Executive Summary
This review covers the MA, MFA, and PhD programs of the Department of Theatre and Dance. This report is based on a site visit conducted April 18-20, 2012, as well as analysis of the documentation provided by the Graduate School and the Department. It should be noted for the record that the statistical portions of the self-study that were populated by the office of Institutional Research and Information Management (IRIM) seem to contain numerous significant errors, especially as regards enrollment and graduation data. The Fine Arts Dean herself said to us, “What’s reported out of our departments does not align with Institutional Research.” This caused a regrettable waste of time, first for the reviewers who prepared for the site visit based on erroneous data, and then for the Department administrators, who had to use a portion of the site visit time addressing misconceptions based on the bad data. Where such data is used to support the remainder of this report, the accuracy should be considered only as a “best guess.” Where not enough data is available to draw a conclusion, I have so indicated. It should be noted, however, that the failure of IRIM and the unit to determine (either collaboratively or independently) clear answers to the most basic of metric criteria -- e.g. number of students enrolled in each program – represents a significant obstacle to TTU’s stated goal of advancing its graduate programs to the first tier nationally.

During the site visit, the review team met with Department Chair Frederick Christoffel, with Visual and Performing Arts Dean Carol Edwards, with the Theatre and Dance faculty (as a group), and with a large group (approximately 20) of current graduate students. We also received a facilities tour led by Professors Marks and Chansky. Though no private meeting with the Graduate Advisor, Professor Donahue, was initially scheduled, the review team asked for such a meeting and Professor Christoffel graciously arranged it on short notice, much to the appreciation of the committee.

My overall impression is that the faculty, staff, and students of the Department of Theatre and Dance are hardworking, talented, and committed to excellence in the study and practice of theatre. Unfortunately, there are a number of structural problems (detailed below) that present obstacles to the stated goals of increasing the size of the program and achieving national prominence in the field.

Program Overview and Vision (Poor)
Compared to theatre programs at peer institutions, TTU is best described as a small unit with a medium-to-large graduate program. While the unit is to be commended on its ability to maintain graduate enrollment and program quality in the face of myriad administrative and financial obstacles, it is clear that the faculty and students are demoralized. The unit’s facilities (see below) are so inadequate that the most common response seems to be gallows humor. Faculty report that they are overworked, and that time spent advising and mentoring graduate students is not sufficiently accounted for or rewarded in the annual evaluation process. Graduate students
feel that many faculty are not sympathetic to their academic needs. With regard to TTU’s goal of significantly increasing graduate enrollment by 2020, the unit clearly feels that this represents an unwelcome mandate, but seems to be making efforts to comply. The enrollment goals stated in the unit’s strategic plan are apparently listed under duress and bear no reasonable relationship to the realities of the field. If, for example, the unit were able to reach its stated goal of 15 PhDs awarded per year by 2020, this would make it nearly twice as large as the next largest PhD program in Theatre in the world. Moreover, in a typical year, there are fewer than 30 openings for entry-level tenure-track academic jobs that require the PhD in Theatre. To expect TTU grads to fill half of these is, to put it mildly, preposterous.

Attempts during the site visit to elicit a larger, more positive expression of vision and planning were unsuccessful. Though several individuals expressed hope that the newly appointed Chair (an external hire) will be able to change the local culture in a positive way, no one (from the Dean down to the students) articulated a clear idea of what that change might look like. It should also be noted for the record that the unit’s relationship to the review process was problematic: throughout the site visit, in meetings with the Chair, Fine Arts Dean, and faculty, the same theme was repeated: they don’t understand why this review is necessary, they resent the time and energy involved in complying with the graduate school’s request, and they do not believe anything positive is likely to come of it.

Curriculum and Programs of Study (Good)
The curriculum and programs of study in the PhD program depart significantly from national norms in that TTU’s programs emphasize breadth of competence rather than tightly focused specialization in a single research area. This is by design, and both faculty and students point to the unique curricular structure as a positive feature, one that allows TTU to stand out among the approximately 40 programs in North America that grant PhDs in Theatre and/or Performance Studies. Though the job placement information provided by the unit was minimal, there is at least anecdotal evidence that the “generalist” approach to the Ph.D. offers TTU grads some advantage in certain sectors of the job market. Similarly, the MFA programs depart somewhat from national norms, and some subprograms (most notably Performance & Pedagogy) have recently been reorganized to conform to National Association of Schools of Theatre (NAST) accreditation requirements. The MA program appears to be a standard “intermediate” degree, designed to prepare students for the PhD. Due to lack of data, it is not possible to assess how effective the MA program has been in placing students in doctoral programs.

The degree requirements for each program and subprogram emphasis seem appropriate in the abstract – i.e. the number of required hours and the course titles are consistent with the stated goals of each program. However, a large number of graduate students interviewed stated that their actual experience of the program did not track with the published offerings. In particular, there seems to be a tension between the needs of some graduate students to execute production projects (e.g. directing a play as an element of their academic plan) and the ability of the Department to support such projects. This is a significant concern, as it appears to have a negative impact on both time-to-degree and completion rates.

An even greater concern, one echoed by both faculty and students, is that several of the subprogram emphases (theatre history/criticism, playwriting, and arts administration) are dependent on a single faculty member each. This is simply inadequate by any discipline-wide
measure. If students’ ability to progress toward the degree depends on a single faculty member, then time-to-degree and completion rates – currently well below the national average for the field of theatre – will continue to remain poor. If the department is to reach its stated #1 priority to “Increase Enrollment and Promote Student Success,” they will need to add at least three additional faculty lines and/or to reduce the number of subprograms or “tracks” offered within the MFA and PhD degrees.

Regarding qualifying exams and theses/dissertations, the department’s procedures fall somewhat outside the national norm. The faculty are aware of the fact that, as one professor put it, “some would say we have substandard dissertations,” but the Graduate Advisor and Chair both made compelling arguments that “professional problem” and “internship” dissertations are appropriate to the praxis-oriented tracks that many of their students pursue. No data was available on what percentage of students choose these options as opposed to the traditional research dissertation. We were given a brief opportunity to glance at some completed dissertations, but we did not have sufficient time to do a thorough analysis vis-à-vis quality. Regarding the quality of routine classroom instruction and graduate mentoring, no material was provided to the review team.

**Faculty Productivity (Good)**

Given the number of degree programs and subprograms, as well as the overall number of graduate students enrolled, the faculty is severely overloaded. Theatre and Dance currently has 13 tenured or tenure-track faculty and 3 non tenure-track faculty. The overall number is misleading, however, because Dance faculty, though members of the unit, do not participate in the delivery of the graduate curriculum (which covers only Theatre). In practice, only 11 faculty members serve the graduate program, and virtually all of these also teach in the undergraduate program. In short: the average teaching and service workload of faculty in Theatre significantly exceeds the national norm for doctoral-granting institutions in Theatre.

Likely due to the high teaching and service load, overall faculty scholarly productivity is lower than expected for a doctoral-granting institution. Only two or three of the faculty have published traditional scholarship during the review period, and of these only one or two have established national reputations as evidenced by citations of their work, election to office in national organizations, etc. Most of the faculty research in the unit comes under the category of Creative Activity, and here the picture is more complicated. While the quantity of the faculty’s theatre design, directing, acting, and other creative work meets or exceeds national norms, the quality is difficult to assess. Most first-tier research institutions expect theatre faculty to conduct the majority of their creative activity outside the university, preferably in professional venues with international or national reputations. Absent the presentation of work in such venues (and this is the case for many of the unit’s faculty), other material (e.g. peer reviews, video documentation) may be used to evidence quality, but no such materials were included in the self-study or the site visit. The Department Chair indicated that such materials are used in the promotion and tenure process, but did not provide any concrete examples for the committee to review.

A note regarding service: *It is highly recommended that the position of Graduate Advisor be recognized as requiring more time and administrative support than it currently receives.* The national norm for first tier doctoral granting programs is that the Graduate Director should receive *both* a course release and a salary supplement, as well as significant clerical support. The current Graduate Advisor lacks this kind of support, and reports being overworked to the point
where basic functions of the graduate program (e.g. recruiting new students, assisting with and tracking job placement for graduates) must often be deferred or neglected due to other professional demands. Given the institution’s stated aspirations, this is inadequate.

Finally, though not strictly speaking a measure of productivity, we note for the record that the faculty includes no persons of color, nor does it include any faculty with research or teaching specializations in minority or non-western theatre. This is inconsistent with national norms for the field.

**Quality and Quantity of Graduate Students and Graduates (Good)**

It is difficult to assess the graduate student profile based on the data provided. The overall average GRE scores and entering GPAs, for example, would place the program near the bottom of PhD programs in Theatre nationally; the scores of MFA students, however, are not disaggregated from the whole, and – as is common in arts programs – the national averages for students pursuing such degrees tends to be significantly lower because grades and test scores are less relevant indicators of potential success. Moreover, when data was provided for individual subprograms (e.g. the MFA in design), this data contained gross inaccuracies to the point that no meaningful conclusions can be drawn. The data regarding Graduate Applicants by Region is, frankly, useless, given that something like a third of the applicants are listed as “Blank Code.” In general, the inability of the IRIM data to provide a clear profile of the program’s students is a major obstacle to establishing meaningful benchmarks for assessment of student quality. The Fine Arts Dean and the Chair each noted independently that the need to unambiguously classify MFA students as distinct from MA or PhD students is part of the problem in the data set, but it goes much further than that. Whether this problem originates in IRIM or in the unit is beyond the scope of this review.

The students we spoke with seemed articulate and engaged. By and large they are non-traditional, either in the sense that they are returning to higher ed after some years in the workforce, or because they identify primarily as artists rather than scholars, or both. Virtually all said that they chose TTU because of its unique combination of scholarship and creative practice, echoing what faculty and administrators believe is the strength of the program. In this sense, there appears to be a healthy consonance between the program’s orientation and its target market.

Student recruitment appears to be handled on an ad hoc basis, mostly due to the fact that faculty do not have sufficient time to engage in more systematic recruitment efforts. This puts TTU at a significant disadvantage in attracting the top students nationally. Consequently, admissions to the program tend to be haphazard, with the size of the entering cohort in each degree program and subprogram varying significantly from year to year. Any attempt to grow the program will require a more coherent recruitment plan and increased institutional support for recruitment activity.

Student retention appears to be at or near national averages, but here again the data available to the review team is inadequate to do more than guess. Students in the program appear to be reasonably productive in terms of scholarship and creative activity. The department and the graduate school do a commendable job of providing support for student participation in scholarly conferences, theatre festivals, etc considering the overall scarcity of resources. One potential
problem is the lack of traditional peer-reviewed publication (articles, reviews) by doctoral students. While recognizing that many of the unit’s PhD students are not pursuing a traditional research track, the reality is that publication expectations are increasing across the field of theatre and performance studies, and TTU PhDs are competing in a job market where the average new PhD has published at least one article prior to completion.

The department does not systematically track placement of graduates. Faculty members report anecdotally that the placement rate is high, especially for PhD graduates, but there is little hard evidence one way or another. Similarly, faculty and administration point with justifiable pride to a number of graduates from past years who have since gone on to success as university faculty and administrators, but there is no comprehensive data to indicate whether these success stories are representative or exceptional. In fairness, it should be noted that this problem (lack of good placement data) is common across doctoral programs in the field, plaguing the top tier as well as lesser-known programs, and is currently the subject of much heated conversation in our two largest professional organizations, the American Society for Theatre Research and the Association for Theatre in Higher Education.

With regard to the training and mentorship involved in teaching/research assistantships, our meeting with the graduate students suggests that there is significant room for improvement. As a group, students perceive the selection and evaluation process for GA, TA and GPTI positions as mysterious, arbitrary, and subject to personal whims of supervising faculty. While some students are quite satisfied with the level of mentorship they receive, others report feeling neglected and/or overworked to the point where their academic progress suffers.

Most troubling, students overwhelmingly report reluctance to bring problems to the attention of the administration for fear of reprisals in the form of loss of funding, inability to progress in the program, etc. Even allowing for the fact that feelings of powerlessness are – to some degree – structural in all graduate programs, these reports are credible and unsettling. Frankly, based on what I heard from current graduate students, I would not be comfortable counseling my own students to apply to TTU unless and until significant changes are made.

Facilities and Resources ( Unsatisfactory)

The unit’s facilities, especially the rehearsal and shop spaces, range from inadequate (at best) to genuinely dangerous. The review team encountered poorly ventilated shops, overcrowded offices, teaching and research spaces that did not appear to be ADA compliant, and even a door marked as a fire exit that could not be opened from the inside.

Moving beyond safety considerations (which are numerous), the lack of appropriate facilities to support theatre production directly and negatively impacts the unit’s ability to deliver its graduate curriculum. Fundamental to the conception of the program is that each graduate student admitted must have sufficient opportunity to participate fully in creative as well as scholarly research. Many students reported frustration with the lack of such opportunities. While the department is to be commended for their efforts to maintain a robust production program and curriculum despite the lack of adequate facilities, it is clear that any projected growth in the number of graduate students enrolled or graduate degrees awarded will be unsuccessful without a significant institutional investment in and expansion of the unit’s physical plant.
The review team was not given an opportunity to directly evaluate the program’s library resources. Students expressed some frustration about the need to use interlibrary loan (with its attendant delays) to access some publications in the field; faculty did not report any problems with the library system, and the survey results in the self study indicate that faculty generally find the library resources adequate to their needs. With regard to information technology, the review team was not given much information, but IT did not seem to be a pressing concern for the faculty or students with whom we spoke.

Regarding support staff, there are two significant concerns: First, the production program relies heavily on graduate assistant or GPTl labor. This by itself is not troubling, and is common (though not accepted as “best practice”) among similar programs nationally. However, because such production assignments are a major source of funding for graduate students, there is a strong likelihood that the demands of the production program may be allowed to take precedence over graduate students’ academic progress. Several students, for example, reported that the demands of their assistantships regularly exceed the 20 hours per week specified in their appointment. Second, the lack of a graduate secretary – i.e. a member of the academic support staff tasked part-time or full-time to assist the Graduate Advisor in processing applications, student progress forms, etc – is out of line with national norms, and presents a significant obstacle to any attempts to increase enrollment, reduce average time to degree, etc.

A final thought regarding the review process: it is unfortunate that the review team did not have the opportunity to meet with faculty members individually or in groups by rank (e.g. all the assistant professors). The faculty survey results included in the self-study indicate significant variance of attitudes on many of the questions, but this variation was not in evidence in the 90 minutes we had with the faculty, despite attempts by the review team to probe these areas. It seems clear that some faculty members, particularly those with less seniority, feel uncomfortable speaking about departmental issues in a public forum. Thus, while it is not the intent of this report to generalize regarding faculty attitudes or concerns, the format of the review has occasionally made this necessary.