunities for grants that are “not specific to a particular program or particular project.” For instance, multi-year financial support could be used to sustain infrastructure, repair or upgrade buildings or systems, or front administrative or institutional costs (e.g., rent or utilities).

Another financial need that emerged was the ability for theaters to take risks. Access to designated risk capital or to a “creative risk fund” would prove helpful here, participants suggested. Many theater organizations strive to produce new works or boldly advance the field in other ways, but they require the fiscal confidence to do so. Listening session participants explored other potential ways to nurture this type of financial support. Ideas included developing boards willing to invest in artistic risk and pooling a cross-sector risk fund for developing new works or piloting new models of operation. Taking such risks, one participant suggested, “can possibly pay off to make us more sustainable for the long run.”

New Approaches for Public Investment

Beyond what theater organizations and funders could do differently to spur long-term financial investments, the field representatives considered new and potential avenues of public support. For example, some participants referenced the public education sector. Participants in several listening groups discussed the opportunity for receiving additional funding through education policy pathways. Citing research from SMU DataArts, which found that educational activities

were a significant source of funding for arts organizations,³ one participant wondered if nonprofit theater organizations could approach the U.S. Department of Education, to identify support for theater education programs as a new revenue stream.

“It became clear to me that we really need a massive infusion of arts and education money again at the public-school level from an early age to convince people of what we are and what we’re doing.”

Other participants agreed there are “a lot of possibilities with education” and “a lot more fundraisers out there for education than there are for theater.” Public education investments in nonprofit theaters could also heighten awareness and appreciation of theater arts in the community. As one participant said, “It became clear to me that we really need a massive infusion of arts and education money again at the public-school level from an early age to convince people of what we are and what we’re doing.”

Building Capacity in Development and Fundraising

Multiple participants sought to understand the post-pandemic donor and funding landscape. One suggestion was to invest in research on donor and development trends, as a way of examining what has changed and where theaters can find space to grow. As one participant said, “We’re finding it difficult to keep up with foundations or our state agencies and what their requirements are in terms of changing what panelists are looking at.”

Similarly, there was a recognized need for financial consultative services in many topic areas. These areas included how best to use existing funds, how to become financially stable, and how to price services or tickets. “Perhaps an area of expertise that we’re struggling with is that we are quickly having to learn how to be a single ticket shop,” one participant said. Another remarked: “It would be nice to also get funding for support in terms of financial advisement.”

A related need, as voiced by participants, is a communications tool or resource for helping theaters to message with funders, donors, or boards. “If you’re asking people for money, you ... have to have the good manners to speak their language,” one participant noted, “that’s something that would be helpful ... if you can help teach or give our organization resources on the language that you need to keep your donors and your boards happy.” This service might help theaters to become transparent about their financial needs and current fiscal standing and, therefore, to communicate more effectively with employees, donors, boards, and other funders. Representatives of recently closed theaters especially stressed this need (For more on communication resources and strategies, see the “Collaboration and Communication” section.)

Technology

Among the listening session participants, there was also a wish for theaters to acquire, implement, or learn about relevant new technologies. Participants proposed using technological

³ Likely referring to “As Relief Funding Dwindles, Arts and Culture Seek New Revenue Sources.” July 2024, SMU DataArts. <https://culturaldata.org/national-trends-2024/funding-sources/>.

tools such as AI, electronic tip jars, ticketing apps, management apps, and fundraising software to help theaters increase and manage their financial resources.

At the same time, participants craved training and start-up support to implement and correctly use new and existing technological tools in the most productive manner. “We want investment from the tech sector to fix this, one participant said. “I wish we could do better because it’s hard enough ... even to get working internet in our theaters so people can check the QR codes that we’ve given them already.”

II. Workforce

Workforce issues represented the second largest overarching theme from the listening sessions. This theme centered on the types of people and positions composing the theater industry. Listening session participants discussed labor, training, education, staffing, job retention, and changing expectations for how people work.

Challenges

Participants in every listening session reporting having experienced workforce challenges. These included staffing, industry-wide retention issues, and high levels of turnover, particularly in smaller towns or at smaller theaters. Theaters also reported having to cut back programming or shrink operations due to the pandemic or financial pressures related to inflation and to rising labor and material costs. Relatedly, participants also noted job scarcity as a challenge, particularly among artists and journalists. Two-thirds of sessions discussed feelings of burnout and mental / physical health concerns with working in the field. Many participants said the way people are working or want to work has shifted fundamentally, on a societal level. While most participants viewed these shifts as positive, a few still named them a management challenge.

Some listening session participants connected turnover rates and other staffing challenges to growing gaps in institutional or practical knowledge at the managerial level. Multiple participants said that many theaters and other arts organizations are poorly run, and that this mismanagement exacts a considerable toll on theater workers and artists. As one way to address this need, listening session participants said they would like to see more training and education for new entrants or even those currently in the field.

Strategies and Innovations

How Theaters Have Adapted Since 2020

Listening session participants described already have taken steps since 2020 to adapt to recent and ongoing workforce challenges. For example, some participants discussed outsourcing or using third parties for certain positions in HR and other departments, while others talked about enabling more remote work options.

Participants also mentioned hiring or bringing in new or outside perspectives, which, in turn, have catalyzed new ideas and ways of working. One participant said, “I’ll say there’s an opportunity, too. We are seeing folks who are coming to us from outside the industry, bringing some really fresh ideas and, in a good way, questioning everything we do.”

Some participants referenced actively seeking new types of candidates to fill certain positions. One participant said, “We’re trying to get creative in terms of how we look at job descriptions and try to hire outside the industry and train people such as, like, expert project managers or data specialists to come into development or come into our production industry.”

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Some participants said that the theater sector has also seen positive changes in work through the prioritization of values, work / life balance, living wages, and increased flexibility, echoing larger systemic shifts in how people work. There has been a “push and discussion about getting rid of ‘10 out of 12[s],’ about abandoning unpaid internships, about coming up with really ‘living wage’ situations for people who are working in what is essentially a full-on gig economy,” one participant said.⁴ Another participant said that there has been a growing understanding that workers are not machines, and there should be systems in place to allow for sickness and other life events: “I love the idea that has come from the pandemic that workers are actually people, all of us, from the wardrobe person to the lead on stage.”

Newer generations entering the workforce may also be contributing to this shift. Some participants said that these hires are less willing to engage in more anachronistic styles of working in the theater, such as working late hours, working overtime to strike shows, or working sixty-hour weeks. One participant remarked of the trend: “I don’t think that’s going to change. And so, I think, we have to figure out how, at the theater, to sort of reimagine an operating model that takes that new workforce into consideration.”

Investing in Jobs and Training

Many participants said that one way to help strengthen theater and associated sectors would be by investing in the jobs and training required for the field’s success. Arts journalists discussed the impact that endowments could have even for a handful of positions in theater criticism and feature-writing. As one arts journalist said, “Our industry [of arts journalism and theater criticism] is in crisis. On the other hand, it would not take that much money to subsidize it.” This speaker conjectured that 50 endowed arts journalist positions at 50 newspapers around the country would fix the problem, adding to the health of both the theater and journalism industries, and a majority of other participants voiced support of this idea. Another arts journalist elaborated on it, suggesting that such an initiative also should encourage new, diverse voices to enter the field: “Fifty slots around America for young critics of color, for LGBTQ critics, for college graduates, ... the groups that would be engorged by that would be revolutionary.”

*“Our industry [of arts journalism and theater criticism] is in crisis.
On the other hand, it would not take that much money to subsidize it.”*

More than half of participating groups represented in the listening sessions also discussed the importance of training, mentoring, or financially supporting people in the field. Voicing the concern of many, one participant said that due to retirements and high staff turnover, “there is no institutional knowledge.” This factor may have an outsized impact on freelance or individual artists who come into these environments. One participant said, “I feel like every theater I walk

⁴ “10 out of 12s” refers to the practice of actors working 12-hour days (working a maximum of ten hours, with two hours for breaks), as allowed in Actors’ Equity Association contracts, in the week leading up to a performance when the technical elements (e.g., lights, sound, and sets) are introduced into rehearsal with the actors.

into is in crisis. At least 50 percent of the crisis is they just don't know the fundamentals, like the fact that you should fill a house for previews." Listening session participants discussed seeing the depletion of institutional knowledge in positions in set design, tech, costuming, theater management, and theater administration.

One suggestion for investing in the workforce was at the entry level, to create financial scaffolding for people coming out of school and who are interested in joining the industry. Providing support for theaters to sustain workers at entry levels may help also to address staffing or retention challenges, particularly as financial barriers were an oft-cited reason for people leaving the field.

When discussing how best to support incoming artists, a participant asked, "How do they give us a safety net to get those new artists into our industry, make them feel confident that they will be able to pay their bills for the next couple of years until the work picks up, until they find their artistic homes?" Further, such support may help in dismantling some of the barriers to entering the theater industry and thus bring more diverse voices to the field. One participant said, "The way to achieve a diverse, representative, creative workforce is to ensure that all creative professionals are able to pursue a career with their pay and benefits. Otherwise, careers in arts, entertainment, and media are open to a narrow, non-inclusive set of folks, namely those who can hold out for a payday that might never arrive." Incorporating such protections or resources may encourage those entering the theater workforce to view theater as a more sustainable career while simultaneously allowing the sector to invest in its future leaders.

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Another strategy suggested by several participants was for theater organizations to assume a more active role in training by providing fellowships, residencies, paid internships, or mentorship programs to offer hands-on, applied training for various theater jobs. One participant said, "I don't think we can just wait for private industry and our universities only being the ones to train the next generation of leaders in our industry to fill these slots. I think we have to actually take an active role, to cultivate it ourselves."

One suggestion to implement this strategy was not only to provide residencies at theater organizations, but to create a platform for connecting new members of the workforce to places offering residencies or other active training programs, providing theaters with applicants for those programs.

Listening session participants primarily focused on cultivating new leaders in the theater sector, but there was also interest in career investments throughout all career stages, from early career to senior management, and in training for succession planning. As one participant said, the emphasis on professional development is about "building better boards and leaders over the course of the next five years plus one or two decades."

Improving Awareness of Education Pathways and Resources

In addition to further investments in the number of positions and in practical training for those positions, listening session participants expressed the desire to have continuing educational opportunities for workers currently in the field.

One strategy mentioned was to extend accessible opportunities for professional growth across different theater roles through accreditation or certifications in specific areas of expertise. This could be achieved through theater service organizations focusing on theater development by providing support for “accreditation and professional development in a higher-skilled way.”

Another educational strategy, as suggested by a participant, might involve a theater hosting a program to show community members how theaters are run and what all different components are needed to put on a show. But participants acknowledged that, for the components they wanted to teach—costumes, lighting, set design, stage management, and technical directing—such learning must first begin and be supported at the staff level. As one participant said, “There’s all these things that we would need support to get that training for staff on.” Another participant expressed an interest in “best practices” are for different departments to standardize skillsets or to inform a general resource for theaters training individuals in different positions—especially given the high turnover rates in recent years.

III. Investing in Future Sustainability

The theme of “Investing in Future Sustainability” refers to how theaters can engage in long-term planning and becoming financially and operationally stable and successful. “Future Sustainability” spans several topics discussed in the report, especially financial issues and audience engagement, but this section focuses on long-term impacts on the health and vitality of the theater sector. Each listening session contributed to discussions of this theme.

Challenges

Listening session participants expressed the need for sustainability and long-term thinking across the industry. Participants discussed feeling they were in a constant state of survival, with theaters having to react to multiple problems as they arise instead of being able to form and execute sustainability plans or invest in their future through allocating resources to infrastructure or implementing new models of working. One participant elaborated: “We have been doing so many Band-Aid fixes, or so many short-term solutions that the time required to stop and do really thoughtful and meaningful long-term planning—we just can’t.” Participants also said the lack of multi-year general operating support and the insufficiency of funds to invest in systems or other factors needed for stability (such as websites, software, or infrastructure) posed a challenge.

“We have been doing so many Band-aid fixes, or so many short-term solutions that the time required to stop and do really thoughtful and meaningful long-term planning—we just can’t.”

Additionally, listening session participants representing recently closed theaters described the difficulty of creating and implementing sustainability plans flexible enough to withstand other emergent challenges or the larger systemic and structural issues facing the field, such as climate change or larger economic and consumer shifts. As one participant said, “The structural issues are so great and so significant of a problem affecting the theater industry ... structural [in terms of] the way nonprofit arts or organizations are set up.”

Strategies and Innovations

Relevance of Theater

The topic of “relevance” was discussed in three ways: how it is perceived by theaters themselves, by the people served by theaters, and by the larger cultural and societal sphere. One participant said: “Theaters are being able to restaff themselves, choose works that stay within their mission, yet are very community-focused and speaking to the now and today, and also bringing in that ever-widening diversity of voices.” Participants said engaging with these dimensions of relevance can help organizations achieve long-term sustainability and impact through intentional engagement and by situating the role of theater in communities and on the larger cultural stage.

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the now and today, and also bringing in that ever-widening diversity of voices.”

Having programs and other activities aligned to values and mission statements is one way theaters can exhibit relevance and authenticity at an organizational level, participants said. Many theaters have sought to refine how their organizations are run and have reframed whom they want to serve, and then have committed to ways of working that support those values. One participant said the “pandemic has some small blessings, and one of them was the ability to just stop and actually talk about the work and think about it, and question whether we were who we wanted to be and what we wanted to do.” Others said they feel emboldened to commit to new practices and cultures in a way they “would not have been able to do previously,” as one participant said, because of a larger cultural awakening about social justice and new attitudes toward work and labor.

For theater organizations, self-relevance also included addressing challenges to inclusivity and diversity. One participant described how their theater engaged in an evaluation to examine the inclusivity of its organization. “We worked with a pro-bono consultant who helped us really take a look at our organization from top to bottom, in and out, to really make sure we were running an anti-racist organization,” the participant said. Others noted there is still work to do within DEI and to ensure diversity not only in the stories they tell, but in the fabric of the theater industry itself. As one participant said, “diversity is our strength, particularly for the long-term success of the nonprofit sector.”

Participants also discussed their relevance to others: to their audiences, funders, and the larger community they serve. Some organizations have described this commitment as being able to present programs that community members want, or which represent the communities they want to engage. One participant asked: “What is the impact? What is the contribution to your city, your city’s fabric, your community’s fabric?” Change can be realized by intentional engagement and shifts in programming. For example, one theater put on Spanish and bilingual programming as a way to engage audiences who “might not be communities that have traditionally been thought of as communities that count.”

Lastly, theater is relevant to the broader fields of the arts, culture, and entertainment, and to the larger societal fabric. One participant made an analogy: “This art community is a little bit like cake, and we’re like the sugar in the cake. You can eat the cake, if you take [the sugar] out, [but] something is really wrong. You go into the community, you take the arts out, the community is not right. And so it falls apart ... when art doesn’t happen, when theaters don’t prosper.”

Theater was also discussed as representing many different functions within society. Participants mentioned theater in the context of community healing and in terms of sharing stories and representing diverse voices and experiences. Some participants also discussed theater in relation to activism—e.g., using programming to make statements about a range of events and issues, as well as how and when to engage in that activism.

Throughout the listening sessions, participants explored the role and purpose of theater and how, even though theaters may serve different purposes in different spaces, they should be invested in and supported as an art form and a way of expression.

Funding for Sustainability

Many listening session participants expressed concern about their ability to engage in multi-year planning and are trying to strategize how organizations can reach the point of financial stability. They discussed how this goal may be achieved through general non-project dependent funding to invest in people, infrastructure, or services aimed at long-term development. Participants described how their current financial situation has led to “an inability to sort of invest in anything that has to do with infrastructure” or any type of system that could assist with organizational stability and efficiency. As one participant said, “We just don’t have the cash to actually invest in, because everything’s going to producing and just trying to keep the train running.”

In general, participants stressed the importance of multi-year funding, planning, and investing. One said, “I think what we really need is ... multi-year support.” Multi-year funding opportunities may also be beneficial by allowing recipients to plan beyond their season or current fiscal year. This ability would provide space for theater organizations to work toward sustainability and financial resilience.

“I think what we really need is ... multi-year support.”

Participants also explored how longer-term financial planning may be beneficial when theaters must navigate unexpected crises, such as climate change issues or the COVID-19 pandemic. One participant discussed how these crises have become a significant factor affecting their operations: “how are we planning for our next shutdown, for when our theater floods, for when it’s hailed and it’s never hailed in my town before, when there’s wildfire smoke that cancels our shows.” Another listening session participant described a time when their theater flooded, and said they learned that “the field is not well situated for the next problem ... our adaptability and resilience [are] really limited.”

Outreach and Advocacy

Across the listening sessions, participants discussed the importance of theater advocacy. Theater groups that have engaged lobbyists view it as a “very, very positive investment” (in the words of one participant) and say it has opened funding avenues for their organization. Emphasis was placed on the need for a cross-sector, multi-theater push toward advocating for the value of theater and theaters’ interests (e.g., in financial policies or policy support). Some participants recalled being part of coalitions of theater organizations that worked together to get bills passed at local or state levels. One listening session participant discussed how these smaller regional pushes can lead to large impacts: “What we can do is work together collectively in all of our spaces so that we can have some movement regionally,” the participant said. “I’ve seen it happen through some [organization] members where they collectively come together, even on the county level, to increase support.”

Listening session participants also expressed a desire to learn how to participate in advocacy for funding or for larger community or policy efforts. One identified a need for “educating the sector to advocate for itself.” Another participant said, “There is this larger work, this campaign work—really this lobbying work—that’s multi-year [and] about trying to make it a little easier for the next cohort, for the longevity and sustainability.” Some participants encouraged others to

get involved by joining larger nonprofit theater organizations or coalitions with advocacy arms. Support and leadership still may be needed in helping theaters to connect with these groups or with lobbyists directly.

Investing in Innovation

Another strategy for promoting theater's sustainability is to invest in innovation through research and development across individual theater companies. In half of the listening sessions, participants discussed ideas for research or expressed wanting information about various aspects of the industry. Topics for research included shifts in audience behavior and demographics, shifts in public tastes in theater, best practices for promoting the importance of theater to communities, and effective programming formats. Additionally, there was interest among participants in engaging in multi-site, multi-theater experiments and sharing the data collected with theater organizations. There was also a desire for more "real time" data about these trends. If theater organizations are getting data, one participant noted, "it's like a year or 18 months old ... [but] everything's changing so fast."

Theater participants also wanted to understand shifts in how theaters are working and which models or structures (e.g., models of programming and operational structures) may work better. A related question sought to understand not only which structures may succeed, but which have failed and why. Some participants asked for large, longitudinal studies in multiple theaters nationwide. Such studies could give participating theaters access to anonymized data and trends. The data would allow theaters and arts researchers to examine wider patterns and would provide a deeper, more complete understanding of post-pandemic shifts in the industry.

Further, these calls for heightened and more current research implies the need for people's capacity, within individual theaters, to interpret and implement findings. One participant referenced a bandwidth issue, saying, "The ability to monitor, intake, synthesize, regurgitate, [and] present on data is just something that always moves to [the] sidelines." Research investments should include supporting the personnel required to conduct and translate it.

Another type of investment is to bring in voices from outside the theater industry to help address larger issues facing organizations. One participant said, "I would love if there was a way to bring some brilliant systematic thinkers in ... who are not involved necessarily in theater, but who are working with extreme systematic change." This approach could afford theater organizations the opportunity to engage with a more objective, external view on how to address challenges.

Listening session participants wanted to know what is or has been successful for other non-theater art forms to see if those practices could transfer to theater. As one participant asked, "What are the opportunities that are seeing dramatic growth beyond our discipline? And what might this mean?"

Innovative strategies must extend to methods for engaging with new audiences, for example, by investing in filming or streaming to provide programming to those unable to physically come into the theater space. Investments in new works or programs is also connected to the long-term goal for many theaters of enlarging and expanding their audience base.

“Arts education is fundamental. ... That’s the investment for the future and you have to plant the seeds.”

At the same time, investments in theater and arts education were described as foundational in building the industry’s future, and therefore part of any sustainability-focused strategy. “Arts education is fundamental,” one participant said. “That’s the investment for the future and you have to plant the seeds.” Another said, “The notion of reinventing the theater starts with reinventing arts and education programs.”

IV. Audience Engagement

“Audience Engagement” was the second smallest of the overarching themes in terms of the frequency with which it arose during the listening sessions, even though all 12 discussed it. This theme includes programming innovations and promotional strategies geared toward engaging or acquiring audiences, as well as larger sectoral strategies to encourage theater engagement at a regional or national level.

Challenges

Participants in nearly every listening session reported challenges with theater attendance or audience engagement. As reasons for the overall decline in attendance, some participants cited the pandemic, the overall rise in the cost of living, and changes in “going-out” culture. Many discussions explored the need to reach and acquire new audiences and to retain current patrons. Participants also said there was a lack of knowledge in communities about theaters or theater offerings, a gap that could be traced to dwindling local press coverage of new plays and programs.

Strategies and Innovations

Programming Innovations

Many theater reps in the listening sessions said they have tried to address attendance shortfalls by renewing their focus on audience and community engagement. Several discussed the importance of channeling and reflecting the community and its values in the works they produce, as a way to encourage community members to return to the theatrical space. These participants stressed that “audiences want to see and hear stories that resonate with them, which means ensuring that those stories, music [and] performances look and sound like America today and tomorrow.” One participant reflected on a specific experience in which the theater attempted to adopt this approach: “To bring different voices and to really focus on different representation of the stories that are on the stage made a ... surprisingly positive impact on the community in general. And it really impacted ... how much people were participating.”

*“Audiences want to see and hear stories that resonate with them.
Which means ensuring that those stories, music, performance, look
and sound like America today and tomorrow”*

Another suggestion was to host public squares to engage with their communities about issues they view as relevant and would like to see reflected in theater programming. This initial and active community engagement can help to answer a larger question, as summarized by one listening session participant: “Who are we here to serve? And how do we make connections with them?” Another participant stressed: “It’s a matter of reaching out to the community, connecting with people, nurturing relationships for years, just to get them to see what we do. The important part, too, is that we represent them on stage. They are telling their stories.”

Another strategy to encourage new audiences is investing in educational programs and providing accessible tickets for students—a practice that can cultivate future theatergoers while simultaneously benefiting young audiences. The idea was to invest in such programs “starting from when the kids are young and up into adulthood,” one participant said. Another offered: “In our first year, we served about a thousand kids and they’re all going to be season ticket holders someday. They’re not all going to Broadway, but they sure are going to love theater.” Listening session participants discussed many ways to further provide access to young audiences, from putting on shows geared at youth, to supporting transportation and providing student discounts. Participants representing theater for young audiences wanted to emphasize, however, that the primary goal of youth programs is “helping kids today,” and “providing creativity and moments of imagination, and just art, for kids.”

Listening session participants also spoke to the idea of cross-sector collaboration, particularly with arts journalists or arts critics as a way to foster engagement among both theatergoers and potential readers. One arts journalist described such a relationship as a consultative opportunity, where journalists could facilitate conversations with community to share reviews or encourage arts participation: “You know that little box that Lucy has in *Peanuts*, where it’s like ‘Advice 5 cents?’” the journalist asked. “If you have a critics booth and you just go up and you say ‘[what] should I see?’ ... I think it’s different ways of facilitating the discussions that we want to have about art and welcoming people into them.”

A strong partnership with news media for arts events and the theaters themselves can boost understanding and appreciation for theater among potential audiences. As one arts journalist said, “It will actually change the way that you address the art, and it will bind you to it more tightly.” Opportunities for audience members to interact with theater critics before or after performances also can help dispel the image of the unapproachable or ivory-tower critic “so embedded in the popular imagination.”

Promotion Strategies

Recognizing that some of the audience-related challenges stem from a lack of arts news coverage, listening session participants explored new ways to promote programs and events. “Public tastes and art are constantly changing,” one participant noted. “The competitive landscape for theater now is completely different than it was.” In the current environment, using social media to engage with new audiences has become imperative. “People are really identifying with people on the social media platform where it’s like a one-to-one relationship,” one participant said. Others discussed the possibility of using traditional media formats (e.g., short video trailers) to promote upcoming shows—a technique that already has been adopted in other art forms such as orchestra and ballet.

Still other promotional strategies may include partnerships with other community spaces. For example, one participant suggested partnering with libraries and independent bookstores to market programs for young audiences based on books. The primary goal in this case is “just trying to really get in front of audiences in a different way.”

Sectoral Strategies

Another set of strategies explored by participants were those meant to promote audience engagement and theater attendance beyond the individual theater level. Many participants discussed what could be considered as part of a larger theme of “eventization”—i.e., providing novel, social, or interactive elements to elevate audiences’ experiences. One participant said it is an effort “to leverage the resources that we have and fundamentally creating experiences which make people feel. [Audiences are] going to really remember what that social [experience] is, and how thrilling it is to have these live experiences.”

Further, theater “eventization” could be encouraged through a larger-scale public relations campaign promoting a theater attendance as a valuable cultural experience or by emphasizing the social and cultural role of theater, participants across several sessions said. Participants expressed an overarching need to make theater more central to the contemporary cultural landscape. “How do we get back to a place where the notion of live theater is in and of itself valued?” asked one participant. However, those results may prove difficult for theater organizations to achieve on their own.

“We need help training people and encouraging them to value the arts and make it more habitual to participate, [change] their mindset, [and] make it a thing ... some sort of bigger regional effort, if not a national effort ... to see that value and to alleviate the individual artists and organizations from having to solve that problem alone, because it’s too big.”

“There needs to be a national campaign to help with this,” one participant said. “We need help training people and encouraging them to value the arts and make it more habitual to participate, [change] their mindset, [and] make it a thing ... some sort of bigger regional effort, if not a national effort ... to see that value and to alleviate the individual artists and organizations from having to solve that problem alone, because it’s too big.”

Since “eventization” depends on knowing what programs are occurring, audiences may be well-served by having a central website that provides a platform for theaters across the country to post information about their offerings. One participant referenced an existing regional billboard campaign comprised of digital ads that would take viewers to a centralized website that listed all theater companies in that area and made it easier for customers to view program options and buy tickets. This person said, “We’re trying to make it easier for people [to] act on that intention when they have that free Friday night and can go find something fun.”

Other listening session participants voiced similar demand for a centralized site for theater organizations. One suggested that it could function similarly to the Major League Baseball (MLB) website, which allows users to go and buy tickets for any team or game in one place. The same participant advocating this approach also addressed concerns about competition within a regional area or marketplace. With the MLB, this person said, teams in the same city “need the same and use the same ticketing platform. It’s not they’re competing for audiences, but the fact that they’re all using that isn’t a barrier to their success.”

Lastly, in a full quarter of the listening sessions, participants discussed the possibility of theater engagement being promoted as a solution to health and wellness concerns. The intersection of arts and health has been promoted recently by funders and policymakers. Participants suggested bringing the conversation more prominently into theater. Listening session participants referenced research about arts and cultural programming and wellness, and about the potential role of social and cultural prescribing of theater, for example, in promoting a sense of community and belonging. Participants encouraged “this idea of ‘arts on prescription,’ or how the arts and health can work together. And doctors can prescribe folks to go do art activities [or] go take a dance [class] for their mental and physical health.”

Theatergoing was also discussed as a public health initiative to help address the loneliness epidemic and some symptoms of mental health concerns. One participant recalled the “[Healing, Bridging, Thriving](#)” summit⁵ co-hosted by the White House Domestic Policy Council and the NEA: “I think back to the Surgeon General’s conversation with us about how the epidemic of loneliness was met well by the cure of performing arts engagement. And I feel like if we could just leverage that research ... so that we can be viewed as a solution in the core work we do, that would be super helpful.” However, participants also said they would need help and education in promoting this function for theater.

Table 1: Overview of “Audience Engagement” Strategies

1. Promotion Strategies	
Utilizing physical spaces	<i>Libraries, community centers</i>
Utilizing virtual spaces	<i>Social media, digital campaigns</i>
2. Community-Centric Strategies	
Reflecting communities	<i>Telling community stories, reflecting diversity</i>
Reaching out to communities	<i>Active engagement, public squares</i>
Investing in young audiences	<i>Accessible tickets & shows, investing in theater education</i>
3. Sector-Wide Strategies	
Eventization	
Developing digital infrastructure for engagement	<i>Central websites to view theaters and shows</i>
Promoting theater’s ties to health and wellness	

⁵ See <https://www.arts.gov/stories/blog/2024/healing-bridging-thriving-reflection-cair-lab> for a report on the “Healing, Bridging, Thriving” summit. A full video of the summit may be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9WC4xCKdkbM&t=5907s>.

V. Collaborations and Communication

“Collaborations and Communications” was the smallest of the five overarching discussion themes in terms of frequency with which it arose, but the theme was discussed by at least some participants in all 12 listening sessions.⁶ The theme includes consideration of fiscal and creative partnerships, coalitions, corporate partnerships, and mergers. As communication is crucial to partnerships, it is also captured in this theme.

Challenges

Every listening session brought up collaboration and communication in some form. While session participants discussed many specific partnerships and their resulting benefits, a few challenges also emerged. One had to do with identifying the right partner organizations in the first place, and how to create a lasting alliance. Another challenge concerned working with universities, which were characterized as experiencing their own hardships. Lastly, participants expressed having communication challenges within staff across generations and across unions, funders, donors, and boards.

Strategies and Innovations

Promoting Collaborations

Nearly every category of listening session participant expressed demand for additional collaborations and for cross-sector discussions about the industry and its well-being.

One suggestion from arts journalists and union leaders was to have a platform or forum connecting industry representatives and serving as a site for virtual networking and conversation. Other session participants suggested having in-person meetings and engaging in continuous dialogue with other field experts to exchange ideas, compare solutions, and take part in collaborative theater development. One listening session participant described the ethos of partnership and communication as a shift from the pandemic, saying, “We’re really collaborating in ways that are deeper than I think we used to collaborate as a field. I feel like there’s a lot less holding on of information and of projects, and a lot more willingness to share them.” Another participant stressed the time and effort involved in sustaining such endeavors: “It’s going to have to be continuous over time. And it’s going to have to involve people that can also guide us in that process.”

“We’re really collaborating in ways that are deeper than I think we used to collaborate as a field. I feel like there’s a lot less holding of information and of projects, and a lot more willingness to share them.”

In addition to seeking to build these connections, participants craved additional resources for theaters to communicate effectively within the theater ecosystem and beyond their

⁶ Please note this theme does not have a figure showing an overview of sub-themes.

constituencies. They wanted productive, proactive communications with funders, boards, unions, critics, communities, and other fields outside the arts that theaters may engage with. As one participant asked the group, “How are you connecting to constituencies outside of yourself? And what are you doing so that you [are] kind of speaking in ways that are actually going to resonate with the people you’re hoping to reach, who may have priorities that are different?”

Participants in the listening session comprised of arts journalists expressed wanting to find “a way to communicate better with theater companies” about audience engagement and readership, and for theater companies to better understand the role of arts journalists and theater critics. Union groups, meanwhile, focused more on the desire to communicate about labor issues or challenges and provide support across the field. As one union representative asked, “How do we, as a community, provide a forum and an ability for all of us to Zoom our employers, artists, unions together and address some of these issues?”

Listening session participants further voiced a need to partner or otherwise engage with other fields with which theater has “a natural connection,” such as “education and health care.” Regarding these sectors, one participant said, “We’re not doing any work without it being in partnership either with another arts and culture organization or an organization that somehow has thematic resonance with the particular story being told. So, we’re working with other health services, with nurses.”

Several listening session participants discussed existing partnerships with different organizations focusing on health or other human services, and others said that theater’s involvement in these areas is still “a place where this field has great opportunities to be relevant and open and equitable in ways we haven’t even imagined yet.”

Resource-Sharing

Another discussion topic, related to collaborations, centered on the nonprofit theater sector’s ability to share resources and labor through coalitions among theaters or in collaborations to pool materials, space, and staff. Such partnerships may help alleviate some of the administrative or financial burdens of running a theater. In terms of resource-sharing, one listening session participant questioned “why we have multiple production shops, multiple costume, storage facilities, multiple of everything, and [are] not sharing more resources [with] those of us who are in more densely populated artistic areas.” Smaller theaters, likewise, could leverage their resources and purchasing power to share insurance or materials by engaging with these types of partnerships.

Some participants said their theaters already have been experimenting with this type of collaboration and have seen initial success. One example was theaters co-hiring artistic directors, managing directors, or payroll positions. Having shared “backroom operations of everything, the marketing, the finance, the facility management” implemented across regionally close theaters may be beneficial for both efficiency and general staffing issues.

While not every participant expressed wanting to follow this model, some participants saw promise in coordination and collaboration. “There is some potential in ... collective working of

organizations together in the same city to leverage their resources and to leverage funding together” as a way for the industry to grow and thrive, one participant said.

Another form of resource-sharing discussed pertains to the works themselves, with theaters across the country investing in co-productions or presenting another company’s productions. One participant described a Canadian theater sector strategy that has found success by funding new works and promoting collaboration through co-production. This participant said, “All these Canadian groups [are] collaborating on brand-new works, like almost nobody builds their own work. They collaborate to build something. But then there’s another pool of money to present that work.”

“We need to find ways to work together instead of further segmenting ourselves into our own niche spots.”

Engaging in mutually beneficial collaborations in production may help theaters financially by reducing labor costs and saving time. As one listening session participant said, “In the arts ... we need to find ways to work together instead of further segmenting ourselves into our own niche spots.”

Conclusion

The nonprofit theater industry has faced a number of challenges across various issue areas since the COVID-19 pandemic began, as described by participants in the listening sessions. Despite these challenges, participants characterized the field as resilient and innovative. As one participant said, “We like to remind folks that the theater didn’t break. We are resilient.” Some of the ideas explored in these listening sessions—and some of the strategies that theaters already have implemented—could represent promising strategies for nonprofit theaters and for the industry at large.

“The theater didn’t break. We are resilient.”

Across field representatives by type (i.e., arts journalists, union leaders, and theater practitioners for young audiences), listening session participants said they were glad to have engaged in the dialogue. Many participants said the exchange helped them to feel less siloed within their respective organizations, and that they appreciated sharing ideas and learning what has and has not worked for similar entities. For all the difficulties confronting the field, a majority of participants maintained a primarily hopeful outlook and expressed appreciation for having had the opportunity to state their concerns and to connect with others who are dedicated to enriching the future of nonprofit theater in the United States.

About the Data

This report identifies and discusses themes from 12 virtual listening sessions held by the NEA in the spring and summer of 2024 with a range of nonprofit theater industry leaders, representing the following types of entities:

- Session 1: Nonprofit Theaters (General) Group 1
- Session 2: Nonprofit Theaters (General) Group 2
- Session 3: Nonprofit Theaters (General) Group 3
- Session 4: Nonprofit Theaters (General) Group 4 and Touring Theaters
- Session 5: Freelance and Individual Artists
- Session 6: Theaters for Young Audiences
- Session 7: Black, Indigenous, Theaters of Color (BITOC)
- Session 8: Recently Closed Theaters
- Session 9: Leadership Alumnae and Interim Managing Directors
- Session 10: Arts Journalists
- Session 11: Union Leaders
- Session 12: Service Organization Leaders and Arts Researchers

The listening sessions were led by the NEA Theater and Musical Theater team, with support from the NEA's Office of Research & Analysis, and in partnership with the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities. Participants were invited based on their professional role or affiliation, with the overarching goal to be regionally diverse and to represent a diverse and inclusive cross-section of theater representatives who could speak to the conditions at particular institutions and the field as a whole, for a range of types and sizes of theaters.

Prior to deciding whether or not to participate, invitees were told that their choice to do so was in no way connected to their potential grant application status with the NEA, and that participating would have no impact on potential grants funding.

Each listening session lasted for approximately two hours. Participants were given the following prompts to discuss:

- The most pressing challenges for your organization and the field, including:
 - Your perceptions of the larger issues underneath the surface level or obvious problems the field is currently facing (i.e. staffing, funding, and audiences)
- Examples of new ways of working in your organization, or elsewhere in the field, that have been successful post re-opening, including:
 - Practices you have done away with, that you're okay with
 - Innovative practices you have observed
- Areas of expertise lacking at your organization/in the field that you/we need to succeed

- Possible approaches/strategies to creating the future of our industry if we could quiet the external conditions beyond our control

After the listening sessions were completed, each session was transcribed and analyzed by a trained researcher for common themes across the conversations. Themes were coded as occurring only once per instance of the participant speaking, unless, within that instance, the participant gave multiple examples converging on a single theme. In those instances, the theme would be coded per distinctive example given. Themes were not treated as mutually exclusive. If a quote could be considered both to fall under both “future stability” and “finances,” for example, then it was coded as both. This overlap occurred most frequently with “financial” and “workforce” themes (see Table 2). The themes then were grouped together by high-level topics (i.e., finances, audience engagement, etc.), as presented in the report.

Table 2: Thematic Co-Occurrence across the Five Main Themes

This table shows how often each of the five overarching themes co-occurred with each other.

	Finance	Workforce	Investing in Future Sustainability	Audience Engagement	Collaborations and Communication
Finance	n/a	13	10	6	4
Workforce	13	n/a	10	2	4
Investing in Future Sustainability	10	10	n/a	7	3
Audience Engagement	6	2	7	n/a	2
Collaborations and Communication	4	4	3	2	n/a