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African American Student Theatre Organization Involvement and the College Experience at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENT THEATRE ORGANIZATION INVOLVEMENT
AND THE COLLEGE EXPERIENCE AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA, LAS VEGAS

By

Crestcencia Ortiz-Barnett

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
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ABSTRACT

AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENT THEATRE ORGANIZATION INVOLVEMENT AND THE COLLEGE EXPERIENCE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA, LAS VEGAS

By

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Dr. Lezlie Cross, Examination Committee Chair
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There aren't many studies pertaining to African American theater student organizations. This study examined the African American Student Association for Theatre and Film (AASATF) on the campus of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Five undergraduates and one graduate student were interviewed for this study. The thesis gives an overview of the history of AASATF, the need for the organization, and how participant involvement in AASATF affected their college experience. Administrators within the Fine Arts Department can utilize these findings to better serve the needs of their diverse students.

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To my husband Jessie, no words could express how blessed I have been to have you along for this journey. To you and our beautiful daughter, Savannah, thank you for sacrificing the most precious thing...time. Because of your support and sacrifice this was possible. I love you.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides a review of current and pertinent literature about the academic and social college experience, building towards a discussion of the impact of the AASATF on UNLV's campus. As the focus of this study is on a college theatre organization, the review of literature on college experience will focus primarily on studies of student organizations and their peer interactions. Because the research for this thesis examined students' experiences in a predominantly African American theatre organization, and because there are limited resources on this topic for research, a review of the literature on the college experience of students of color has been included. African American student organizations will be discussed in terms of their roles on campus and their impact on members. The review will also highlight specific student organizations that helped AASATF and its members succeed with the development of the organization.

In the spring of 2009, I was a transfer student at The University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV), with junior status and majoring in theatre studies. I was twenty-six years old and ready to experience life beyond school. It is undeniable that theatre can be exciting. However, I chose not to get involved at UNLV, as I was at my previous college, participating in performances, making friends and networking for the school's theatre program. My plans changed one afternoon as I tried consoling a weeping classmate after our directing class. In her frustration, she yelled out, "I don't want to do *A Raisin in the Sun!*" She said this because she it was the only African American play that she knew and thought that she would be forced to direct or perform in. This was the sentence that changed my life, as well as my involvement on the campus of the University of Nevada,

Las Vegas. My classmate was crying after class because our professor asked her why she chose to play white characters when she is African American. She believed the reason this play was performed multiple times by students of color in acting and directing classes was because of the lack of available material for African American students. The professor intended to urge the student to bring to the class more material by African American playwrights beyond *A Raisin in the Sun*. In making this suggestion he didn't mean any harm. However, this particular student, though African American, only knew of one African American playwright (Lorraine Hansberry) and one African American play (*A Raisin in the Sun*). Additionally, she did not feel it was her responsibility to teach other students about African American theatrical history. Perhaps if the university had made the black drama and performance course part of the mandatory requirements, more students, not just African Americans, would learn about a wider variety of African American playwrights and plays.

This friend and I were two of three African American students in this beginning directing class. I felt differently than my classmate. I wanted to show the diversity in theatre to my classmates and planned to present the work of a new African American playwright each week. All the material I chose to direct or perform was written by African Americans because it was what interested me the most, as I felt I could relate to the history of the African American characters as a woman of color. Even as a child, I was interested in African American literature, playwrights, history and performance. As my classmate and I began to converse, I found out that she actually didn't know any black plays other than *A Raisin in the Sun*. She had begun her college career at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas and explained that (as far as she knew) African

American theatre was not a subject that was taught and so she never felt the need to research any more on the subject. At this time, I had only spent a semester at UNLV and was already aware of the *Black Drama and Performance* class that is offered every semester, in addition to the small section on Black theatre in the theatre history class that is also offered every semester. I began to see that unlike myself, she was just not interested in African American history, performances or playwrights. Per our conversation, she also was not concerned about the lack of students of color in university productions, or the fact that at that time, in 2009, UNLV had never produced an all-African American production. This was problematic to me because I had begun to befriend classmates who were African American and had dreams of performing in a UNLV production before they graduated college. I was able to witness the need for more diversity within our programs and was saddened every time a classmate of color chose to attend a different university because they felt their needs and desires were not being met.

By the fall, my classmate and I were both beginning our senior year and I was more interested in keeping my head down and graduating than becoming involved in what was or what wasn't happening in the theatre department. That same semester, I was enrolled in the *Black Drama and Performance* elective. This class is an introduction to the origins and development of black American drama and black practitioners of the theatre arts from 1800s to contemporary times. My classmate could have taken this class but she chose not to. "It's not a requirement, so I won't waste my time," she said. My classmate was more concerned with completing her degree, so she believed that if she didn't have to take it, she wasn't going to. Instead of the western classics that I had been learning since the beginning of my theatre college experience, in one semester, I was

learning about African American theatre artists whom I had never heard of, as I was experiencing the work of a new playwright every class period. As much as I was retaining, I was concerned about all of the other theatre majors who were not being taught about these amazing artists of color in theatre because this course was an elective.

UNLV's Theatre History course covered the better-known black actors and playwrights, but in the elective course I was able to learn much more about black theatre. I not only learned about hundreds of performances, but the struggles that African American actors, directors and writers suffered over many years. This was important especially for theatre studies majors, as we are to know all theatre including backgrounds history and cultures.

After speaking with African American students who consistently auditioned for performances and who were involved in UNLV's undergraduate theatre programs¹, I learned that almost all of these students were graduating with their four year degrees without having been in a single university performance. These students believed that this was due in part to their ethnicities and the fact that there was a lack of diverse performances. These students believed that their only opportunities to participate in performances were if they agreed to contribute through design and tech. At this time, there were no black graduate students to speak with, and this observation was showing me that a diverse theatre student body was not a priority. The undergraduate performance program at UNLV requires students to audition for roles in all performances. My fellow students of color continued to audition, however they were not cast in university performances. The students of color believed that they were never given a role because during their time at UNLV, between the years of 2008-2010, the university didn't

¹ Bachelor of Arts: Concentrations in Stage and Screen acting, Theatre studies, and Design/Technology.

produce any performances with roles for actors of color. Between the years of 2008 and 2010, the Nevada Conservatory Theatre, with the support of the university, produced 18 productions². African Americans wrote none of them, nor did the productions feature students of color in lead speaking roles.

Seeing the need for African-American students to have equal opportunities, I decided to develop a student theatre organization specifically but not limited to African American students, in order to assist future incoming African American theater students and current students. I wanted to assist these students in making performance opportunities for themselves through stage and film. After deciding on a name for the organization, The African American Student Association for Theatre and Film (AASATF), with the goal to produce stage performances and film projects, the next step was to register the organization with the student involvement center. Before registering AASATF as a tax-exempt student organization listed on the university's website, I spoke with one professor who agreed to assist with the development of the organization and serve as the group's advisor. The professor and I arranged a meeting with a few faculty members and development of the organization was not of interest to most of the faculty. For most, they felt as if the organization would bring division in the department. However, there were a few professors that were excited to see what the students would do within the organization. Despite the lack of support from the department, I still had the

²Recent productions at the NCT included *Shining City* By Conor McPherson, *The Importance of Being Earnest* By Oscar Wilde, *The Diary of Anne Frank* In a new adaptation by Wendy Kesselman, *The Cradle Will Rock* Book, Music and Lyrics by Marc Blitzstein, *The Music Man* Book, Music and Lyrics by Meredith Wilson, *King Lear* By William Shakespeare, *The Marriage of Bette and Boo* by Christopher Durang, *The Chasm* by Laura Neubauer, *Company* Book by George Furth, *Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol* By David H. Bell, *All My Sons* By Arthur Miller, *The Little Dog Laughed* By Douglas Carter Beane, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* By William Shakespeare, *Reasons to be Pretty* By Neil LaBute, New Play Festival, *Pink Champagne* By Neil Haven, *The Way It Has To Be* By Jeremiah Munsey, *Whales, Save Us!* By Elizabeth Leavitt and *The Musical of Musicals* By Joanne Bogart and Eric Rockwell

support of our advisor and we went about registering the organization into the university's database in order to become tax exempt and searchable online. I was interested in creating an environment anyone interested that would aid in the professional growth of my fellow students, give them a chance to practice their craft, as well as provide a teaching environment in which interested students could learn further about their crafts, African American theatre and feel free to make mistakes without the pressure of being judged by their professors or that it would affect their grade. This organization was developed for the under-served communities within the theatre major, specifically actors of color. The group had an educational goal to make the campus community more aware of the contributions of African American theatre artists. With the aid of my fellow students, and support from our advisor, in the fall of 2009, The African American Student Association for Theatre and Film was developed. AASATF's mission was to address issues affecting UNLV's African American theatre students on campus, in the classroom and in the community. The goal was to be able to use theater art to encourage social consciousness as well as cultural awareness, while serving and educating all ethnicities as well as elevating knowledge and promoting unity among all UNLV organizations, students, faculty and staff. The organization's members would produce one performance per semester. During the months leading up to the production, members would study specific parts of the performance and educate each other on vision, what they thought the playwright wanted to see on stage, design ideas, props and anything else that goes into producing a production. AASATF's student advisor, Professor Clarence Gilyard would then mentor each student by advising them on their acting, designs, acting, lighting and technical skills.

In 2009, of the nearly 250 registered student organizations at UNLV, there were no theatre organizations. Today there are two theatre organizations on the campus of UNLV, The AASATF and the Theatre Student Collective (TSC). UNLV's collegiate link portal lists all university registered organizations and states that TSC's mission is to provide more opportunities for theatre students to learn by doing. The TSC produces entirely student-run productions, special theatrical events, and workshops.

African American students at UNLV had only three active student organizations and nine historically Black Greek-letter organizations (BGLO) to join. The three student organizations were the Black Student Organization (BSO), similar to Students Organizing Diverse Activities (SODA) they offered student mixers, movie nights, and gatherings in order to meet and unite Black students on campus. There was also the African Students Association (ASA), whose purpose was to create and encourage relationships among African Students at UNLV, and the Black Graduate Student Association (BGSA). The mission of BGSA was to promote unity and a dedication to higher learning, academic scholarship, professionalism, and excellence, through community involvement and active dialogue. Though these organizations could meet the needs of AASATF members in other aspects, for example, a sense of community, multiple friendships and support, the need for African American theatre could not be met, hence the desire to develop AASATF.

One of these organizations, Students Organizing Diverse Activities (SODA) could be found under the multicultural student programs. Their mission was to provide students an inclusive environment with the goal of empowering students to explore social change through examining cultural identity, educating self and engaging others. Over the years,

SODA has been a supporter of AASATF. The first organization to assist AASATF with funding for performances and marketing was SODA. They have since played a role in the membership recruitment of AASATF by allowing members to perform during their celebrations, such as Hispanic heritage month, Asian American month, Native American month, and Black history month. Though a multicultural organization, SODA does not fully meet the needs of student who looked to participate in African American theatrical productions because their organization does not produce theatrical performances. Given the process to start AASATF and the need expressed by African American students in the theater program, this study was carried out.

Purpose of this study

This thesis will examine the social and academic impact that AASATF, an African American student theatre organization, had on the college experience of students at UNLV. To better understand the college experience of participants in this study I examined the effect membership in an ethnic-based theatrical group had on six participants' social and academic lives. Through narrative analysis, the members' responses were examined to understand how joining the African American Student Association for Theatre and Film impacted their college experience socially and academically. The students' responses to the survey reflected that the organization created an agential space that allowed them to embrace their culture, while providing service to their communities, and being supported in their career and educational quests.

Literature Review

The reasons why individuals pursue higher education are as diverse as their backgrounds. Regardless of the reason, “few people will argue the profound effect attending college has in a person’s life” (Astin 1). Student’s college experiences can be positive or negative depending on their upbringing and educational background. Scholar Ernest Boyer believes that this profound effect is nurtured by faculty and staff meeting the needs of students as individuals; recognizing them as diverse, creative, and self-regulating, while seeking to become economically and socially adept” (1). Despite the fact that each year students will enter college pursuing similar academic goals, the college experience likely will have a “different effect on different kinds of students” (Pascarella and Terenzini 626). For example, while attending college, “many majority Caucasian students can live independent lives, free of issues related to their racial or ethnic heritage while students of color, are often the voice of a race/the spokesperson, whether they want to be or not” (Olivas and Watson 234).

Those who make it to college encounter obstacles that threaten their ability to complete their academic goals. According to A. L. Rodríguez’s *Latina College Student: Issues and Challenges for the 21st Century*, the barriers students of color face as they participate in college are: (a) socioeconomic status, (b) cultural stereotyping, (c) academic under preparation, (d) institutional marginalization, and (e) stress factors (511-527). Understanding the obstacles students of color face while attending institutions of higher education could help institutions create a more welcoming environment and continue to support entities that aid in the retention of these students, such as student organizations. This research addresses African American student involvement outside of

the classroom, specifically in an African American student organization (AASO). I felt this exploration was important because little research has been done on African American theatre student organizations and the college experience, also because I am the founder and a former member of the AASATF. I contacted current and former members of AASATF seeking their participation in this study. As a founder I felt a strong connection to the organization however, I understand that my experience have been different from other members, thus I set out to gather their stories. To make participants feel more comfortable and willing to share their experiences, I provided a survey to allow some individuals to remain anonymous if they chose.

Examining the role that AASOs have on the college experience of African Americans, can tell us about student's level of engagement, success, and satisfaction. African American-based student organizations offer black students opportunities to identify with the cultural heritage of fellow members. AASATF does this by celebrating the many ethnic cultures members share with each other. Scholars Padilla, Trevino, González and Trevino in *Developing Local Models of Minority Student Success in College* found that involvement in ethnic student organizations assisted students of color to bridge the cultural gap between their communities and the institution they attended (125-135).

Participant responses addressed how their membership in AASATF helped them academically and socially at UNLV. Participants reflected on the choices they made during their undergraduate careers, and the impact they felt their involvement in the organization had on their college experience. This research demonstrates how AASATF influenced students' academic success. For example, a longitudinal study by Alexander

W. Astin showed that students, no matter their gender or ethnicity, who join student organizations or participate in extracurricular activities, are less likely to drop out of college.

Researchers, such as Austin, Light, Pascarella and Terenzini have explored how college affects student's experiences in institutions of higher education. Ernest T. Pascarella, and Patrick T. Terenzini believe that students' college experience is predominantly based on individuals' efforts and involvement in academics, interpersonal relationships, and extracurricular activities at their institutions (246-48). They assert that men and women's efforts, including their engagement with extracurricular activities during their undergraduate careers, are critical determinants of how the college experience is shaped. Pascarella and Terenzini's 2005 updated research from their 1991 *How College Affects Students* found that it is important for college students to build relationships with fellow students as well as professors. As they explored student interactions through multiple and diverse campus organizations more in depth, they found that "peer relationships promote positive academic and social self-concepts, self-confidence, and leadership skills" (Pascarella & Terenzini 614). This thesis will include data from past and present AASATF members that will prove Pascarella and Terenzini's explorations to be true, as many found that the organization had not only provided them with long lasting relationships, confidence, and leadership skills but also helped them to excel academically.

From Alexander Astin's 1999 article, "Student Involvement: A Developmental Theory for Higher Education," we understand that the college experience is influenced by what happens both inside and outside of the classroom. He found that students who

become deeply involved in their studies can become cut off from other aspects of college life, such as Greek life, social gatherings, sports, and student interest organizations such as AASATF. For many students, what motivated them to become involved with their institution were their relationships with peers, which we will see was the case with some AASATF members. Pascarella and Terenzini's conclusion that student persistence and college graduation are impacted by meaningful peer interactions supports Astin's view on student relationships (40). They argued "students' attraction to other students who are like them, including attitudes and values, had a powerful influence in students' socialization to peer group norms through progressive conformity, which encourages students to adapt their goals and values to accommodate those of the peer group" (Pascarella & Terenzini 615).

In *Making The Most of College* (2001), author Richard Light found that undergraduates differentiate between two types of learning: academic and interpersonal. For Light, *academic learning* is the knowledge students' gain from in class instruction, out of class assignments, and course materials. Furthermore, light explained "*interpersonal learning* involved students' acquisition of information about and from peers' backgrounds, perspectives about life, as well as school" (emphasis original 145). He also explored student involvement in a traditional campus. A traditional campus is considered an institution of higher education where students stay in on and off campus housing vs. a commuter campus where students travel to go to class and then go home. UNLV is primarily a commuter campus. He found that when it came to activities other than courses, students had to seek opportunities on their own through student life program and other avenues, especially on a residential campus. Light highlighted that

college students tend to be involved in events outside of academics, often finding ample opportunities to be active (145-47). Though Light found that no matter what the organization, an overwhelming majority of students were heavily involved in activities outside of the classroom.

Scholars Christen Logue, Teresa Hutchens, and Mark Hector, in their study *Student Leadership: a phenomenological exploration of postsecondary experiences*, looked at student leadership acquired through extracurricular activities (393-408). They believed that student involvement in extracurricular activities enhances student experiences personally. What they found was that the personal benefits and skills gained by students taking on leadership positions in their organizations and on campus were positive overall. These students were more confident and they learned how to network and believed in themselves as leaders.

In *Out-of-Class Experiences Associated With Student Learning and Personal Development* (1995), scholar G. D. Kuh explored the out-of-class experience and acknowledges that the academic curriculum provides the foundation for colleges, but Kuh also found that there were also advantages to extracurricular activities. Like Pascarella and Terenzini, Kuh found that students gained skills from their extracurricular collegiate involvement such as “critical thinking, as well as relational and organizational skills” (150). He explained that these skills are associated with the satisfactory experiences and built relationships that students recalled from participating in extracurricular activities during, and after, college. Kuh found that amongst college friends when they talk about the “good ole’ days”, they often recall their out-of-class activities. Kuh cites activities

such as new member welcome gatherings, game nights, community service, and the peer relationships these events fostered, rather than the classes they took.

Lemuel W. Watson, Melvin C. Terrell, Doris J. Wright, Fred A. Bonner II, Michael J. Cuyjet, James A. Gold, Donna Rudy, Dawn R. Person, in *How Minority Students Experience College: Implications for Planning and Policy*, examined the reality of campus culture and found that many students of color begin their college experience excited about their schools because of the diversity that is showcased during the courting phase of recruitment. According to these researchers, sometimes students feel deceived or blatantly lied to by the information given during recruitment in such situations. Besides their institutions' misrepresentation of diversity, students of color have to deal with how they are perceived by others on campus. Watson et al. addressed how students of color are "often placed in a role of spokesperson for their racial and ethnic groups, a role they are expected to play in nonminority settings" (67). While UNLV is a minority serving institution, African Americans only make up eight percent of the undergraduate population (UNLV College portraits).

A study conducted by scholars Julie R. Ancis, William E. Sedlacek, and Jonathan J. Mohr, *Student Perceptions of Campus Cultural Climate by Race*, which surveyed 578 black and white undergraduates at a large predominantly white institution (PWI), revealed significant differences between racial/ethnic groups on multiple dimensions of campus climate. Blacks consistently reported more racial-ethnic conflict on campus; more pressure to conform to stereotypes, and less equitable treatment by faculty, staff, and teaching assistants. A number of other research studies including but not limited to, Cokley & Chapman, *The Roles of Ethnic Identity, Anti-White Attitudes, and Academic*

Self-Concept in African American Student Achievement 2008 and Pascarella & Terenzini, *How College Affects Students: A Third Decade of Research Vol 2* (2005) have found that students of color enrolled at PWIs perceived an environment characterized by a lack of support and an unwelcoming academic climate. This can be exacerbated by the fact that at PWIs, “they were often the only Blacks in their classes, residence hall floors, or places of employment” (Guiffrida 309). Scholar C. M. Steele in *A Threat in the Air: How Stereotypes Shape Intellectual Identity and Performance*, stated his belief that the expectation of students of color to represent an entire race, while fighting off unspoken stereotypes, adds pressure and further disappoints for many students of color in postsecondary education (614). Steele acknowledged that the social stigma of intellectual inferiority among certain cultural minorities, referred to as stereotype threat, contributes to their lower academic achievement. He stated, “what has yet to be demonstrated empirically is whether these more recent sociocultural perspectives can help explain racial and ethnic differences in dropout rates” (628). The participants in this study shared how they were validated academically through participation in AASATF.

In line with these findings, Laura Rendón, *Validating Culturally Diverse Students: Toward a New Model of Learning and Student Development*, looked at diverse students’ development in college. She pointed out that students often felt “alienated and intimidated by the college culture” when they did not fit the stereotypic affluent, White student profile (34). In her research many students expressed a desire to eliminate perceptions of them as incapable of learning. Doing so is important since students of color who feel that they do not fit into the culture of an institution have a much more difficult time succeeding in higher education. Like Watson et al., Rendón found that

students who built relationships with peers and faculty were more invested in their college socially and academically, which was reflected in the survey responses by participants who felt AASATF helped them socially and academically at UNLV. In particular, the learning of the students in the AASATF was enhanced when they took the initiative to become more involved in their college; for example, they met with professors regularly and were involved in various student organizations. A couple of participants explained that if they had not joined AASATF, they would not have been as involved with other student organizations.

Relationships with peers and faculty often validated students. Rendón explored the need for validation of students of color in institutions of higher education. She found that students need academic and interpersonal validation. Students who are not receiving one of the two, will look towards the other for the validation that is needed, but students who need both and are not receiving either are “among the most fragile students, who in the absence of both in and out-of-class validation will likely leave college” (45). Rendón also argued that students could become invested in college academics and engaged in social communities with the proper support and guidance from their institutions. She showed a further need for positive interactions for students of color, which include positive and validating relationships outside of the classroom with faculty and peers.

Scholars, Terry Saenz, George A. Marcoulides, Ellen Junn, and Ray Young, in their study *The relationship between college experience and academic performance among minority students* (1999), support Rendón’s findings on the need for student validation. They explored social integration as it relates to the college experience of students of color. Terry Saenz and his colleagues found that when students feel they do

not fit in or who have negative experiences in school, they are more likely to drop out. To prevent students from dropping out, some institutions employ retention initiatives such as social integration. Social integration was conceptualized as evolving from attending or participating in campus events and performances, which include sports activities, plays, or other fine arts events (13, 199-207).

One of the reasons that social integration is successful is due to peer interaction. Like others in the field, Saenz et al. noted the importance of, and need for, positive peer interactions that result in student satisfaction in higher education. Maria Cecilia Zea, Carol A. Reisen, Cheryl Beil, and Robert D. Caplan's 1997 study, *Predicting Intention to Remain in College Among Ethnic Minority and Nonminority Students*, also supported the impact of peer interaction highlighting the impact negative peer relationships have on student success. As positive interactions can help retention, negative interactions can impact attrition. The need for positive peer relationships for students of color is important in their quest to succeed in college.

The students in the 2002 study by Lee Jones, Jeanett Castellanos, and Darnell Cole, *Examining the Ethnic Minority Student Experience at Predominantly White Institutions* addressed students' desire to involve, represent, and also aid their communities by requesting a cross-cultural center in the middle of campus. The student's desire was to develop programs to reinforce a multicultural coalition where all student groups work collaboratively and not separately. The students found that classes were only part of their experience. They "expressed a responsibility and a sense of obligation, to represent and voice their opinions in order to make a difference in their community. Students saw themselves as a part of society, instrumental in changing stereotypes and

racist minds, while also, consciously representing diversity” (Jones et al., 2002, 29). The study’s participants held a strong sense of responsibility to give back to their communities and emphasized the importance of assisting “their people” (29).

Like scholars Astin, Kuh, and Light, Jones et al. also found that taking part in student life, for example student organizations and leadership activities, is a critical component to the college experience. In his research, Light found that students believed that ethnic and racial organizations played a highly constructive role on their campus. Many understood that the primary purpose of each student organization is to offer diverse students a place to “meet, mingle with, and enjoy friends from similar backgrounds” (Light, 199). He found that many students believed that it was critical for leaders of their respected student’s organizations to understand that in their positions, they have an opportunity to make major contributions to their campuses as a whole that will go beyond their organizations’ created, sponsored or organized cultural events. Such activities give student groups an opportunity to celebrate their “culture, background, special interest, and customs while simultaneously sharing them with the wider campus community” (Light, 199). As such, student organizations offer men and women of color the ability to create bonds based on shared interest.

Scholars Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische in 1998’s *What Is Agency?*, shared that “since [agency] centers around the engagement and disengagement by actors of the different contextual environments that constitute their own structured yet flexible social universes” (973). When studying members of a student organization, there is expectation that member experiences will be both social and relational due to the nature of the organization. Hence, agency goes beyond the individual; it can also be used to understand

the collective. For example, scholars Marybeth Gasman and Lucretia Payton-Stewart in their study *Twice Removed: A White Scholar Studies the History of Black Sororities and a Black Scholar Responds* (2006) looked at agency from an outsider's perspective when studying a Black sorority. In her work, Gasman addressed how her personal experiences as a professor of education at the University of Pennsylvania put into perspective her reality as a member of the majority group when compared to African American Professors. Through these interactions, she became interested in learning more about the Black community in general. Gasman's friendship with Payton-Stewart, a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha, the first historically Black sorority, allowed her to gain access to sorority information and history that helped her research on philanthropic efforts of African American sororities. In her study, Gasman found that sorority member's agency increased through membership due to their civic engagements and social interactions. The current research on AASATF will similarly look at agency but instead of the organization as a whole, it will examine narratives of members in order to explore how agency emerges for current and past members.

This literature review demonstrates that what students do in college both academically and socially impacts the overall college experience. On the other hand, the review also reveals that there is a gap in the research on African American theatre student organizations. The purpose of this study is to understand the perceptions of members of a predominantly African American theatre student organization. The members of AASATF joined an organization that communicates certain messages such as cultural acceptance and expectations to members and non-members. In the literature reviewed, it has been noted that participating in extracurricular activities shapes the college experience. This

study sets out to understand how membership in an African American student organization shapes the experiences of their members. The agency of the members may be affected by the organization's prescribed purpose be it social, academic, service, and/or a combination of the aforementioned members are individuals, but they are also part of an entity, an organization with a driving purpose to encourage social consciousness, as well as cultural awareness, while serving and educating all ethnicities as well as elevating knowledge and promoting unity among all UNLV organizations, students, faculty, and staff.

This study will also be conducted from a personal perspective; I have been involved in the creation and shaping of AASATF, I therefore played a role in the establishment of production, fostering mentorship, and supporting continued membership and personal growth. This study will look at the experiences members have had within the AASATF, and the messages communicated by the organization to members, potential members given that student organizations play an important role in socializing students to universities. In this research I examined participants' narratives to understand members' perception of how the organization has affected their college experience, more specifically their social and educational spheres.

The chapters that follow will argue for the need of the AASATF as a part of the UNLV campus due to its positive impact on member's academic and social lives. Within the organization's identity-related constraints, I examine how agency plays out for African American student organization membership vis-à-vis their personal beliefs, identities, academic interests, and so forth; since agency shapes the lives of members due to the questioning of their experiences, environment, surrounding, and relationships.

CHAPTER 2

ANALYSIS

To understand the impact AASATF had on members, I surveyed six past and current participants. To examine the survey responses, I used a qualitative research approach. Qualitative exploration allowed me to understand the unique experiences of participants who joined an African American based student theatre organization. While this type of data is not statistically generalizable, it provides insights that quantitative methods may miss as explained by Watson et al:

Qualitative research assigns value to the ‘voice’ of the participant.

Qualitative research models seek to uncover patterns of relationships among the voices of participants within the community. Researchers seek a holistic understanding of how participants within the phenomenon construct meaning and use this newly created framework in a practical manner (26).

A qualitative research method worked best for this study since the study sought to understand the experiences members had during their collegiate career in relationship to their organization. Qualitative research allowed the voices of the participants to be heard and for me to discover commonalities between participants and underlined messages as will be discussed in Chapter Three.

In order to understand how members felt about their lack of opportunities to act, direct, stage manage and design, there was a need for academic research that allowed the uniqueness of their voices to be expressed. Watson et al. explained that “qualitative research models seek to uncover patterns of relationships among the voices of

participants within the community” (26). The current study sought to find patterns of experiences and relationships among participants. Qualitative studies focus on people, organizations, and the like, in their natural habitat, which allows researchers to try and make sense of life occurrences and the meanings people give them (Denzin & Lincoln 387). Since this study is based on responses provided via survey, I required a tool that would allow me to bridge said narratives, hence the use of interpretive approach. This approach “views research as nonlinear, recursive process in which data collection, data analysis, and interpretation occurs throughout the study and influence each other” (Willis, Jost & Nilakanta 202). The benefit of qualitative research is the opportunity to explore the student voice as it relates to their perspective on their academic and social experiences.

With permission from the board members of AASATF, members of the organization were invited to participate in the study via email. In January 2014 the board members also voted and approved the use of the real name of the organization, African American Student Association of Theatre and Film, in this study. I sent email messages to 124 past and present AASATF members that provided a link to a ten question survey through an electronic service. I created ten questions to gather enough information to learn about the social and academic experiences of the members of AASATF. It was stated that members could give a false name if desired. While the organization and the participants were in agreement to use the name of the organization, with permission, I chose to use only the last names of participants in the hopes that members would feel more comfortable with answering questions honestly. Given my insider role as founder, I did not want the members to feel as though they would be penalized in any way for their

honesty. I took my role of researcher with the utmost respect; as such I was *reflexive* in the analysis process, reflecting on my experiences and interpretation in order to help ensure that I was not bringing in my personal bias to the study, while also keeping in mind the possible biases in the responses. Reflexivity is “where researchers engage in explicit self-aware meta-analysis” (Finlay 2009).

All members who joined the organization during their undergraduate or graduate college years were asked to respond. The organization has been in existence since September 2009 and is in its fifth year as of September 2014. Participation in the survey was voluntary and no academic or monetary compensation was given. The subjects of the study included current students, members and university alumnae. At the time the survey data was collected, between the months of September 2013 and May 2014, the organization had been active on the UNLV campus for four and a half years had 30 members, but only 12 were active.

The survey was sent to 124 students in the AASATF database. Ten members started the survey but only six completed both the demographic and questionnaire portions. When the survey was sent, many of the new members did not know who I was because I had not been affiliated with AASATF for two years. I believe this was the reason why I only received responses from people that I knew personally through AASATF. Seven members expressed later that they refused to answer survey questions for fear of harming or potentially losing relationships with the professors that they admired and viewed as mentors. The participants’ ethnic/racial breakdown was as follows:

| | |
|------------------|---|
| African American | 3 |
| Latina Other | 1 |
| Multiracial | 1 |
| Caucasian other | 1 |

One respondent was currently attending UNLV, four were undergraduate alumnae, and one was a graduate alumnae. I asked the participants about membership in other student organizations to better understand their potential interest in AASATF. Of the six members who completed the survey portion, five had not researched other organizations prior to joining AASATF, while one did seek information on other organizations. The one participant who researched other organizations explored an African American Sorority, two African American-based student organizations and one multicultural student organization. She went on to become a member of the sorority, the multicultural organization and one of the two African American organizations researched.

As part of completing the survey, participants addressed the following questions:

1. Prior to joining AASATF did you research other sororities (i.e., traditionally white, Black, multicultural, etc.)?
2. What attracted you to AASATF?
3. Why did you choose to join AASATF?
4. How has being part of AASATF impacted your academic achievement?
5. How has being part of AASATF impacted how you see yourself as a member of the university community?
6. What are the messages that AASATF communicate that have been most important to you?
7. How do AASATF members talk to potential members? What kinds of things do you say to recruit potential members?

8. What does AASATF represent/communicate to the university community?
9. What has AASATF meant to your college experience (in terms of education, social, etc.)?
10. Share any additional information, opinions, and/or stories about your experience as a member of AASATF, or an African American.

Riessman explained that the source of the research is the story. In order to understand the participants' stories in this research, I selected the ten survey questions in order to address their experiences prior to joining AASATF and once they became members. As such, the survey questions provided an opportunity for participants to reflect on how AASATF impacted their college experience, which allowed me to weave together the participants' stories in my aim to gain a greater understanding about the importance membership in AASATF had on students at UNLV. The questionnaire responses showed how participants structured their extracurricular time at UNLV, how the organization positively impacted their academics, and how their individual experiences within an African American student theatre organization compared to that of other participants. With this in mind, I set out to learn from participants how being members of AASATF shaped their college experience and how the membership impacted their academic and social lives. The areas of study within the survey are grounded in the members' perspectives about the impact the organization has had on them. The study showed AASATF played a role in developing agency and leadership in participants as seen in the study "Student Leadership: A Phenomenological Exploration of Postsecondary Experiences" by Logue et al. The goal of the qualitative phenomenological research is to

describe a lived experience and the study was designed to explore the personal structure of leadership experience from the perspective of the student leaders chosen for the study.

What was found personally within the participants was the awareness of their personal identity that their organizations assisted in providing through their designated roles. Agency shapes the lives of members due to the questioning of their experiences, environment, surrounding, and relationships. In the AASATF, agency and leadership were developed by members because of the opportunity that the organization gave to them to make decisions on their own, develop performances, marketing, fundraising, and networking, while giving them a stronger motivation to excel academically. Having a support system to help students through their college experiences is essential. AASATF provided support by having study groups, providing student tutoring within the organization and also providing many opportunities for member bonding. All participants in the survey included that they were not only supported by their peers, but also participated in the support of others.

This study explored narratives of past and current undergraduate and graduate students detailing their experiences as part of an African American based theatre student organization. I reviewed the messages communicated to members, as perceived by the participants, and how membership in AASATF impacted the members' academic and social lives. The study explored whether being part of an African American based theatre organization has helped or deterred members from creating and/or enforcing agency. Furthermore, I looked at the aspects of membership that have made participants question what they want for themselves and the changes they made accordingly.

Through conducting this research I found that UNLV had a number of African American students who believed they needed an additional resource outside the department to have their artistic and theatrical needs met. AASATF proved to be a positive experience and asset for both the students and the theatre department as a whole. Members who participated in the survey and were theatre majors stated that after AASATF was created, they noticed more roles being offered to African American students in the department for university performances. Members also stated that they believed AASATF played a role in the department's decision to produce their first all-African American performance, August Wilson's *Seven Guitars* in 2012. I interviewed two college faculty members; one felt that the founding of AASATF did not impact the selection of *Seven Guitars* as a part of the 2011-12 season. However, the second faculty member, who was more closely affiliated with AASATF, felt that the presence of the African American student theatre organization influenced the decision to have the first all-African American performance at UNLV.

In the spring of 2011, the members of AASATF developed a proposal for the theatre department to provide monetary support to AASATF as well as allow them to utilize the Paul Harris theatre as a performance space. The proposal included all of the activities the organization had participated in since its founding and the acknowledgement that the organizations received by the student organization office (Explained within third footnote). It also included photos organization photos donation forms from other organizations that assisted monetarily in developing and furthering the organization's purpose, mission, and needs. A meeting was held in which the AASATF President (myself) sat before the department faculty and presented the proposal in hopes

that all would be in agreement to fund the AASATF and allow the organization to use the departments equipment and theatre spaces. After a week the decision was made and the Fine Arts department began allowing AASATF to use their theatre facilities, which included the Paul Harris Theatre, dressing rooms, rehearsal rooms, technical equipment, and props. In that same semester, the Fine Arts department also began providing the organization \$500.00 per semester to go towards the needs of the organization. Those needs were costumes, extra props, marketing materials, and food for the organizations recruitment mixers and member meetings. To go along with the funding, and free use of space, was the tremendous support of the professors in the department.

Professors in the Fine Arts department wrote letters to other faculty about the impact the organization was having on students and the campus community, urging them to offer their support in any form to the organization. These supportive professors noted that the AASATF promoted diversity³ and brought African American Culture to the University. They would make announcements during their classes, informing students of the organization. Some professors even offered extra credit to students who attended AASATF performances. The growing support attracted many other supporters across campus who offered moral support and constructive critiques of performances. These professors offered guidance to actors, directors and stage managers alike, and were there on opening nights, cheering for their students.

³ The AASATF won SODA's Students Committed to Promoting Diversity Award and Best New Student Organization in 2011 for the production of *For Colored Girls...* and the 2011 Award from Senator Harry Reid for the promotion of diversity on campus.

At UNLV, students had other of options to be involved on campus by way of student organizations specifically geared to African Americans, such as the Black Student Organization and the Black Graduate Student Association, but neither of these organizations furthered their interest in theatre. For a group of students who really wanted to explore African American theatre, their only option was to create a new student organization, the African American Student Association for Theater and Film. The responses of the ten-question survey demonstrated that student benefited socially and academically from membership in AASATF. Furthermore their agency shaped their lives due to the questioning of their experiences, environment, surrounding, and relationships.

CHAPTER 3

INTERVIEW RESULTS

This research seeks to understand the impact membership AASATF had on participants' college experiences. The researcher interviewed six participants⁴, one senior and five Alumni from UNLV to share their experiences from a 10 question interview. Santana, an Alumnus, is a 30 years old Puerto Rican and Dominican male, currently working in Los Angeles as a server and actor. Simons, a 23 year old Caucasian and African American Female is currently residing in Las Vegas, NV and working in the marketing field. Williams, a 26 year old African American male is currently residing in Atlanta GA, pursuing his acting career. Carter, a 23 year old female African American student and customer service worker, is residing in Las Vegas, NV. Wilson, a 28 year old African American working mother of one, currently resides in Las Vegas while also pursuing her acting career. Simons is the co-founder of the organization with myself. When Simons and I created the organization, we did so to give members of the organization an opportunity to work on their craft. The founders wanted members to be able to practice what they had been learning from their professors, in front of their peers.

The research begins by looking at how the members arrived at the decision of joining an organization geared towards predominantly African Americans and how that compared to the reasons for specifically joining AASATF. The study also examined what messages are communicated by the organization resonated with members and university community. The participant narrative addressed the effect organizational membership had

⁴ All six participants gave permission to use their real names.

on their academics and the college experience. In order to analyze the responses, human and rhetorical agency theories were used to guide the study, which will be addressed further in chapter three.

The survey reveals that AASATF members are cognizant of the changes, in personal growth, leadership skills and confidence, they have gone through via the process of membership. For example, the responses demonstrated that the participants were more confident in their ability to perform in front of their peers and their work in the organization fueled their passion for academics, and improved social skills, thus enhancing human agency. Scholar Collins stated, “because social worlds result from human agency, they remain inherently dynamic and changing” (96). Members’ questioning, reasoning, and actions have led to their personal evolution thus affecting their college experience. They questioned why African Americans were not featured in UNLV performances, they reasoned that a new organization could provide opportunities for African American students. They were correct. Their membership in the AASATF led to eight performances on the UNLV campus with predominantly African American casts.

For a few of the participants, their membership in AASATF came from their interest in what the organization could offer them. AASATF member Santana remarked:

I did not really do any kind of extensive research about other organizations. I just kind of inquired a bit during the days that clubs and fraternities were promoting their groups. Honestly it did not interest me much as I felt a bit older and had a different agenda as to what my goals were. What attracted me to AASATF was actually being present when the founder, Crestcencia Ortiz, was formulating her ideas of the program

before it was born. Every class I had with her I saw her want, need, and desire to be able to give everyone an equal and fair opportunity to further advance themselves with much needed experience and to be able to exercise and nurture their artistic muscle regardless of any type of category they may fall in. (Personal Communication, October 7, 2013)

Though Santana is not African American he was drawn to AASATF because he could just be himself, as he explained:

I chose AASATF because it did not require me to be anything but myself. I did not have to pledge or get analyzed prior to joining. Their events and projects were sincere and done with no intent of gaining anything but love, opportunity, knowledge, and enjoyment. I was never above or below anyone in any kind of ranking structure. (Personal Communication, October 7, 2013)

AASATF had an unwritten welcoming policy. The only thing that AASATF required was a serious commitment to advancing the organization.

While all of the other members who participated in the survey did not search for other organizations on campus, Simons did. She was also a member of other organizations that were predominantly African American and leadership based, such as a sorority and Students Organizing Diverse Activities. She, like Santana decided to become a part of the organization because of the passion for change that she saw from a former member. The AASATF organization offered members something that no other student organization provided: the opportunity to be featured in student organized African

American theatre productions. Member Williams found an opportunity to perform by joining AASATF, he states:

As an African American at UNLV there weren't any performances I could be cast for. When this group (AASATF) came along, I saw opportunities for me to be cast in performances that had more diverse roles in them.

(Personal Communication, October 7, 2013)

During his membership, Williams went on to perform in three productions and assist in two other productions by offering assistance where needed. He attributes his recent success as an actor in Atlanta, GA to his involvement in AASATF.

When the organization was founded in 2009 there were no active student organizations under the department of Fine Arts. Performances through the theatre department rarely gave opportunities for actors of color, and until 2012, there had never been an all-African American cast in an NCT performance. The NCT, along with the support of the University, produced August Wilson's *Seven Guitars* in the spring of 2012.⁵ This performance came after AASATF had produced four African American plays. Williams goes on to say that as an African American actor, and with the limited selection of African American roles he realized he had to support AASATF because it provided a more diverse selection of performances.

For Williams, another reason for joining AASATF was to give back to the campus community by fundraising for the organization and recruiting new members. The members of AASATF participate in university service endeavors such as volunteering for different cultural celebrations, back to school festivals and UNLV's Festival of

⁵ I was chosen to Assistant Direct, perhaps because of my involvement with the AASATF.

communities. Simons noted: “I never would have imagined how my involvement would lead to a successful college experience, and an ability to become a self-starter now that I have graduated.” (Personal Communication, October 7, 2013) There is an expectation among members that they must uphold the mission AASATF as it is dedicated to promoting positive awareness about African American history and accomplishments, specifically in theater and film, by providing free programs and performances that will educate and connect all backgrounds. Carter joined AASATF because of the opportunities she saw for herself in the form of acting and directing, the same went for Williams, Santana and Wilson.

Some members came into the organization with a strong sense of agency, for example, being a self-starter. Some members were able to see what was needed in the organization and without asking, took action. Some members, before joining AASATF, were able to develop friendships easily, while others developed agency during their membership with AASATF. The members of AASATF actively questioned the state of their community, university, and members. They saw a need and acted accordingly by producing performances, planning gatherings, creating workshops etc. Members saw a need on campus for students of color to be in the theatre department. The need was that students wanted to be given the same opportunities to perform as others.

Seeking membership in AASATF was the moment many of the members chose to speak, to take action by requesting different performances for the season, fundraising for the organization to bring awareness, and requesting meetings with faculty to discuss the future of AASATF on campus and future use of funding and the use of facilities. Moreover, through AASATF, members recognized their power as a unified group. They

came together for different reasons but had the same underlying goals of educating others on the importance of Black theatre arts. They accomplished these goals by holding forums that discussed playwrights, plays, and productions on campus that were free to the campus community, networking with the NAACP of Las Vegas, The Black Caucus and the Latino Caucus for support of the AASATF, and providing performances to the community free of charge.

Scholar Gasman, as an outsider studying a Black sorority, gained a new level of appreciation once she saw the level of agency, strength, and influence the members processed within their organization and community. The same can be said with previous members of AASATF. In the early stages of the organization's development, members worked tirelessly to provide a service to students of color in the theatre department. This service was an opportunity for these students to perform. By providing this service, members of AASATF gained a higher level of appreciation of their capabilities. Their capabilities were just one of the things members had a higher level of appreciation for another was the impact that AASATF was having on their grades. All of the members that completed the survey felt that AASATF impacted their academics positively. Most theatre students know that pursuing a theatre degree means you will be working with your hands. You have to be able to physically show that you can act, design, build, etc. Participating in AASATF productions gave members an opportunity to excel in some classes such as, stage management, directing, acting, lighting, and voice and movement.

Member Mack, for example, was able to share what she had been learning in acting with other members during a performance rehearsal to help them understand the author of the performance. Many members came to AASATF because they had been a

part of UNLV's theatre acting program⁶ and yet had never had an opportunity to practice their craft on stage in a production. It could have been because the season chosen hadn't called for people of color, or the fact that many students didn't have experience in acting. The reality was still that many students of color were not chosen for roles. Some students were worried that they would graduate not having a chance to practice the acting skills they learned in class in front of an audience. For Williams, having to tell people that he was a theatre student whose emphasis was acting was embarrassing because he had actually never been on stage to truly perfect what he had learned. He began to call himself a "master auditioner." In an interview, Williams's stated: "Blacks, Latinos and all other non-white students were not being given opportunities. We would go to audition after audition, only to find out that the roles did not call for a person of color" (Personal Communication, October 7, 2013).

Williams believed that AASATF boosted his confidence as well as his GPA. This was possible because a member had to be in good standing with AASATF by achieving a minimum of a 2.5 GPA in order to be eligible and be actively participating for the semester. Given an opportunity to perform in productions, Williams began to work harder in school and gained confidence as an actor. Mack, a graduate student, who is not of African American but of Jewish decent, stated that: "AASATF was supportive and encouraging of my personal artistic growth. It taught me that with concentrated community effort, much could be achieved. In addition, I was introduced to new techniques and directing styles" (Personal Communication, February 6, 2014). Each

⁶ Stage and Screen Acting (SSA) at UNLV is an undergraduate program designed for students interested in pursuing a professional career on the stage and screen. It offers conservatory-style training for the serious acting student in all aspects of performance including stage acting, acting for film and television as well as voice, movement and speech training.

performance produced under AASATF was directed by, students and on occasion, outside directors (students who were not theatre majors) so each person had the opportunity to host their own forum and discuss their directing styles as it pertained to the performance. Those interested in directing a show or joining AASATF as a member would attend a meeting, take notes and hold discussions. This is the way AASATF communicated with members: open forums were used to communicate in order for members and interests to feel appreciated, needed and equal.

Almost all of the participants in this study make references to growth, personally, artistically, socially and academically due to their involvement in the AASATF. Simons felt the organization helped her academically, she states: “AASATF expanded my knowledge of black literature and black theatre; the organization challenged me to help produce a show that was meaningful and understandable” (Personal Communication, February 10, 2014). As stated above, Wilson gained confidence in herself as an actor. Wilson received a Bachelor of Science from her previous university, but decided that theatre was her passion. She believes that AASATF helped her to prepare for auditions in Los Angeles, which she ended up landing. Williams and Carter, also boast about the positive impact the organization has had on their academics. Santana also believes that AASATF impacted him positively by giving him an opportunity to act. Santana states: “AASATF impacted my academic achievement by producing the only performances I had ever been able to actually perform in prior to me graduating with my four year theater degree” (Personal Communication, October 7, 2013). Santana’s comment is precisely what brought AASATF to the attention of the University’s theatre department. It was the need for students to graduate knowing that they were absolutely prepared to

utilize their education. Members believed that one couldn't possibly go out into the working world and audition, if they had not the proper environment to learn from their mistakes. AASATF Member Williams stated "Can you become an architect and start building skyscrapers, if all you ever did was read about how to do it?" (Personal Communication, October 7, 2013).

For many, the organization provided a learning environment that helped them achieve their personal goals, as well as look forward to their futures. As an African American female student, Carter found no outlet for her craft on the stage of the NCT. Through AASATF she not only was able to perform, but also directed and was the organization's 2012-2013 President. Her duties were to oversee all members and other office holders, manage the organizations semester budget, network for sponsors and organize membership recruiting. Carter believes that holding the position of president to the organization helped her gain leadership skills that she believes has helped her beyond college. Carter also believes that because of AASATF, she was able to make discoveries about herself as an actress. She believes that learning about other plays by people of color assisted her by giving showcasing many options and opportunities as a female African American actress in search of the perfect character for her to perform. She feels that without AASATF, she would not have been able to be so involved on campus, while also providing herself an opportunity to perform and direct for her peers, both on the campus and in surrounding communities.

The AASATF communicates many kinds of messages, including but not limited to unity, passion for art, acceptance, and no tolerance for discrimination. Many of these messages are what attracted Mack to AASATF. She stated:

Those who are different, whether it was differences of race, sexual orientation, physical ability, perceived acting ability, acting technique, or simply on matters of opinion, are heard. It is the most "color blind" experience I have had in or out of the theatre, and that is due in large part to the premium AASATF places on the work. It is precisely this dedication to the art that makes this organization's work so powerful, and its experiences so transformative. AASATF made it clear that all were welcome and valued (Personal Communication, February 2, 2014).

To AASATF's members, these messages also encouraged them to join the organization. Once they became members, unity, similar passions for art and acceptance is what kept most members motivated and engaged.

AASATF engaged its members by including them in the production process, which consisted of choosing a play, research, fundraising for the production and the choosing of a director. AASATF held weekly meetings to update all members on any development, changes, funds etc. Members were able to decide for themselves, if they wanted to participate as an actor, director, stage hand, stage manager, lighting or sound director, or all of the above. Members made the commitment in writing and usually chose one or two of the above. Students involved with AASATF were able to bring their specific skill sets to the organization. Those who were new to theatre and the organization chose to assist in other capacities, such as fundraising and community service events. For members, being a productive member of an organization where everyone works together and on an equal playing field enabled them to develop a renewed sense of agency. For member Williams, the message he heard was one of

opportunity. He felt AASATF proved that there is always an opportunity for someone to achieve a goal set forth, but in some cases, they must be created. For Williams, his goal was to become an actor but he wanted to be able to have the opportunity to perform. AASATF gives members an opportunity to creatively build something for themselves. The organization empowers members by supporting their endeavors both civically and personally. Members are encouraged to lead in the organization and the campus community by volunteering for performances done by the University's Main-stage theater, the NCT, events sponsored by other student organizations, and leadership opportunities within AASATF.

Carter felt that AASATF gave her a sense of purpose in the university community. This coincides with Scholar Light's theory that there is an importance of student involvement outside of the classroom and the impact on student satisfaction in how it correlates with members feeling satisfied with the social aspect, friendships and a sense of belonging that the AASATF membership provided (124). Carter felt appreciation for her friendships through AASATF and the support that was given to her. She states:

Although I was a member of a minority organization, AASATF allowed me to have more confidence in knowing that being an African American actress within the university is something to be proud of. I no longer just had the purpose of honing my craft as an actress; I felt that I finally had an opportunity to educate my fellow students about African Americans and other minority playwrights through the various productions and

fundraisers through AASATF (Personal Communication, February 2, 2014).

It was the dedication of members of the AASATF by working on their relationships, communicating respectfully, listening and acknowledging each other that provided them a platform to build friendships. Building a successful play requires teamwork, communication and trust. These interactions played a major role in how students built friendships within AASATF. Through this platform members began to constantly interact with each other, even outside of the organization, whether it was a gathering, non-school related activities or accepting invitations to mixers. It was also their commitment to the organization and each other that made them successful. AASATF member Carter expressed:

In terms of my social experience I was able to meet and become friends with some of the most inspiring people I have come to know in my life time. Being around people who share the same dreams and have the same passion and drive as I did made my entire college experience purely meaningful. I was not a social butterfly before joining this organization and it has taught me to open up and allow people to really get to know me.

I am forever grateful (Personal Communication, February 2, 2014).

AASATF member Wilson feels that the organization helped her become more involved within UNLV, while Simons believes that she has made lifelong friendships as well as much-needed networks. These friendships were particularly important during times when members needed to be unified, for example, presenting their first performance of Ntozake Shange's *For Colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* to a

campus community who had never experienced an African American play and stirred mixed emotions when the decision to start productions was decided. The AASATF was accused by some professors and students for trying to stir racial controversy. There were organizations and departments that refused to sponsor the organization for fear of supporting a group that they believe was created to segregate by race. The adversity that members experienced brought them closer; they spent more time with each other and began to realize that the organization was exactly what UNLV needed to bring awareness to the lack of Black performances on campus. Members began working harder to advocate for the organization. They passed out flyers, pamphlets, and spoke to students about the organization in the university's free speech area.

Santana, an original member of the AASATF and witness to the hardships that the organization faced in the beginning, for example, no funding, accusations, and being denied support from other organizations and departments, states:

It is my belief that AASATF was directly responsible for changing the University's choice of grad students and selection of plays for the season. Because of this there was a different kind of exposure that normally would not have been experienced, a good exposure that was very much needed to help diversify and strengthen the program (Personal Communication, October 7, 2013).

Though it isn't completely proven that AASATF helped strengthen the theatre department, Santana's sentiments are shared by multiple members of AASATF. It may only be coincidence, but after AASATF was created and was offering students more opportunities, the department also began to offer more opportunities to African American

actors, and gained numerous new students who were members of AASATF while being non-theatre majors.

AASATF has helped shape many of the members' peer relationships in light of personal development. Carter felt she had learned many things about herself through her work with the AASATF. She discovered many strengths and weaknesses that allowed her to work on herself. Williams shared a personal account:

I'm just glad to be a part of something that was available to provide more opportunities for people, who wouldn't have gotten any if it wasn't for this group. *Miss Evers' Boys*, my first production at UNLV, I performed as Willie Johnson. I was told by one of the students that this is some of the best acting he has seen at this school period, and to think it would have never been possible without the hard work, constant dedication and never quit attitude of Miss Crestcencia Ortiz (Personal Communication, October 7, 2013).

Williams, an original member, had the opportunity of being a part of the AASATF's development; he stood in unity with other members, when the organization began to receive resistance from the theatre department in terms of no funding and minimum support. It was decided that the AASATF would be a student-run organization. Williams was present when it was also decided that the AASATF would not be funded by the department, so along with other members, he began working on fundraising ideas. Williams wasn't an actor in *For Colored Girls...*, the ASATF's first performance, because it consisted of an all-female cast, but he utilized his skills as a stage hand,

fundraiser, and house manager to make sure that the organization would succeed. Below Williams recalls:

Before this group was created I remember just walking around campus talking to Ms. Ortiz about how no opportunities were here at UNLV and how it was extremely limited as far as getting cast in a production and constantly trying to figure out how we could provide a platform where African Americans and other groups alike who were not getting cast, could have that chance to showcase their talent instead of going all 4 years with anything. That's when Ms. Ortiz took it in her hands and actually decided to start this organization I didn't know what she would need I just knew that I would have her back and be there to provide in any way possible, I helped with AASATF's first production of colored girls as a stage hand moving curtains etc. years later the group is still going and I'm proud to say I was a part of a movement that help provide opportunities for diverse backgrounds and it wouldn't have been possible without the hard work of Ms. Ortiz (Personal Communication, October 7, 2013).

The organization encourages members to grow as individuals. Some members challenge each other to think through their personal and artistic decisions to ensure that they are in fact making the best choice for themselves as well as onstage and for their careers. Being that all members are individuals, and regardless of being part of a student-run organization, they have different values, so challenging each other artistically is not always successful. But, more often than not, members come from an honest place of

caring for a fellow member and they want them to make the best choices for themselves to achieve their highest success.

Membership of AASATF continued to play a role in the life of some who were out of college. Scholar Kuh mentioned that when people reflect on their college experience often what they reminisced about were the out-of-class, social experiences (140). For AASATF member Simons, it was no different. As a marketing graduate, Simons believed that AASATF gave her the necessary tools for success in her field such as networking, flyer and poster creations and administrative work. This experience enabled her to become a self-starter in her small business marketing company. For Carter, she believes that deciding to join AASATF was the best decision she made in her college career.

The college experience narratives addressed the bounds of unity, being supported through difficult times, and the long lasting impact of the organization, as stated by Dr. J. Gazel, “For many students, the college experience is the first time they have the opportunity to interact with people from diverse racial, economic, or national backgrounds” (534). These experiences allow students to compare and contrast their personal experiences with those of different backgrounds and student groups, as have the members of AASATF.

Scholar Gazel states that when students promote social justice and create genuine friendships, they demonstrate agency. She writes: “agency is employed when participants are co-creators and take ownership of the process” (543). The participants of the current study exhibited agency in their college experience because they decided to seek membership, built friendships and assisted in the development of the an African

American-based organization, fully aware that AASATF would be producing African American theatre arts. Their reasoning for joining the group was to seek support, to network, to improve their leadership, and to give back to their communities. For many of them, they successfully accomplished their goals, increased their self-esteem and became more self-empowered by developing a strong sense of agency over their education and future by giving them the necessary leadership skills to be successful.

As members of AASATF, students were able to use their experiences in the group, and the organization's unified support, not only to develop as individuals but to also help their campus community by fulfilling a need. They combated oppressive environments and situations by providing positive role models as members of a group unified around the idea of diversity. The unity with their fellow students and the friendships students gained through membership were a recurring theme from the individuals surveyed. Participants felt that AASATF offered support by allowing them the opportunity to fully create a production of their own. The members who are part of the organization built their identity through their support of each other socially, professionally, academically, and emotionally.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study set out to explore the college experiences of students who are members of an African American-based student theatre organization, the messages communicated by the organization, and the level of agency of the members. Participants shared that they were attracted to AASATF for the opportunity to work on their craft, community service, the professional demeanor, and for the opportunity to network as well as learn from other strong students of color. The members who took part in the survey appreciated the bonding and leadership skills they gained. The majority of the participants who completed the survey felt that AASATF supported them in their academic efforts through graduation, enhanced their social life, and expanded their social and professional networks by giving them a “family” away from home, and much more.

This research also examined the messages communicated by the organization to members and to the university community. Here again, most respondents felt strongly about the positive messages they received from AASATF. Many felt that the organization represented support, professionalism, community dedication, and involvement, as well as a celebration of African American Culture. Though support for the organization came from the theatre department one year after the organization was created, members felt that AASATF “could have flourished faster” (Wilson) with the support of the department. To support an organization founded by the department’s students, professors can begin to actively listen to their students when they express their unhappiness in their process, as Williams states he did, but was “not taken seriously.” faculty can assist by attending organization’s meetings, rehearsals, fundraisers etc. Students are always

looking for mentors, so having an organization such as AASATF in your department is a great opportunity to mentor students that you see on a regular basis. Professors can also take a genuine interest in their student's extracurricular activities as it involves what they are being taught. This is a great way for professors to not only be engaged and a mentor, but to evaluate if what they are teaching is in fact being applied.

Lastly, I identified how participants' agency was impacted by their choice to join an African American-based organization. Responses demonstrated that the overall impact on human and rhetorical agency was positive for the members surveyed. Participants who were members since the beginning found value in the organization and still believed in what it represented years after joining and graduating from college. The organization shaped their lives by strengthening their self-perception, increasing their sense of empowerment, and creating a safe place for self-discovery. For some members the organization changed their life for the better. The organization afforded the members a space to develop agency that supported their cultural pride, artistic abilities, connection to community, and a network of supportive faculty and peers.

This study has shown that not only African Americans, but all theatre students of color need support while attending a university which doesn't have a large population of students of color. This research also demonstrated that African American theatre students thrive when there is a program in place to help them excel in their craft, as it is equally important for White students to learn about the richness of the African American legacy in the American theatre. Participants felt that AASATF provided members with assistance in identity development, expanded member's knowledge of black literature and black theatre, a learning environment which helps members to achieve personal

goals, opportunities for leadership, performance, fundraising, networking, as well as a sense of family for members who are away from home. A strong sense of self-identity and self-esteem were some of the positive results of membership in this organization. The AASATF encouraged members to find their voices and strengths, and showed them the beauty of self-acceptance. The organization also provided a network of members that is constant and far reaching. The benefit of having this network is that past and current members are able to contact each other for information on the organization, volunteer opportunities or any theater related opportunities in their areas. In more recent years, UNLV has been very aggressive about non-traditional casting, and where AASATF used to fill that void, the organization is now working in collaboration with the theatre department.

The agency of the individual member is developed in this organization. The organization creates an environment that encourages AASATF members to follow their personal and professional dreams in the arts, while at the same time creating opportunities to work together in aiding the growth of their peers. For this group of members, agency was not limited by the organization; it was enhanced by their experiences, environment, surroundings, and relationships.

Participants in the survey highlighted the social connection the organization provided which correlates to the research of Hurtado and Carter who found that men and women who belonged to student organizations “had a significantly stronger sense of belonging by their second year than non-members: (335). They go on to state that the most significant association to belonging was students who were affiliated with social-community organizations. Perhaps, that is why members of AASATF felt strongly tied to

UNLV as well as developing a new dedication to their academics. They have found a group that merges both the benefits of art, networking, community service and leadership development, while providing a sense of culture and service.

Only members of one African American theatre student organization were surveyed which could be a limitation for this study. The narratives drawn from the surveys could have addressed other issues if other student organizations had been included. At the time of the development of the AASATF there were no other student theatre organizations. Today there is another student theatre organization at UNLV similar to AASATF, the Theatre Student Collective (TSC). Their mission states that they exist to provide more opportunities for theatre students to learn by doing. Just at AASATF does, TSC produces entirely student-run productions, special theatrical events and workshops. Although only members from AASATF were surveyed, I believe that participation from the TSC could have impacted the results of the study if they had different experiences from members of AASATF in the development of their organization and support from the Fine Arts department and the university.

Lastly, my personal affiliation as founder and president of AASATF from 2009-2011, may have impacted the level of genuine feedback by members. As I was the one conducting the survey, members could have felt the need to be overly positive about their experience or not as willing to address possible issues, such as play selection, leadership roles, scheduling, fundraising etc. In organizing the study, I tried to mitigate this limitation by offering to make the survey anonymous, however participants chose to use their real names. Furthermore, I also encouraged members during the survey recruitment process to be honest with their responses, and provide as much detail as they saw fit. As I

wrote up the responses to the survey, every effort was made to include a fair range of narratives in this study, including both positive and less than positive comments.

Although I know there are limitations in this current study, it is important to have studies like this because for institutions of higher education to learn how to support students of color who are involved in their theatre programs and it supports the need for diverse performances in PWIs. There is a lack of research on African American theatre student organizations. A reason could be that these organizations draw a smaller number of students, unlike Greek life or athletics. Student organizations such as Greek life and athletics have a longer tradition at university campuses and attract more students hence why these areas tend to be researched more often than African American theatre student organizations. For example, UNLV has 36 student Greek letter organizations and offers 26 Athletic intermural and clubs, compared to the two student theatre organizations offered. There are a number of future studies that can be conducted to learn more about how African American student theatre organizations have a positive impact on the college experiences of students of color and the university community as a whole. Research can also be conducted in African American serving institutions, perhaps historically Black colleges and universities. There may be a different sense of the support and development for students of color in institutions where they see reflections of themselves throughout the university.

Another study opportunity would be to explore the membership of non-Blacks in African American-based organizations. The research could look at what attracted non-Blacks to their respective organizations and how they feel being part of the organization

as it relates to their ethnic backgrounds. Their narratives could shed light on what brought them to the organization as well as what keeps them engaged.

Lastly, it may be worthwhile to look at African American professionals in theatre who joined a theatre organization in college. Some of the members that participated in this study have been members of AASATF for five years. Evaluating the long-term effect of membership in a similar organization may be a worthwhile effort. It would be interesting to know what keeps some members involved over years and not others. Also, in a study such as this one, the research can shed light on what traits of the organization the members took away as they moved into their professional careers and other personal goals.

In conclusion, I believe that the AASATF contributes to the diversity of UNLV by providing African American theatre performances, thus educating the UNLV community about African American playwrights. Colleges can make diversity in the theatre a goal of their development by listening to their current students and knowing what their desires are and then taking their desires into consideration when choosing a performance, so that their students feel connected to the work and the department, thus, developing a neutral learning environment for all students. Organizations similar to AASATF will flourish in the future if there is a strong supportive bond between the student theatre organization and the theatre department. I also believe that every year, UNLV should produce an equal amount of performances by women and people of color, as to not only meet the needs of students but to use these diverse performances to teach students and the community about the different cultures in theatre.

This study has shown how a small, student-run organization can provide information, academic improvement, a sense of family, fundraising as well as networking opportunities and leadership skills. The AASATF is proof that if students feel their needs aren't being met, or that they want to give themselves an opportunity that they feel has not been given, that it is possible to make their own opportunities.

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Curriculum Vitae

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EDUCATION

M.A. Theatre.

University of Nevada Las Vegas, Las Vegas, NV, 2010-2015

Thesis: African American Student Theatre Organization Involvement and the College Experience at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

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B.A. Theatre Studies

University of Nevada Las Vegas, Las Vegas, NV, 2009-2010 (Transfer from Alabama State Univ.

Advisor: Shannon Sumpter

Graduate and undergraduate courses (Selected)

Play structure and Analysis
Introduction to Drama
Scenic Design
Lighting Design
Stage Management
Women Playwrights
Theatre History I and II
Black drama and performance

LANGUAGES

Spanish: Advanced reading; advanced conversation and intermediate writing

THEATRICAL EXPERIENCE (Selected)

Director

| | | |
|-------------------------------|----------------|------|
| <i>How to love a black...</i> | AASATF Project | 2011 |
| <i>Miss Evers' Boys</i> | AASATF Project | 2011 |
| <i>For Colored Girls...</i> | AASATF Project | 2010 |

Assistant Director

| | | |
|------------------------|---------------------------------|------|
| <i>Seven Guitars</i> | University of Nevada, Las Vegas | 2012 |
| <i>A Street Car...</i> | University of Nevada, Las Vegas | 2011 |

GRANTS, FELLOWSHIPS AND AWARDS

UNLV Leading Lady Award, 2012
University of Nevada Las Vegas Graduate Access Grant, 2011
Graduate Roosevelt Fitzgerald award, 2011
Humanitarian Award Delta Tau Lambda Sorority Inc. 2010
Student Committed to Diversity UNLV SODA, 2010
Promoting Diversity Through The Arts award, UNLV, 2010
From Senator Harry Reid for the production of "Colored Girls", 2010
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