Overview: In January of 2004, the Theatre Arts Department wrote the following to describe its primary departmental goals: The Theatre Arts Department at Westmont College seeks to occupy a crucial niche in Christian Liberal Arts education. Coupling innovative approaches to theatre practice with a thorough foundation of traditional perspectives, the department’s classes, projects, and performances teach students how to make original contemporary theatre, and provide the practical and methodological tools necessary for understanding how it relates to both past and present. In keeping with Westmont’s Liberal Arts vision and heritage, the department develops creative, imaginative individuals who are ready for a lifetime of thinking, learning, and creating. The Westmont Theatre Arts Department explores contemporary world theatre by exposing students to the work of artists and teachers who come from a variety of traditions, ethnicities, nationalities, cultures, and aesthetic training. By the end of a four-year period at Westmont, a Theatre Arts major has gained the perspectives, knowledge, and creative methods necessary to make, interpret, and understand theatre in the contemporary world.

Nearly two years after this statement was written, it is clear to the department that this statement – and much of the document that follows it – fail to communicate the vision and goals for the department at this time in its history. This is for many reasons. First of all, the department is substantively different than the one that helped shape the original document. Professor Mitchell Thomas has joined the department, and Professor Michael Pearce has departed it. More to the point, however, all members of the department at this time do not wholly support Professor Pearce’s drive for innovative contemporary theatre, and devised, collaborative theatre as a primary goal. Professor Pearce’s quest for innovative practice shines through in many of the goals presented in the January 2004 template. To wit: “Students display innovation, originality, and creativity in their theatre work... students have the ability to create their own original theatre work... the department makes performances that achieve a high degree of uniqueness and originality.” Indeed, the language of “innovation” was shot through the entire original document. The Program Review Committee comments upon this when they ask, “...is all innovation equally “good?” Are there standards that can be used to judge not only whether a student is demonstrating creativity, but also whether the creative act has been done well? Would there ever be a time when you would inform a student that although he or she had demonstrated creativity, the original work has been done poorly?” These are very good questions, and they have dominated much of the department’s thinking about “where we are right now.”

So, where are we right now? The department has used the 2004 template to arrive at the following conclusions:
1) The language of the 2004 document does not accurately reflect what we want for Westmont students studying Theatre Arts at Westmont College.
2) The language of the 2004 document does not communicate effectively the present departmental mission and goals.
3) The 2004 template is unwieldy, at times redundant, and overly ambitious.
4) Assessing the goals, as stated in 2004, is very difficult in some cases, nearly impossible in others.
5) The department is in a significant state of transition – even transformation – from one paradigm of teaching to another.

Considering the above, the department recognizes it is in an important transitional period, and has decided to rework our assessment plan. Or stated another way, the department has taken the opportunity provided by this progress report to refine the goals of the department. By refining the template, we will achieve the following:

1) Effectively communicate what we want for students studying Theatre Arts at Westmont College.
2) Create a clearer mission and set of goals for the department.
3) Create a more streamlined, elegant, and effective plan.
4) Strategically determine the success of the two major components of the program – the “studio” or “performance” part of the program, and the “classroom” or “cognitive” part of the program.
5) Create a document that reflects the changing face of the department, from what it was in January 2004, to what it is today.

By rewriting the plan, we will be addressing many substantive issues. We will address the uncertainties in the plan, and make them more clear and certain. We will address the major places of need in the plan, reassess goals, and create a plan where the evidence we gather more clearly matches the stated goals of the department. Most critically, the department believes will function differently. Our goals will accurately reflect what we do in the classroom, which will ultimately connect more visibly to the ways that our teaching is changing our student.
The New Plan
Theatre Arts Department

Departmental Goal #1 – 2004

*Students display innovation, originality, and creativity in their theatre work, and possess a deep and broad understanding of the traditional heritage of world performing traditions.*

Departmental Goal #1 – 2005-2006

*Westmont College Theatre Arts students will cultivate their own individual creative spirits, and display the necessary imagination, technical expertise, and courageous self-discipline necessary for effective, dynamic work on the stage.*

The department will assess these goals in the “performance” component of the program, including courses such as acting, directing, design, technique, and choreography courses, where the professor will assess the student’s development relative to the point where the student entered Westmont. Evidence will be gathered by using the following tools:

1) Written assessment of the students’ developing work, in relation to the criteria listed above, as well as the stated goals of individual courses. Faculty maintain electronic records of selective feedback given to the student in the course. *(In progress, will have evidence of this.)*

2) Individual, post-show interviews where a group of three professors responds to the acting, design, stage management, and technical work that the student accomplished on the show. Written records of these interviews will be maintained, and used to track the students’ development through the program. *(In progress, we will have evidence of this.)*

3) Development of student through auditions for departmental productions. Faculty directors will keep written impressions of auditioners from show to show and production to production, tracking the way that the student develops his or her skill at auditioning during their time at Westmont. *(Just begun, anecdotal evidence of this; substantive evidence by June 2006.)*

4) Journals and logbooks, where the students self-assess their development in the specific area of work. *(In progress, we have evidence of this.)*

5) Second-year “Assessment Pieces,” where a group of three professors assesses a student’s scene work or directing project, and provide feedback relative to the criteria listed above. *(Introduced this fall, will have evidence of this by December.)*

6) Senior projects. Students select a jury of three faculty members, with one faculty member acting as chair. Faculty member serves as a mentor for the student’s project, guiding the student as he or she conceives, executes, and presents the project. Following a public performance of the project, the jury provides written and oral feedback. Criteria involves three main areas: conception, vision, and
creativity of the piece; process used while the piece is in rehearsal; technical execution of the piece. *(Introduced in Spring 2005, have evidence of this.)*

7) External sources such as newspaper reviews, letters, anecdotes from audience members. *(Have a great deal of evidence of this.)*

Departmental Goal #2 – 2005-2006

*Westmont College Theatre Arts students will display a deep and broad understanding of the history, literature, and theory of the European theatre tradition, and contemporary American theatre practice that has derived from it.*

The department will assess these goals through traditional classroom settings, primarily in Theatre History, Dramatic Theory, and a soon-to-be proposed course in Dramatic Literature. Assessment tools will include examinations, scholarly essays, and oral presentations. Evidence will be gathered using the following tools:

1) Through examinations that focus on the concepts, principles, and terminology of the stage, including major theatrical figures and their contributions, the evolution of the physical stage from the Greeks to today, major theoretical and cultural movements, acting and directing theory, and the literature of the stage. Each course will establish a baseline of knowledge with an introductory survey, and students’ developing knowledge will be tracked in relation to that baseline. *(Though we do this already, we do not have a baseline. To be introduced in Spring, 2006)*

2) Through analytical and research papers that ask students to explore topics related to #1 immediately above. Professors track the students emerging understanding of concepts, as well as their ability to write, by providing detailed written and oral feedback. Professors keep electronic copies of their responses to each student, and track students’ development in writing from semester to semester and year to year. *(Already introduced, have a great deal of evidence here.)*

3) Through oral reports where students are required to create presentations on plays and playwrights, critical interpretations of plays, dances and choreographies, or imagined “virtual” productions of plays. Professors keep electronic copies of their responses to each student, and can track students’ development in organization, clarity, ability to interest, and fundamental comprehension of the material. *(Already introduced, but evidence is spotty – to be fully introduced in Spring, 2006)*
College-wide Goal #1 – 2005-2006

Westmont College Theatre Arts students will cultivate tools for effective written communication, and will display abilities to describe, evaluate, differentiate, synthesize, analyze, and interpret, toward a deep understanding of the received historical, theoretical, and practical development of theatre and drama.

Effective written communication will be displayed by using the following tools:

1) Multiple 10-15 page essays in three upper division “Writing Intensive” courses. Students will be assessed relative to several criteria, including organization, clarity of presentation, mechanics, and creativity and sophistication of argument. Students will re-write essays in these courses, and faculty will provide detailed responses to each essay. The responses will be kept electronically, and faculty will track students’ development from re-write to re-write. (Presently in practice, have a good deal of evidence in this area.)

2) Journals in acting, design, and directing courses. Students will be assessed relative to the development of their own personal writing voice, in relation to their emerging thoughts about the creative process. Faculty collect journals, comment upon them, and keep selections, tracking students’ development in terms of their abilities to make observations describe, make connections, hypothesize, and extrapolate. (Presently in practice, have a good deal of evidence in this area.)

College-wide Goal #1

Westmont College Theatre Arts students cultivate tools for effective oral communication, and display flexibility, nuance, power, clarity, and the thoughtful understanding necessary to communicate fictional characters through language.

1) Directors and Acting teachers assess tools in this area, relative to students’ development of vocal technique and production. Students will be assessed on the above areas in the post-production interview period, described in Departmental Goal 1-1 above. Notes will be kept on vocal technique and production, and will be tracked through acting courses and productions.

2) One new course in the Theatre Arts major, TA 009 Voice and Speech Through Performance, where the students will be assessed on their ability to display vocal freedom, liveliness, clarity, and personal expression with a wide variety of text. Students will self-evaluate and keep and view a video archive of their progress. Students will be assessed by faculty through written and oral evaluations of their work, and faculty will maintain a video archive of their first performance and their last, and record progress and growth. (Course will be taught for the first time in Spring, 2006. Subsequent progress reports will have evaluative information.)
3) Numerous newspaper reviews in recent years note the effective presentation of dramatic texts. (*Good amount of material here.*)
College-wide Goal #2

Westmont college students understand their place in a diverse world, and through the department’s Globe Series and its Theatre in Central and Eastern Europe Mayterm, students display cross-cultural communication skills, flexibility, empathy, and awareness of people from other cultures.

1) Every other May, the Theatre Arts Department will lead an off campus Mayterm program in Central and Eastern Europe, focusing on Russia; the Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania; Poland; the Czech Republic; Hungary; Bulgaria; Croatia; Macedonia; and Serbia. In this program, students will study the theatre and drama of the region with Westmont faculty, and will participate in extensive workshop and master class opportunities with professional artists, teachers, and other students in the region. Students will keep journals, and will reflect on their developing understanding of their place in a diverse world through journal entries, and required essays. Faculty will keep portions of journals, and their responses to them, tracking the students’ observations, challenges, and emerging understanding. (This program has been approved, and is scheduled to being in May 2006.)

2) The Theatre Arts Department’s Globe Series is an international artists-in-residence series where professional artists from other countries are invited for short residencies at Westmont. In the past three years, students have taken classes and workshops, or been directed by, artists from South Africa, Poland, Russia, and the Czech Republic. Following the residencies, majors will be invited to describe, reflect upon, and synthesize their understandings of theatre, and how they are stimulated, challenged, and informed by these artists from other cultures. Students will be invited to provide electronic responses to several open-ended questions. The department chair will respond to the students, and will keep electronic copies of both the students’ work and the responses. (Brand new idea – to be instituted in November 2005.)

College-wide Goal #3

Christian Orientation Standard.

In our January 2004 document, the first sentence reads, The Theatre Arts Department at Westmont College seeks to occupy a crucial niche in Christian Liberal Arts Education. Indeed, this is crucial in all we do here, but it is also clear that the department wants to think more deeply about how we want to word this goal, and how we want to put it in practice. Consequently, the department is spending the remainder of this semester re-envisioning this part of the plan, and intends to begin working with the goal in the 2006-2007 school year.

As a final word, the department is now fully aboard this plan, and confident that the immediate goals enumerated and described here are either in process, or are about to be. For this school year, the department is working with Departmental Goals 1 and 2, and
College-wide Goals, 1 and 2. As part of our timeline related to the implementation of this plan, a new Christian Orientation Standard will be decided upon this year, and put in practice in Fall 2006.