

NEFFA Community Survey Report (Abbreviated)

April, 2026

Overview

This report summarizes responses from a Spring 2024 Community Survey that asked NEFFA members and Festival participants about their experiences of NEFFA and their hopes and priorities for NEFFA's future. The survey built on previous work with the Community Stewardship Committee, which focused on how NEFFA's organizational structure can support and/or hinder inclusion. The survey was not intended to determine any "final answers" as to what NEFFA should do, but rather to hone in on more specific questions that NEFFA can continue to explore through community conversations within and beyond its membership.

We conducted extensive analysis of the survey responses, and only a small portion of that analysis is included here. This abbreviated report provides overall demographics and then highlights a few key themes:

- Engagement, Enjoyment and Commitment
- Roles and Access to Leadership
- Experiences of Exclusion
- Inappropriate Behavior and Dance Floor Etiquette
- Multiple meanings of "diversity"
- Folk Traditions and NEFFA's Identity
- Intergenerational differences

Throughout the report, we offer questions for your further consideration. The report concludes with recommendations for further information gathering and dialogue.

Demographics

Race: Approximately 98% white; other groups are too small to report while maintaining anonymity. Because of the very small number of respondents of color, differences across race almost never reach statistical significance. Nevertheless, these differences are indications of where NEFFA should continue to explore the question of how race may be relevant.¹

¹ The number of respondents of color is so small that in some places when we report comparison data, we have redacted exact numbers to preserve anonymity.

Gender: 57% women; 37% men². About 4.5% trans and/or nonbinary. Respondents under 55 years old are much more likely to be trans and/or nonbinary (16%).

Sexual orientation: Approximately 88% heterosexual/straight. People under 55 years old are much less likely to be heterosexual (~52%) than those over 55 years old (~92%).

Geography: 75% New England residents; 55% MA residents; 31% urban; 40% suburban; 19% small town; 9% rural. Respondents of color and those under 55 years old are more likely to live in urban areas.

Age/Generation: 80% over 55 years old; 44% retired. Respondents of color are younger on average, but still more than half are over 55 years old.

Disability: 79% report no disability; about 20% describe some form of disability.

Language: 97% grew up speaking English at home; 1% grew up speaking another language only; 9% grew up speaking English and another language. Respondents of color are less likely to have grown up speaking English at home and are *much* more likely to have grown up speaking another language as well as English (33%).

Education: 90% have a bachelor's degree (or higher), compared to 50% of MA residents and about 25% of U.S. residents. 40% have a Master's degree, and about 13% have a doctorate.

Key Themes

Engagement, Enjoyment and Commitment

A total of 614 people responded to the survey over a period of about 8 weeks. This is a significant subset of people involved with NEFFA. Moreover, many people took the time to provide detailed write-in responses to optional questions. The robust response demonstrates how deeply people care about NEFFA, which is an important strength that NEFFA can continue to build on.

Overall, people report positive experiences with participating in NEFFA. Most agree or strongly agree with each of the following statements:

- "I feel included and like I belong when participating in NEFFA events" - 86%
- "I feel respected by others when participating in NEFFA events" - 92%
- "I feel respected by others when working in NEFFA (volunteer shifts, committee meetings, etc.)" - 90%
- "I feel a strong sense of community in NEFFA" - 76%

² Includes both cis and trans women and men.

Specifically, people reported feeling welcomed and included when they see old friends, experience intergenerational community, have positive interactions with volunteers, and when events are welcoming to dancers of all skill levels.

Even when people report negative experiences or critiques (which we discuss below), it is clear that they appreciate and care deeply about the NEFFA community.

Roles and Access to Leadership

The survey asked what roles people currently have in NEFFA and what roles they have ever had (e.g. festival-goer, participant in other NEFFA events, committee member, performer, teacher, etc.). Responses reveal some interesting patterns across demographic groups. For instance:

- **Respondents of color are more likely to be volunteers, less likely to be teachers, and less likely to participate in events other than the festival** compared to the overall sample.
- **Men are significantly more likely than women to have ever been a performer, presenter or teacher both at the Festival** (58% of men and 48% of women) and at other NEFFA events (14% of men, 8% of women); **the same pattern holds true for being currently in those roles**. However, there are more women than men in the sample, and the actual *numbers* of teachers who are men and women are roughly equal.
- **People who live in suburban areas are more likely to be board members and performers** than any other group.

The survey also asked several questions about how well respondents understand **how NEFFA works as an organization**. The goal of these questions is to explore who has the information they need to navigate the organization successfully and to become involved in leadership if they want to. We found several notable patterns across demographic groups.

- Compared to the overall sample, **respondents of color were much less likely to say they understand how NEFFA works as an organization** (27% compared to 45% of the overall sample) and that they **trust NEFFA's decision-making processes** (27% compared to 66%).
- **Women are significantly less likely than men to say that “when we have disagreements in NEFFA, we can work it out”** (22% of women and 31% of men).
- **Younger people are overall less likely to respond affirmatively to this whole set of questions**. Some of the most notable differences are:
 - 25-34 year-olds are only a third as likely as others to say they **understand how NEFFA works as an organization** (16%, compared to 45% overall).
 - 25-34 year-olds are much less likely than other groups to say they **know how to get involved in leadership if they want** (30%, compared to 53% overall).
 - 25-34 year-olds are far less likely to say they **trust NEFFA's decision-making processes** (33%, all other groups 68% and higher).

These results suggest that **young people might have difficulty getting involved in NEFFA** beyond participating as dancers or musicians. This aligns with what we learned in our earlier

assessment: In many areas, NEFFA relies on unwritten norms, friendliness, word of mouth, personality affinities, and repeated attendance to recruit its volunteer core and leadership. Obviously this has worked in many ways, and NEFFA functions incredibly well for an all-volunteer organization. Nevertheless there are benefits to having transparent, written processes that people can learn about regardless of their personal connections. Transparency and consistency builds trust and makes it easier for people to move into new roles.

Questions to Consider About Roles and Access to Leadership

- What processes are written and which are not? Which written processes are available to any NEFFA member, without having to know the right person to ask? What processes, roles, or responsibilities need to be clearly outlined?
- What is the pipeline for bringing new people into volunteer and leadership roles? How explicit is it? What is the decision-making process for identifying whether someone is needed in and/or appropriate for a role? How explicit is it?
- What could NEFFA do to ensure everyone who wants to volunteer is able to do so, to succeed, and to feel appreciated?

Experiences of Exclusion

As noted above, people report overall positive experiences with NEFFA, but some respondents report challenging and/or negative experiences:

- 19% agree or strongly agree, “At times, I have felt left out of NEFFA or of particular cliques in NEFFA”
- 5% agree or strongly agree, “I am often the only person of my identity (race, gender, sexuality, religion, etc.) in a NEFFA space”
- 6% agree or strongly agree, “I have experienced inappropriate behavior (such as harassment, bullying, etc.) in a NEFFA space”

In a different part of the survey, 45% of respondents say they find it concerning that **“It’s hard to be a new person in NEFFA,”** and similarly 44% find **“cliquishness”** concerning.

There are substantial differences in positive and negative experiences across race, and some similarities. Compared to the overall sample, respondents of color are:

- About as likely to agree or strongly agree, “I feel included and like I belong when participating in NEFFA events”
- Somewhat less likely agree or strongly agree, “I feel respected by others when participating in NEFFA events”
- Much less likely to agree or strongly agree, “I feel respected by others when working in NEFFA (volunteer shifts, committee meetings, etc.)”

- Much less likely to agree or strongly agree, “I feel a strong sense of community in NEFFA”

Likewise, respondents of color are far more likely to report **feeling left out**, over 10x as likely to report often being the only person of their identity in a NEFFA space, and **twice as likely to have experienced inappropriate behavior** in a NEFFA space.

There are also differences across age, with **25-34 year olds less likely to report positive experiences and more likely to report negative experiences** than other groups.

Across gender, people report positive and negative experiences mostly at similar rates. The only notable difference is that **trans and nonbinary people are more likely to have experienced inappropriate behavior** (9% of trans people and 19% of nonbinary people) than women overall (6%) or men overall (5%).

Some specific experiences that people describe as contributing to feelings of exclusion include:

- Inappropriate behavior and harassment (see below)
- Cliquishness
- Feeling like others mostly want to interact with old friends rather than make new friends
- Feeling undervalued as a volunteer or performer
- Gender-inclusive language (in both directions)
- Pandemic related policies (in both directions)

At least 20 respondents indicated they no longer attend in person. For many, this was related to the risk of COVID for people with compromised immune systems. Others cited mobility issues, living farther away than they used to, or being unable to drive.

Questions to Consider about Positive and Negative Experiences

- Almost 20% of respondents have felt left out. How/why do you think that happens? How/why do you think it appears to happen more for People of Color (over 60%) and for younger people (30%) than for other groups?
- Both young people (of all races) and People of Color (of all ages) are about as likely as others to feel respected as participants, but far less likely to feel respected when working (as volunteers or committee members). How do you make sense of that?

Inappropriate Behavior and Dance Floor Etiquette

Although a relatively small number of people (34 total) reported experiencing inappropriate behavior such as harassment or bullying, some of the examples they gave are egregious:

- Inappropriate touch including touching breasts, grabbing too hard, and touching between the legs (on the dance floor)
- Becoming hostile when someone declines to dance together

- Explicit exclusion of trans and nonbinary people, e.g. people saying “I only want to dance with a real woman”

In a different question, 79% of respondents said that harassment or inappropriate behavior was “not at all concerning” for NEFFA. This suggests that people who have not themselves experienced inappropriate behavior are not aware that others experience it.

Only 57% of respondents said that if they experienced inappropriate behavior, they would know how to report it and would feel confident seeking support from NEFFA.

Dance Floor Etiquette as a Key Site for Belonging and Exclusion

Although the survey did not ask about it specifically, people of all genders and all age groups described interactions on the dance floor as key experiences that led them to feel included or excluded. Experiences of inclusion on the dance floor are largely the same across groups - people enjoy dancing with old friends and new friends, and enjoy being asked to dance. Some experiences of exclusion are also consistent across groups: People report feeling excluded when dancers only want to dance with people they know or with highly skilled dancers, and some describe negative interpersonal behaviors, such as unsolicited or patronizing corrections.

Other experiences of exclusion differ significantly across genders and ages. For example:

- Some older people (of all genders) feel like young people don’t want to dance with them. Some older women describe more explicit signals of exclusion, including being ignored and not asked to dance (by people of any age), and being visibly rejected by dancers who turn away from them while waiting to find a partner. A few described how their experiences changed over time, and that as they have aged, people don’t ask them to dance as much.
- For older men, feelings of exclusion more often came up in experiences of asking someone to dance and being refused. “Occasionally people I ask to dance don't want to dance with me. That's their right, but it still makes me feel a bit dejected.”
- Some women across age groups describe upsetting experiences of repeatedly being asked to dance by the same man after having declined, and women of all ages note that some older men seem to seek out younger women while ignoring women their own age. As one person put it, “I have been the recipient of uncomfortable and unwanted attention from older men at Thursday contras, at Ralph Page, and at the festival. It’s been often enough to discourage me from attending.”

Relatedly, many women of all ages, along with some trans and nonbinary people, described experiences of “handsy behavior” and “substantial sexual harassment,” often on the dance floor.³ Some of the most upsetting incidents occurred during dances where movement patterns make it difficult to disengage without disrupting the dance for others. People describe these experiences as both frightening and disempowering.

³ Some of the respondents who provided these examples did *not* say they had experienced “inappropriate behavior” when that was asked in a general way in an earlier question.

Questions to Consider About Dance Floor Etiquette

- What norms and expectations for dance floor etiquette does NEFFA want to uphold? How explicit are these norms now, and how can they be made more explicit? What should happen when someone doesn't follow them?
- How might the dynamic of people only wanting to dance with their friends interact with dynamics around age and gender? How can "cliquish" practices be interrupted without disrupting the community feelings that people share?
- How are young women (and people who may be perceived as young women) protecting themselves and each other from inappropriate behavior? What can NEFFA do so that young women don't have to take on so much of that responsibility?
- How are older women, especially those who attend dance events alone, respected and included? How aren't they? What new norms or practices could improve this?

Multiple Meanings of Diversity

Only one question asked about diversity explicitly. Respondents had a chance to rate how concerning or not they found various potential issues, on a 3-point scale (very, slightly, or not at all concerning). Almost 60% said it is concerning that NEFFA is "not diverse enough" (11% very, 48% slightly). Responses varied significantly across age groups, with 30% of 25-34-year-olds calling it very concerning compared to only 7% of those over 65. However, these results may not be as straightforward as they seem, because it's likely that people are defining diversity differently from each other.

In comments about diversity, almost everyone says they value diversity, but it's clear that they mean diversity in at least two, very different ways. Some mean the diversity of people who attend, usually in terms of race but sometimes in terms of age. Others mean the diversity of the ethnic traditions represented, and/or the authentic representation of those traditions.

Many respondents express a wish to see NEFFA reflect the real diversity of New England and its diverse, diasporic and non-European communities. Comments on the topic included:

- "More diversity, within the context of the range of cultures which have existed in New England..."
- "Hmong, Cambodian, African and Hispanic populations need adequate representation to make it not be another Bluegrass/Celtic festival with a few ethnic performances tossed in to make it look international."
- "Get the ethnic churches and cultural groups involved the way they were in the 1970s. New England hasn't been English since the 1880s. The real population of the area needs to be presented, including Dominican Republic and Haiti!!"

These voices advocate for expanding the range of traditions represented, often connecting the idea of diversity to regional authenticity — that **NEFFA should mirror the real, lived cultural mosaic of New England** rather than an idealized Anglo-European past.

Equally vocal are folks who caution against “performative” or symbolic inclusion. Instead they want NEFFA to be intentional and earnest in approaching diversity, ensuring communities are represented by practitioners, not outsiders.

- “I find most of the versions of ‘international’ folk dance... feel quite far removed from the living folk tradition in those regions... many other folk practices get boiled down to one-off performances that make those artists feel like they are being treated as tokens.”

A significant number of participants were concerned that increasing diversity could dilute NEFFA’s core identity and/or alienate long-time participants. They are concerned about having to give up something in the current programming in order to diversify. For them **NEFFA’s Euro-American character and history is the core tradition to preserve.**

- “On a theoretical level I support broadening the scope... but in practice I go for friends and contra. I don’t think it’s inherently bad for NEFFA to focus almost exclusively on Anglo folk traditions.”

In general, folks who responded to these questions did not like the feeling that they had to choose between doing more of some things and continuing to do as much of NEFFA’s current core programming.

Many respondents highlighted **other areas of diversity beyond race and ethnicity**, including gender, socioeconomic class, and accessibility, with a couple of people noting that **NEFFA may have become less diverse over the past decades:**

- “After 50 years of involvement... I noted the **reduction in working class or lower as well as non-Western European involvement.**”

At the same time, some people raise a concern that attention to gender, class, age and other aspects of diversity should not be used as a way to avoid working on ethnic and racial diversity.

Questions to Consider About Meanings of Diversity

- How do you see the issue of diversity of participants as connected (or not) to the issues of diversity of traditions represented?
- How should NEFFA explore the balance between representing more traditions and continuing to support the traditions that are already well-represented?

Folk Traditions and NEFFA’s Identity

Very much related to the tensions around “diversity” and all the ways people understand it, the survey reveals some tensions in how people see NEFFA and what they want it to be.

One area where there is common ground is the idea of community. When asked, “Which of the following best describes how you think about NEFFA,” the most common response was “A community of people who share a passion for folk practices” (82%).

The next most popular answers were “A host of contra dances” (78%) and “A place to learn about folk song and dance practices from many cultures” (73%). Many participants chose *both* - they do not want more diversity of folk practices to mean less opportunity for contra. Other response options included “A place to learn about British Isles folks traditions” (38%), “A place to practice British Isles folk traditions” (40%), “A place to learn about cultures other than my own” (48%), and “A place to connect with my own / my ancestors’ culture” (17%).

Two questions explored participants’ perspectives on NEFFA’s future. The first asked, for a variety of activities, if NEFFA should do that activity more, less, or about the same amount. For every activity, **at least twice as many people marked “do more” as marked “do less,”** with the majority choosing “about the same” or “I don’t know.” This raises an obvious question of how NEFFA can do more of anything without doing less of anything.

Another question asked respondents to select three priorities for NEFFA’s future planning. Responses differ significantly across age groups. **Younger respondents are more likely to endorse gathering as a community, diversity, and innovation. Older respondents are more likely to endorse maintaining the festival as-is.** The most striking contrasts are between those 65+ and everyone else:

- “Maintain the festival largely the way it is” – Over 65: 62%; Under 65: 43%
- “Supporting innovation in folk traditions” – Over 65: 18%; Under 65: 37%
- “Providing a space for people to gather” – Over 65: 41%; Under 65: 57%

On the option of “Trying to make the NEFFA community more racially/ethnically diverse,” the most notable age split is between those under 35 and everyone else. Over half (51%) of respondents under 35 years old selected this option, compared to 36% of everyone else.

Questions to Consider About NEFFA’s Future

- The number of people who want to preserve folk traditions is almost the same as the number of people who want to see more racial diversity at NEFFA - each were selected by nearly 40% of respondents. And a significant number - nearly 11% of respondents - selected both. How might NEFFA address this?
- How can NEFFA respond to people’s desire to do more of everything, and not do less of anything?
- How do you understand the generational differences in priorities for NEFFA?
- How can NEFFA continue to provide the experience that older participants (who are the majority) want to have, while also appealing to more younger participants?

Intergenerational Differences

Throughout every section of the survey, significant differences emerged across age groups. Some have already been noted above:

- Demographic differences (e.g. younger people much less likely to be heterosexual)
- Young people less likely to be “plugged in” to NEFFA as an organization
- Experiences of dance floor etiquette; being asked to dance too much or not enough; feeling rejected or overly pursued
- Concerns about diversity and cultural appropriation (young people much more likely to endorse)

Other differences came up as well:

- Younger people are more likely to endorse concern about “It’s hard to be a new person at NEFFA,” ranging from over 60% of the youngest groups to only 30% of those 65+
- Younger people are more likely to say they value meeting new friends through NEFFA, ranging from 100% of the youngest group to 49% of those 65+
- Differences in which activities people want NEFFA to **do more of**:
 - Do more international folk dancing - 21% of 25-34yos; 15% of all respondents
 - Do more English and Scottish dancing - 9% of 25-34 yos; 13% of all respondents
 - Do more other styles of couples dancing - 34% of 25-34yos; 38% of 45-54yos; 18% of 65+ yos
 - Do more sing-alongs and jams - 34% of 25-34yos; 23% of all respondents
 - Do more classes and workshops to learn new skills: 22% of 65+yos; 35%-45% in all other age ranges

Recommendations for Next Steps

Community Conversations

The Community Stewardship Committee is planning a series of facilitated community conversations to explore questions raised by the survey and build mutual understanding. All the “questions to consider” presented throughout this report can serve as discussion questions.

Structures

Survey responses point to the need for more explicit structures, policies and/or shared norms in several areas. We recommend developing these structures collaboratively, with input from a wide range of NEFFA participants including and beyond relevant committee members.

Addressing Inappropriate Behavior

Although mechanisms for reporting inappropriate behavior exist, many people don't know about them. We suggest developing more detailed processes, and documenting them in a way that is accessible to all participants.

Volunteer Welcome/Orientation

We suggest reviewing existing practices for recruiting, orienting and training new volunteers, and ensuring that these processes are inclusive and relatively consistent. The goal should be that anyone who volunteers with NEFFA even once feels respected, valued, and like they are contributing to something positive and important; and that the community's experience of interacting with volunteers is consistently positive.

Transparent Paths to Leadership

We recommend documenting and sharing information about how people can get involved in NEFFA leadership roles (committee membership, board, etc.). Anyone who participates in NEFFA should be able to find out what roles exist, what skills and capacities are valuable in each, and when and how people can join a committee.

Organizational Culture and Community Norms

In addition to the structures described above, we suggest exploring and articulating explicit agreements about how people treat each other in various NEFFA spaces. (Some agreements already exist, and may need to be updated.) Then, we suggest a strategic roll-out to model and practice the agreements. **Dance floor etiquette** is one area where it's clear that people have conflicting expectations and/or desires, and that clarifying norms is necessary to ensure basic safety at dance events.