

The Ropes of Theatre: A Study of Membership in Western Oregon's Theatre Department

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Introduction

Theatre is a very distinctive art form that has existed for thousands of years. It has always served as a space for creativity and self-expression. Around the world, theatre communities create safe, welcoming environments for participants where they can grow and connect in ways that don't exist outside of theatre. Theatre brings people together in a safe community that feels like home for many (Glenn 27). These theatre communities, for example Western Oregon's theatre department, can offer many essential skills in a warm, cultivating environment. Participating in theatre is important because of the safe space it provides, and within this space there are many skills that can be learned.

Participating in theatre offers many skills that are valuable for both students and adults. Research shows that people who participate in theatre have improved self-esteem and higher confidence than people who don't, especially in the case of younger participants (Afolabi 73; Glenn 3; Kumar 176; Pyman and Rugg 563). These skills are valuable for people at any stage in life. Because theatre is an art form, it offers a creative outlet that allows participants to think differently and use the "creative side of

your brain” (Kumar 175). Theatre provides students and adults with a collaborative, creative environment that they may not get in their everyday lives (Ghosh 187; Glenn 2; Kumar 175). Not only is creativity a good outlet, but it’s also a trait that employers look for while hiring that can have a big impact on how well people are able to perform certain jobs (Ghosh 192; Glenn 11). These factors of theatre allow participants to grow their confidence and creativity in ways that improve multiple aspects of life.

One of the most important aspects of theatre is the community that it creates for participants. Theatre can provide many people with a welcoming community that feels like a second home where they can form meaningful connections (Ghosh 185; Glenn 27; Hughes et al. 85; Pyman and Rugg 564). Because theatre is such a welcoming space, it can feel especially safe for people of different cultural backgrounds, from the LGBTQ+ community to people with disabilities (Feagan and Rossiter 141; Ghosh 190; Glenn 28; Hughes et al. 87; Walcon and Nicholson 29). Theatre gives both students and adults a friendly environment that is a unique balance of both fun and productivity while working towards a shared goal (Pyman and Ruggs 567; Walcon and Nicholson 22). In addition to being so open, participating in theatre can also develop a number of life traits that are important outside of theatre. By participating in theatre, people have the chance to grow a number of skills including public speaking, effective oral communication, and the ability to express opinions (Glenn 29; Hughes et al. 87; Kumar 177). Other beneficial skills that can be learned include how to handle stressful situations, gaining better empathy skills, learning trust, and the ability to challenge negative images (Afolabi 76; Kumar 177).

Because theatre is rooted in community and teamwork, it cannot truly exist without people willing to be a part of it. But in order for theatre to remain a strong community, it needs new members who are willing to dedicate themselves to the community. Western Oregon University's theatre department is a great example of a discourse community that relies heavily on new members. Without new students showing interest in joining the department, it wouldn't exist in the same way. The benefits of participating in theatre are evident, but what isn't as well known is how these theater communities are growing. One gap in this research is how these new members are being welcomed into theatre discourse communities. What is it like to join a theatre community? Why do new members choose to stay? I chose to look into membership in WOU's theatre department with the following research question: how are new members being welcomed into the program and how does that contribute to the growth of the community? This research provided me with a better understanding of how new members feel entering the program and why they chose to stay.

Membership in a community can have a big impact on its growth and future. How well new members are welcomed into the community can affect how much it thrives. Because membership of the WOU theatre program depends on new students joining, more experienced members should remember that their interactions with new members impacts the wellbeing of the department as a whole. Without new members joining the program, the community cannot achieve its goals the same way. My research looked into how new members are being welcomed into WOU's theatre program and how that contributes to the growth of the community.

WOU's theatre department is a safe and welcoming community that helps new students grow and connect both inside and outside of the program. This community is essential for students as it provides them with role models to learn from and a place where they feel like they belong, which greatly impacts their overall experience at WOU. College is a big change for many students, but having a community where they feel loved can affect how they view their college experience and whether or not they choose to stay. Having people to look up to who encourage them to be themselves makes the community an important part of these students' first years. Theatre communities like WOU's are important for new students because of the long-lasting impact it can have on their lives.

Methodology

I chose to research WOU's theatre program because I wanted to know more about how these students were both welcoming and being welcomed into the community. I wanted to learn more about ways the community felt welcoming to incoming members and why they chose to continue to be a part of the program. For my primary research, I chose to use two different kinds as opposed to one so that I could get a wider level of responses from the community.

For my first method of primary research, I chose interviews. I set up three interviews with members of the community: one junior and two freshmen. I wanted to get the perspective of members with different levels of experience in the community so I could see how their answers varied. For my first interview, I interviewed Jamie Thomas (*pseudonym*), a freshman majoring in psychology who participates in theatre. I interviewed Jamie on Monday May 12th in WOU's Library. For my second interview, I

interviewed junior Alice Johnson (*pseudonym*), majoring in a BA in Acting, on Tuesday May 13th in WOU's Library. For my final interview, I interviewed Katie Lloyd (*pseudonym*), a freshman majoring in theatre education on Wednesday May 14th in WOU's Library. I chose two freshmen, one majoring in theatre and the other not because I wanted to see how their experiences differed. The interviews focused mostly on how well the members felt included in the community and why they chose to remain in the department. For my second method of primary research, I chose to conduct a survey. The survey focused mostly on whether or not participants felt included and welcomed in the community. Most of the questions were multiple choice but a couple were open ended so I could get more detailed responses. I sent the survey out to all theatre majors and minors at WOU and also encouraged non-theatre majors who participate in theatre to fill out the survey as well. This allowed me to get the perspective of as many members of the theatre department as possible. In total my survey sample was 14 responses. I was hoping to gather more responses from my survey, specifically from non-theatre majors and minors, however I still got a large enough sample size to conduct my research.

I didn't choose to use observation or collect genres for my research as neither seemed relevant for the information I was trying to gather. Using my survey and interviews, I was able to gather enough data to evaluate how welcoming WOU's theatre department is for my research. With this research, I aim to answer how new members are being welcomed into WOU's theatre program and how that contributes to the growth of the community.

Discussion

WOU's theatre department is a welcoming environment where people connect over shared interests and feel comfortable being themselves. Increased membership in WOU's theatre department falls mainly to the students, specifically the upperclassmen who integrate new members into the community and serve as role models for many. This research allows newer members to see the impact experienced members can have on the department as well as the importance of communities like it. It serves as a reminder to new and existing members the difference WOU theatre makes for people and why it's so essential for new college students.

Joining WOU Theatre

Through information I gathered from my survey and interviews, I found that there is a mix of members who knew or did know someone before they joined. Both Jamie and Alice said they knew someone while Katie said she didn't. I believe that knowing people in the program before you arrive can impact your first experiences. It can affect how quickly new members feel like a part of the community. Katie shared that "it was kinda daunting, we have a lot of McNary kids here. They were all already friends and they knew each other so I was like oh I gotta make friends." In order to help integrate new members who don't know anyone faster, existing members can reach out and make a point to include them in activities and conversation. These small early interactions can help integrate new members faster, growing the community.

Are you a theatre major?

14 responses

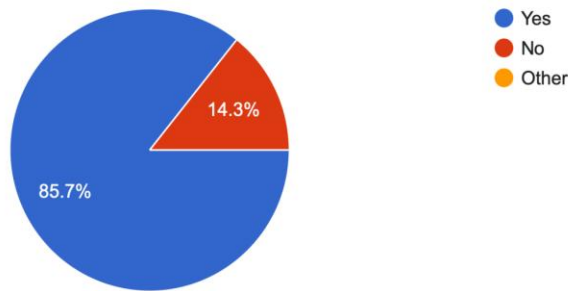


Figure 1. "Are you a theatre major?"

As seen in figure 1 most members of the program are theatre majors. Because of this, most of the members are drawn to the community for the program itself. Alice and Katie said a big reason for them was some of WOU's unique theatre degrees. One responder shared that they joined WOU theatre "because it's the only theatre ed program in Oregon." Jamie shared a big reason for her was a general love for theatre. Many of the members of the community were drawn to specific features of this department. For many of them, it impacted why they chose to come to WOU and why they chose to seek out the theatre department. These features can play a part in growing the community if current members have the goal to advertise the program to people considering joining. This can allow the department to grow as well as bring the community closer together with a shared goal.

Role of Experienced Members

From my survey, I found that a large majority of the current program is made up of freshmen. Because the upperclassmen play such a large role in the department, they are a big reason that new members feel welcomed when arriving. Alice, Jamie, and

Katie all agreed that there was an upperclassmen who helped them feel more comfortable in the program their first year. Jamie and Katie both shared that as freshmen, they felt very welcomed when they first joined. As seen in figure 2, most members of the community agreed that they felt fairly welcomed by more experienced members. Feeling welcomed in the department is a driving factor for the growth of the community and shows why it's so important for students. New members won't want to stay in the program if they don't feel welcomed. Because of this, it's very important for more experienced members to connect with incoming members. Having a mentor within the community can make a big difference for new members, especially freshmen, looking to make connections in college. The role of upperclassmen in the department is one of the main ways new members are being integrated into the community.

On a scale of 1-5 how included do you feel by other more experienced members?

14 responses

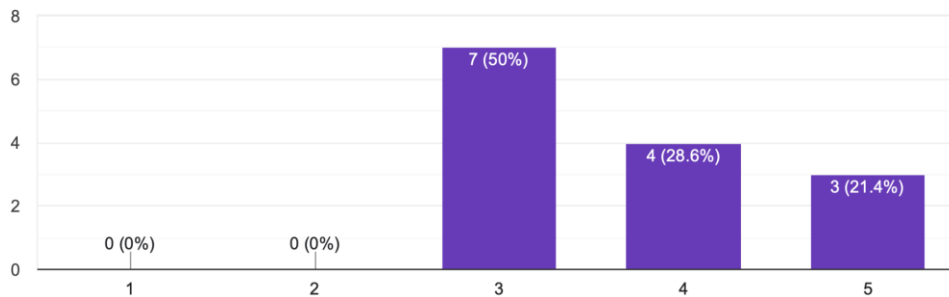


Figure 2. "On a scale of 1-5 how included do you feel by other more experienced members?"

Both Alice and Katie shared that the upperclassmen in the theatre program have a mission to keep WOU's theatre program as welcoming and safe for everyone as possible. Alice said that, "when I was the freshman I noticed a lot of drama, I noticed a lot of toxicity within the department and I knew that that was something I did not want to carry into my upperclassmen years." In order for the department to run the best that it

can, it has to be a safe space where everyone feels welcome. By keeping negativity out of the program, it changes how it operates and therefore the experience for others. Additionally, the upperclassmen offer a lot of inspiration and guidance to new members of the community. Jamie shared that the upperclassmen, “knew the ropes so they could teach me the ropes.” When talking about upperclassmen Katie agreed that, “Seeing them work and seeing how they work and the talent that they all possess was like oh my gosh I could do this one day.” Experienced members offering guidance and support changes new members’ experience drastically. These interactions change how new students feel about joining a new school and theatre program. Having role models to look up to helps them to have something to strive for and encourages them to stay in the department, expanding the community and improving their experience.

Community within WOU Theatre

From information gathered in my survey, most members agreed that they felt welcomed in WOU’s theatre department. As seen in Figure 3, most members feel like they are fairly welcomed within the department. Jamie and Katie agreed that incoming freshmen specifically formed very strong bonds with each other, impacting their experiences. When asked what interactions made her want to stay in the community, Jamie said that, “meeting the other freshmen at auditions and callbacks and just seeing how much support we all had for each other.” Jamie and Katie both acted in the fall show of their freshman year and felt very connected to the freshman in the cast. New members share very similar experiences when coming into college and the community. By connecting with each other, they can form connections which serve as a reason for

them to stay in the program. The support that new members have for each other can strengthen the community as a whole.

On a scale of 1-5 how welcomed do you feel in WOU's theatre program?

14 responses

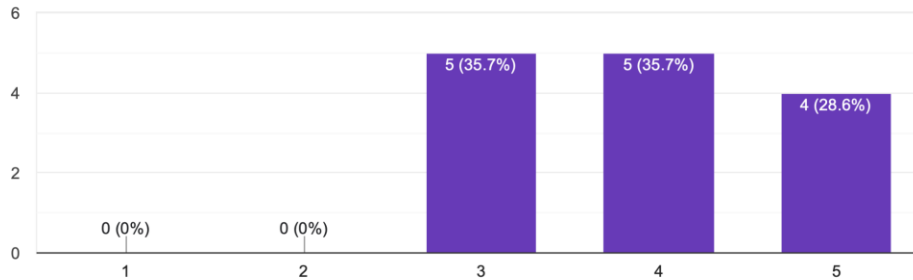


Figure 3. "On a scale of 1-5 how welcomed do you feel in WOU's theatre program?"

Specific interactions and events within the department also contributed to how welcomed new members feel. Data from figure 4 and interviews showed that members felt most included while being a part of a show or during theatre- related classes. These are both times where the community is spending more time together, making it easy to connect and form bonds. Jamie shared, "a lot of people say theatre is family, which it absolutely is." Working together to create something, such as a show, can really help members feel like they have found their home. Katie and Alice both shared that the black box in the Math and Nursing Building is a fun and welcoming environment for members to be in. Having a safe space for members to coexist can impact how they feel about the community. Because the black box in MNB is used for both rehearsals and classes, it can serve as a safe place for vulnerability in the department. Jamie and Alice agreed that activities organized outside the department also help cultivate a welcoming environment for members. Alice shared that, "I love when we would just do stuff together, all of us would go out to a movie, or we used to do this thing called coffee house, when at the end of the term we would all just go and do karaoke in MNB."

Activities organized outside the department say a lot about the connections in the community. By inviting new members to these activities, it can help them feel really comfortable and included their first years at WOU. This can help integrate new members very quickly, encouraging them to stay in the program and strengthen those bonds.

When do you feel the most connected to WOU's theatre program?

14 responses

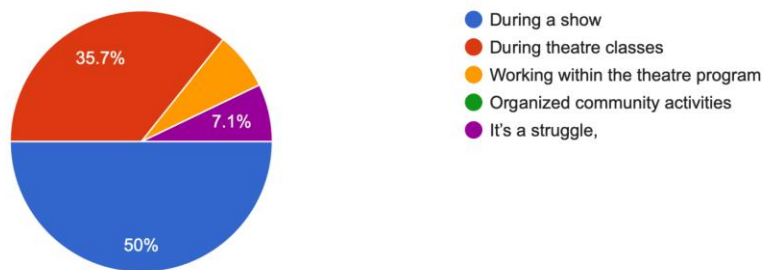


Figure 4. "When do you feel the most connected to WOU's theatre program?"

Data gathered from the survey and interviews shows that the majority of the members of the department agree that they have found their community. It's very clear that both existing members and new members all feel welcomed in the department. Katie and Jamie both shared that WOU theatre is a community where everyone cares about each other. The department creates environments that are safe and welcoming, encouraging people to be themselves. A space where members feel welcomed and loved can be a big factor in why new members choose to stay and greatly impacts their college experience. Jamie and Alice agreed that everyone in the department is just fun and feels free to be themselves. In order for the community to grow, current members need to feel comfortable being their true authentic selves. This allows people to make real connections while doing something that they love. This can change how they

behave inside the department, which can draw new people into the community. This kind of environment can strengthen the bonds between new and existing members and impact the overall community.

Conclusion

All this data shows that WOU's theatre department is a safe community where both new and old members can do what they love in a judgement free environment. Experienced members do a good job integrating new members into the community, expanding the department. By creating a cycle of positivity, these new members will continue to create the same community as they stay in the program. The upperclassmen in WOU's theatre program should remember the value of taking the extra step of including new members. Their actions provide the environment that new members need to feel welcomed and connected at WOU. Communities like this one are important because they give students good role models and a sense of belonging while they are adjusting to life at a new school. It helps new students grow in ways that stay with them their whole lives. There were some limitations in the data such as limited survey responses and interviews. This research provides a lot of information on WOU's theatre department, but more data can be collected from other experienced members as well as a larger survey pool within the department. Additionally, there is still further research that can be done on other theatre communities to compare more data. More information gathered can help uncover more about the community within theatre departments.

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Instructor: Samantha Morgan

Abstract: This essay explores the values of theatre and its ability to create long-lasting communities. I examined WOU's theatre department by exploring the overlooked question of how new members are integrated into the theatre community and why they choose to stay. Because theatre is such a powerful tool for connection. I chose to explore how finding your community within college can have long-lasting effects on your life; the way theatre impacted mine.

Bio: My name is Abby Hawkins, and I'm currently a sophomore majoring in Communications. I've always had a passion for the performing arts, and I've sought it out as long as I can remember. I enjoy all activities where I have a chance to be creative. Outside of academics, I love to act, sing, write, and spend time outdoors. I one day hope to blend my passions with my love of helping others to create positive change.