



INSTITUTIONAL  
MEMBERSHIP  
PROGRAM

RESPOND  
NOT REACT:

Bridging institutions  
into spaces of safe activism

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# Introduction

**Respond not React - bridging institutions into spaces for safe activism**, is a resource developed by the ICCA Membership Department which outlines methods for institutions to process and slow down when addressing the topics of: Best practices vs. Standards; Hiring vs. Investment; and Solidarity vs. Institutional Performativity.

As we have seen time and time again, institutions often struggle to appropriately address and move beyond their initial reaction to social events, call outs or crises. Repeatedly in situations of crisis, no matter how well-intentioned one may be, the appropriate time is not taken to ensure that internal processes are slowed down to examine preexisting biases before public action is taken, often impacting the institution, its staff, and audience.

When a public statement is expected, your institution should not scramble to follow an assumed set of actions that may result in empty statements and unfulfilled initiatives. Throughout this document we will be exploring issues we at the ICCA have observed, discuss the consequences of rushed actions and suggest solutions.

Of course, we see quantitative data as a special tool in validating the research below, so we'll be sure to share plenty of data visuals to soothe your eyes from all the writing.

# Introducing the 'Accountability Research'

Launched in June 2020 as an extension of our work within the ICCA's Institutional Membership Program, our '*Accountability Research*' aims at gathering crucial data on internal practices from our pool of institutional members and other eligible cultural institutions across the country. The intention being to hold cultural institutions accountable for their public funding by highlighting the discrepancy in governance and figures within Indigenous, Black and Afro-Indigenous hiring, board member representation and programming. As we all know, there is a severe lack of hard data surrounding these issues in our sector.

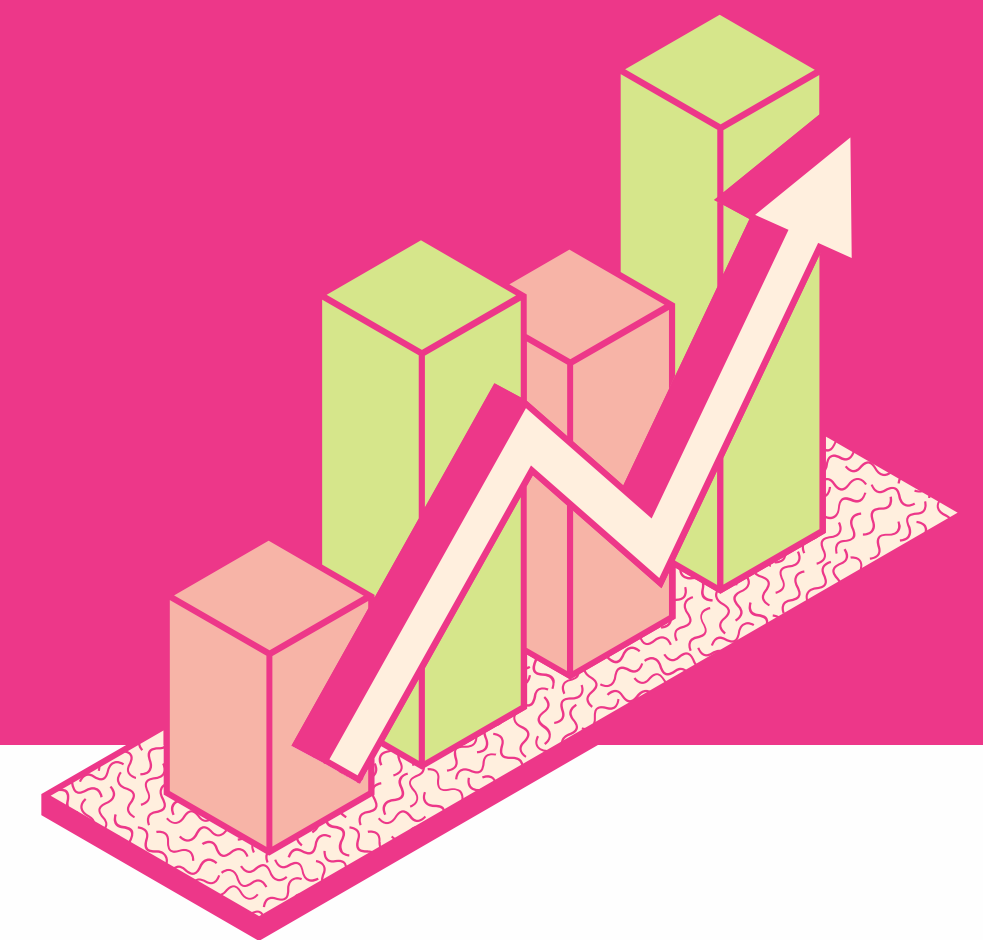
Considering our commitment towards transparency, the ICCA believes that collecting this data will help better inform our work and support our vision for a more equitable future in the arts. The visualized quantitative data will be shared on ICCA platforms to spread awareness in hopes of instilling tangible systematic change. This project also works to better guide the ICCA's community in finding safe and welcoming spaces of employment, as well as encouraging our institutional members to take leadership in this change.

As we expand the scope of our '*Accountability Research*' and its future, we want to first start with you. Feel free to participate in the first round of our surveys below:

**English Version** :<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/D5287H6>.

**French Version** :<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/MFY73HJ>

Our efforts are heavily reliant on our membership. So, getting your answers is key!





# Section 1. Best practices vs. Standards



# What is the issue?

Best practices have largely failed the arts and arts institutions thus far. Upholding a concept of 'best practices' as if there is a singular way to pertain to the wellbeing of staff and patrons is another excuse institutions have used to avoid deep reconsideration of their internal functions and structures. Standards, on the other hand, require more than just putting in place a few public facing initiatives and asks instead for consistency and integrity at all levels within an organization or institution. *The American Association of Museums* gives us a clear look at what differentiates a standard from a best practice:

*"Standards are generally accepted levels of attainment that all museums are expected to achieve. Best Practices are commendable actions and philosophies that demonstrate an awareness of standards, solve problems, can be replicated and that museums may choose to emulate if appropriate to their circumstances." (The American Association of Museums, 2008)*

Best practices are a reactionary and temporary set of responses to any form of crisis, problem, or unexpected social situation an institution may face, often used as a shield to protect against any form of public criticism. Many institutions will mirror their responses to that of others to avoid dialogue around the issue and be allowed to point fingers if they feel 'attacked.'

Standards are generally accepted levels of attainment that all museums/arts organizations are expected to uphold. This could be in the form of mandates, values, or other guiding principles an organization is led by. Beyond short term practices, a standard is an institutional commitment that has been discussed and implemented from the inception of the establishment. It may shift and be reconsidered, but the core values remain the same. To meet said standard, there are already a set of evaluations in place to guarantee that it is being upheld.

# How does it create harm?

When it comes to upholding a strong ethics code most Canadian institutions will follow what they believe is the industry standard or what has been laid out in an HR guideline, but often far little is done to compare how these guidelines are demonstrated within their spaces. Though there is no actual 'Ethics Standard' written anywhere for Canadian arts organizations to follow, there is no reason to fall behind socially expected standards either.

Only activating ethics policies in times of vulnerability proves their status as statutory, and they become nothing more than a temporary set of 'best practices.' implemented to save face. Institutions need to re-envision what constitutes their responsibilities and intrinsically look at how their value systems have excluded the interests and voices of Indigenous, Black and Black-Indigenous staff, patrons and collaborators since inception.



- BIPOC cultural workers are continuously strained to no end with little support and no regard to their mental, physical and creative wellbeing. This is what makes it so difficult for many institutions to retain their racialized staff. Institutions refuse to acknowledge there is a problem to address and continuously uphold the same exhaustive colonial structures which sit in contradiction to their internal values.
- When there is no adequate process for tools of change to be received, they will simply go to waste. No matter how good the intention — practices do not guarantee longevity, standards do.
- Asking your Indigenous or BIPOC staff to come forward only when harm has been done is incredibly exhausting and an unsustainable practice. Systems must be in place to regulate and monitor the people in power who control the workplace environment and dictate staff expectations. Values and ethics are what guide most of us in practicing care towards one another seamlessly.

# Case study

In October 2021, Canadian Art Magazine, one of the longest running and respected arts publications in the country, went bankrupt. It was known by many for being an organization that often centralized Indigenous artists, writers and their ways of knowing across their platforms, but its seemingly progressive outward approach was hiding the complete disruption and systemic racism happening behind closed doors. Ossie Michelin, former editor-at-large for Canadian Art, detailed two years later the many discrepancies and microaggressions all of the racialized staff had to contend with during their stay at the magazine in this 2022 [Maisonneuve essay](#) .

*“Before I joined the magazine, the editorial staff had been advocating for a series of changes inside the organization. They were asking the board for an audit, in part to reevaluate the amount of paid work being done by employees who were Indigenous, Black and People of Colour. They also wanted better communication between the board and editorial staff, reasoning that if their work fuelled the magazine, they should have some say at the governance level. And most importantly, they wanted fresh blood in the magazine’s leadership to better represent the diverse and progressive values that the magazine had come to champion.” ( Michelin, 2022)*

Seeing this wave of relevant setbacks and the growing toxic work culture in the organization’s governance, then Indigenous-editor-at-large Jas M. Morgan, editor-in-chief Jayne Wilkinson and senior editor-at-large Yaniya Lee, worked to transform the present institutional culture despite the reluctance at the board level. But as institutions so often do, they responded to their initiative with promises including possible anti-oppression training, but relatively no serious actions followed suit.

Fast forward to a few months later when David Balzer (former editor-in-chief) published a letter publicly calling out the magazine and asking for accountability from a space that has time and time again benefited from their association with Indigenous and Black communities. He highlights multiple reasons behind his accusations including “that cultural institutions like *Canadian Art* are propped up by the artwork and ideas of Black, Indigenous and People of Colour, even though these institutions mainly get their funding from corporate philanthropy, a sector which tends to exclude these very people.” (Balzer, 2020)

Following Balzer’s letter, Jas M. Morgan released their own public statement detailing a similar pattern observed from their time working at *Canadian Art*. Morgan was the publication's first permanent Indigenous staff member, hired in 2017 with the title of ‘Indigenous editor-at-large.’ More details can be found [here](#) and [here](#) on the public letters they published.

The situation got out of hand in late July 2020, when the editorial staff decided to halt online publishing until the board agreed to shift into a safer and more equitable environment for all racialized employees. This news was shortly followed with the magazine’s publisher’s resignation, yet another white interim publisher was hired to fill the position. This left many employees feeling unheard and outraged. When the magazine finally resumed its operations, the board stated it would begin a process of centering the future of *Canadian Art* around principles of equity, diversity and inclusion. Of course it never happened and the magazine ultimately met its end due to financial losses caused by COVID-19.



What we can learn from this case is the critical importance of valuing the voices and contributions of BIPOC workers internally, this is what sets a standard and enacts care. When we go against those that have built the core of an institution, no other option is left but collapsing into itself. Staff of colour do not advocate for themselves in the hopes of seeing their work come to ruin simply because institutions lack the foundation to hold the magnitude of their visions and ambitions. Strong ethics allow for thoughtful reflection and continuous recognition of those that have led these spaces to success. Institutions do not make us, we the workers make the institution. It is important to keep in mind what brings us together as a community of arts workers, not what sets us apart, as beautifully stated by Michelin. :

*“As Indigenous People, we are already quite familiar with the concept of pretty words and empty promises, and if we have learned anything, it’s to call this out when it happens and demand better. We need to stop pretending that arts institutions with forward-facing, anti-racist rhetoric and conservative, slow-to-change structures can function. We need institutions to offer more than platitudes and back up their promises with action, to challenge their own structures of power, and to work with Indigenous, Black and People of Colour to create new and better systems that allow us all to thrive together.” (Michelin , 2022)*



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**OSSIE MICHELIN**

## What needs to be done to address it? (Tools)

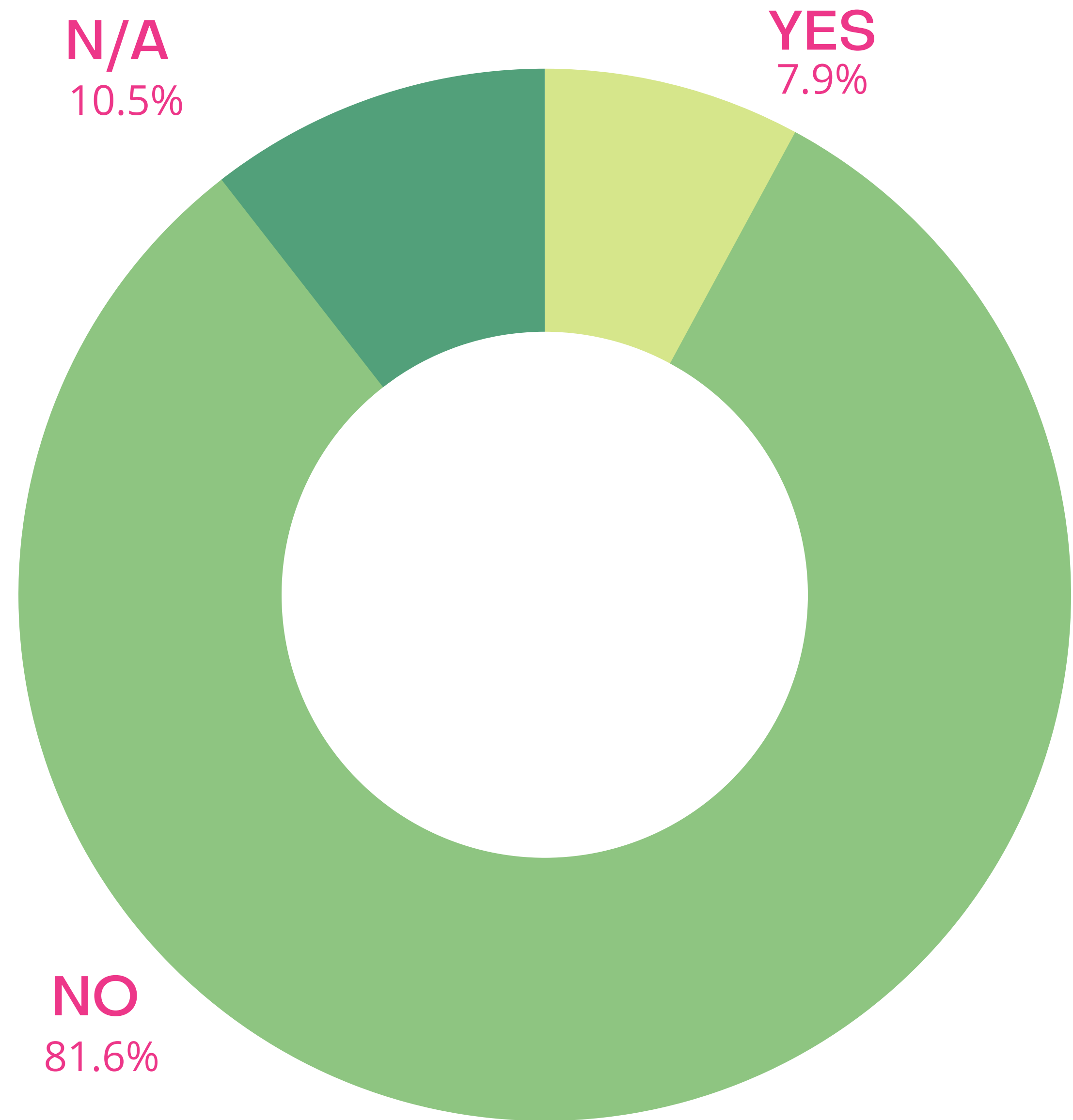
- Ethical Audits and holding space for non-hierarchical conversations that seek the insight of all staff is a vital first step in building a culture of strong ethics and a reputation for fairness, both as an employer and as a public institution. Audits like these promote community-building, the practice of intentional listening, and true integrity.
  - The ethical audit is not only to ensure that prohibited practices do not take place, but behaviours advocated in an organization's employee manual, and within its written policies, actually exist in practice. The value statements of an institution should not be at odds with how its staff behave. Letting behaviours and actions which violate an ethics policy slide will inherently set a negative precedent, deemed to repeat itself over time.
  - Your ethical audit processes should particularly take a close look at how your space might uphold white supremacy in any capacity, (see [Okun's list](#) of characteristics of white supremacy in institutional culture and how to directly combat each element.). Take this process slowly and adapt it to your organization scope.

- Make sure this work is not only shouldered by a single person or marginalized group within your institution but is a shared concern by all. Establish how each department can commit to it in their individual way and plan for its delivery.
- Update your HR policies and governance strategies in accordance with your audit. Most importantly, if there is a lack of expertise or appropriate lived experiences within your organization make sure to invite a consultant and compensate them generously for this work.
- Have mandatory anti-oppression and equity training that is given to all members on staff and board, it should be deeply embedded in your organization and be part of your onboarding processes. This work takes time and requires repeated training annually or bi-annually to start expanding your staff's capacity and understanding .

# Data

AS OF MAY 2022

Has your institution/organization undergone an Ethics audit?



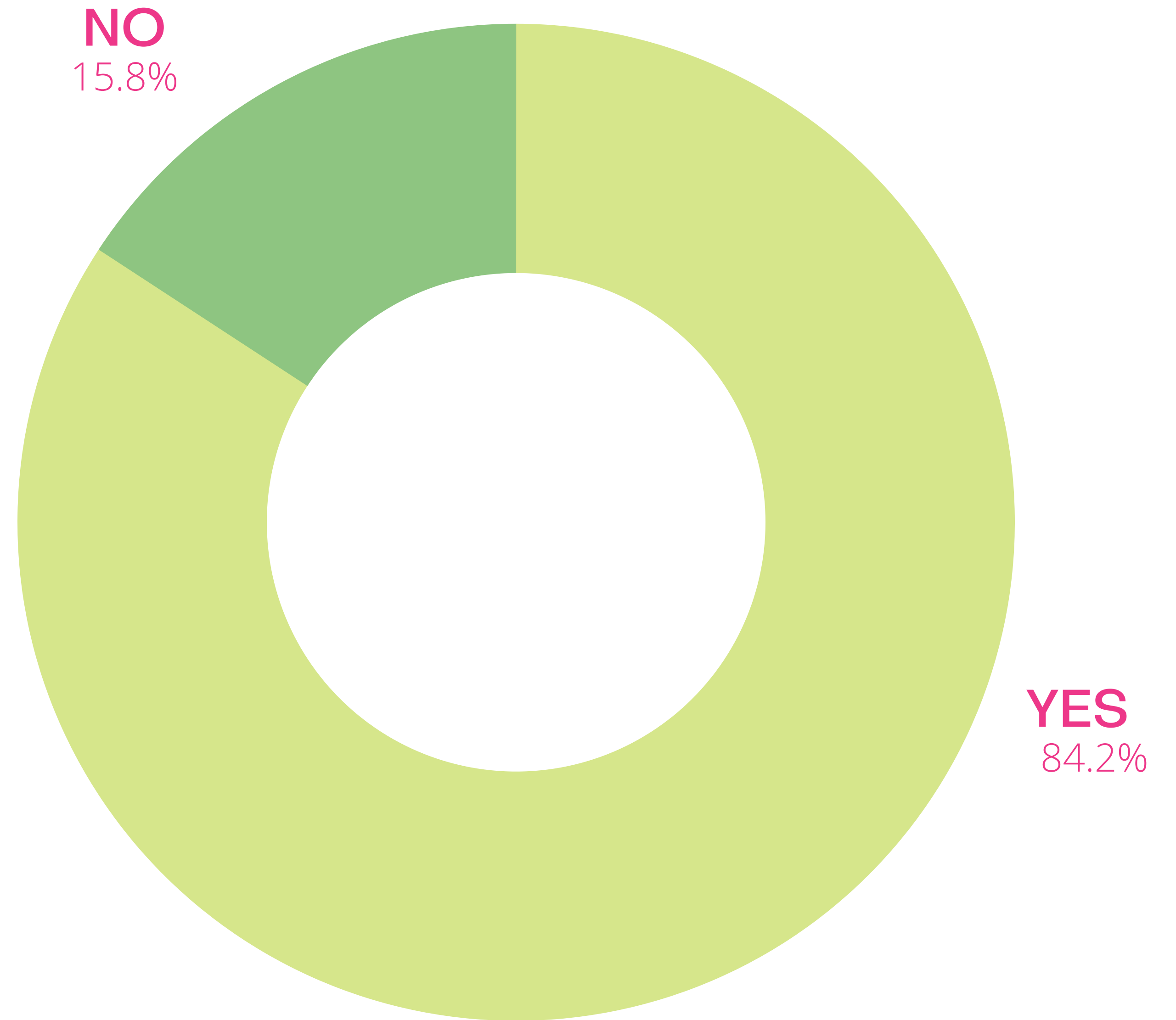
\*Data collected from the Institutional Membership Program



# Data

AS OF MAY 2022

Has your institution/organization undergone anti-oppression training/workshops?

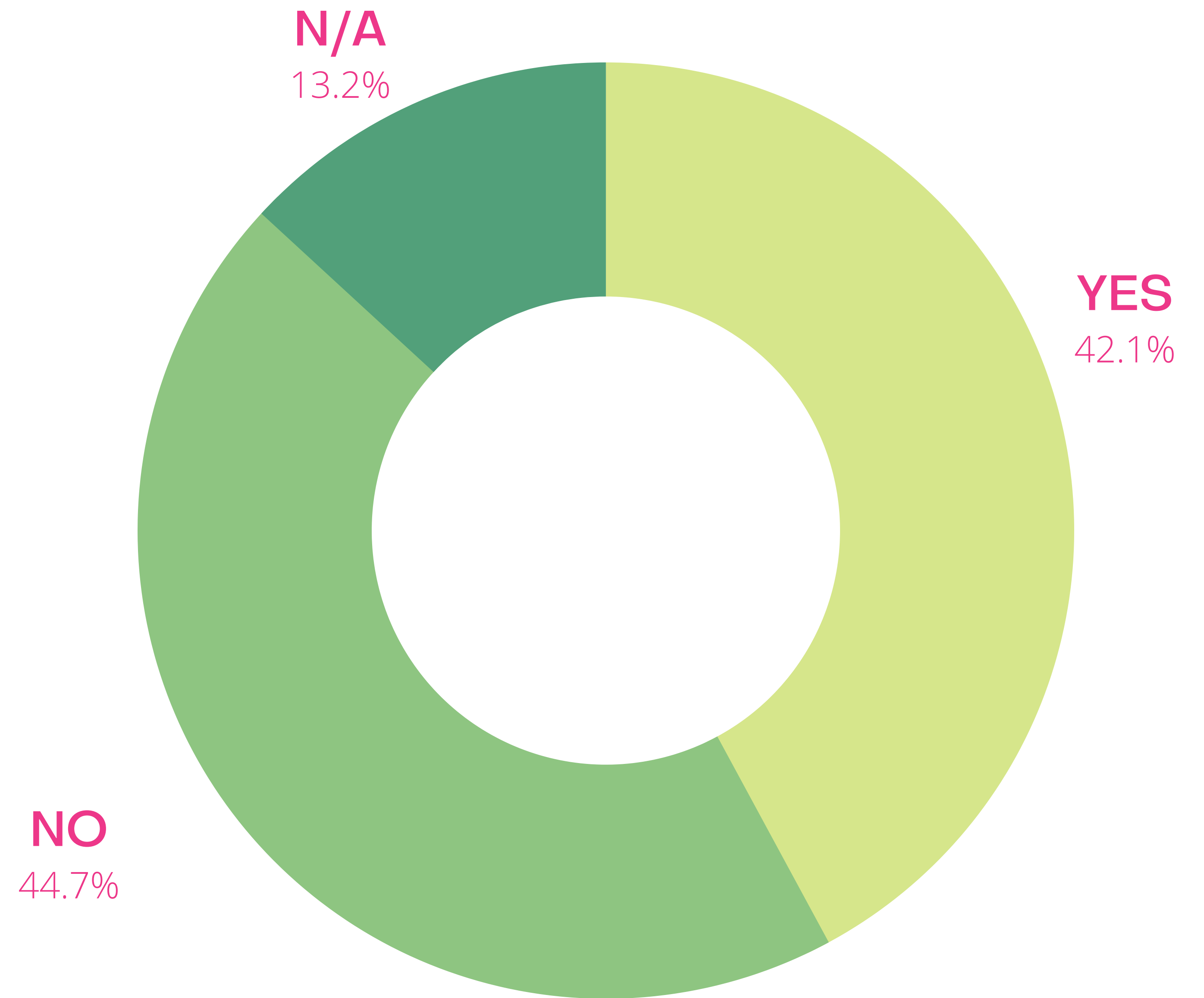


\*Data collected from the Institutional Membership Program

# Data

AS OF MAY 2022

Has your board undergone  
anti-oppression  
training/workshops?

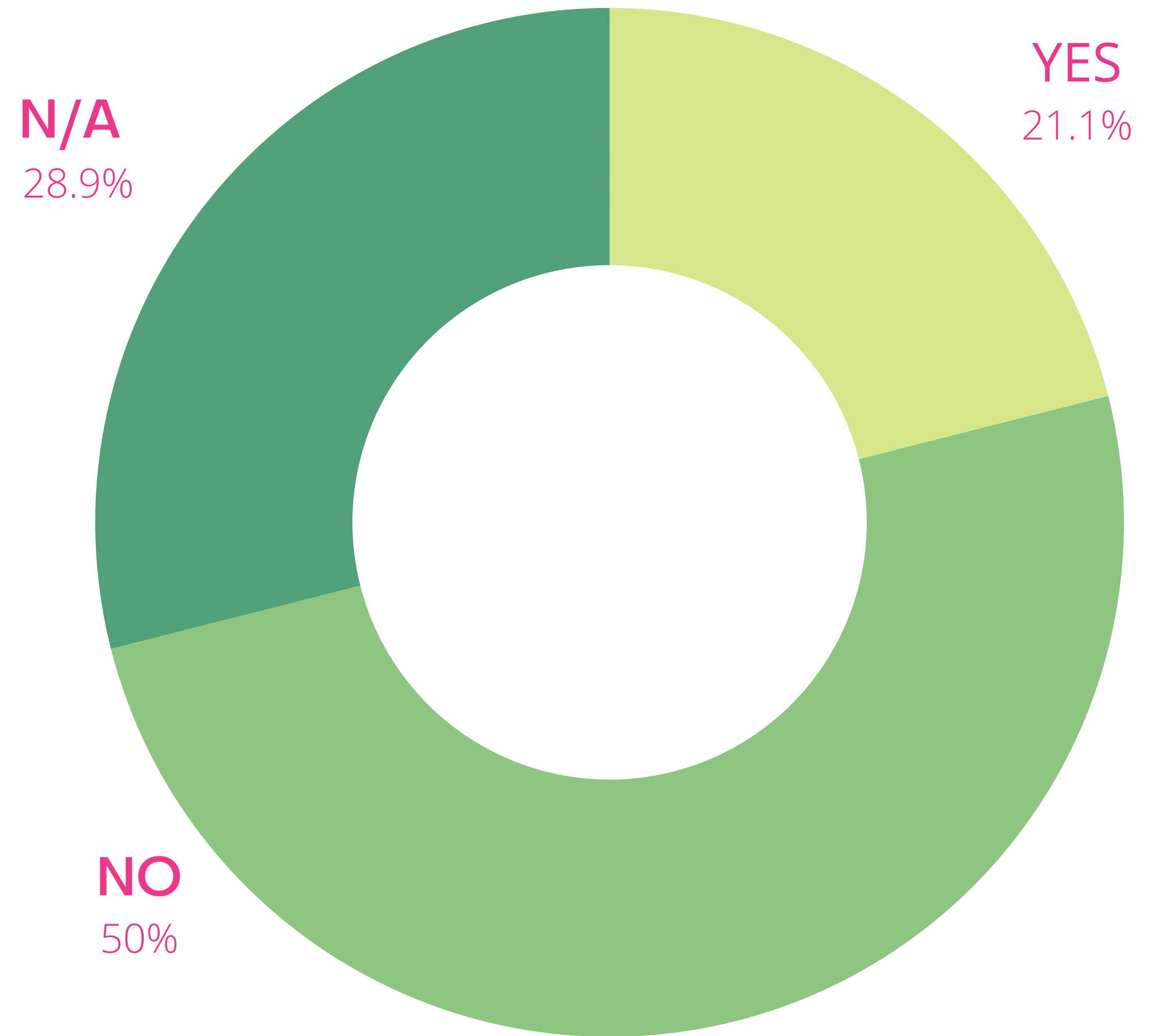


\*Data collected from the Institutional Membership Program

# Data

AS OF MAY 2022

If 'Yes', did you ever receive training before 2020 ?



\*Data collected from the Institutional Membership Program



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If you have any further questions concerning any of the materials above, please contact us via Email. Find our contact information listed below.

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