

APR for the Department of Theatre at UMBC 2025

Executive Summary

The Department of Theatre is a vibrant, innovative, and deeply student-centered program that distinguishes itself through its commitment to devised work, ethical artistic practice, and community-engaged learning. Faculty and staff have cultivated a dynamic environment where students feel not only welcomed but seen and supported as individual artists and collaborators. The department's non-conservatory approach creates space for a wide range of interests and backgrounds, while the development of the Civic Compass Committee signals a forward-thinking, values-driven ethos grounded in collaboration, communication, and accountability. Particularly notable is the possible integration of local organizations—such as Everyman Company—into students' educational experiences, providing a meaningful bridge to professional practice. Faculty also are engaging students in their own creative endeavors. One student remarked, "In other departments I feel like I'm watching the creative work from the outside. In the theatre department, I feel like I'm part of it, inside and participating in its creation." That sentiment is echoed widely among students, who describe feeling deeply cared for and mentored by their faculty.

While the department's energy and values are clear strengths, there are several structural and strategic challenges that warrant thoughtful attention. These include clarifying the distinction between the BFA in Acting and the BA in Theatre Studies or a redesign of the BFA degree; addressing the workload and staffing structures in the performing arts spaces and operations; ensuring students are integrated into the build process as part of their learning; and formalizing key processes such as season selection. The current curriculum could better align with the department's "New Plays, New Ways" mission by re-centering playwriting and directing, while ensuring equity in tenure-track hiring across all areas, including design and production. Some staffing roles, particularly the General Associate and adjunct faculty in history and literature, require reconsideration for sustainability and impact. Additionally, facilities and equipment present safety concerns that should be prioritized. With its artistic vitality and strong student outcomes, the department is well positioned to thrive—provided it is supported with strategic realignment, intentional investment, and continued cross-disciplinary collaboration.

The department is well positioned to explore strategic expansion in line with its mission and creative strengths. One exciting possibility is the development of a 4+1 model in Theatre Education, allowing students to earn an undergraduate degree and a master's in an accelerated five-year pathway. Additionally, establishing a residency for a playwright to develop a new work in collaboration with students would be a powerful extension of the "New Plays, New Ways" ethos. This opportunity would offer students hands-on experience with the process of creating and staging original work, while enriching the season with new voices and fostering stronger ties between the academic and professional theatre communities.

General Questions in all UMBC APRs

Please comment on the appropriateness of general goals and specific objectives of the program. How are they being met?

The Department of Theatre at UMBC has crafted a bold and timely mission—one that honors theatre as both an evolving artistic discipline and a vehicle for social engagement. The dual commitment to rigorous academic inquiry and ethically grounded production work is a clear strength. The department’s vision—“New Plays, New Ways”—resonates deeply in today’s cultural landscape, and the faculty’s dedication to supporting students as both artists and individuals is evident in every facet of the program. The emphasis on interdisciplinary skills, individual mentorship, and storytelling as a means of engaging the human condition reflects a healthy, values-driven academic culture.

However, while the mission is clear and inspiring, the academic structure has not yet fully caught up with these goals. In particular, the current distinctions between the BA in Theatre Studies and the BFA in Acting lack sufficient clarity. As it stands, there are minimal curricular or experiential differences between the two degrees, and students may select the BFA under the assumption that it offers more career preparation, when in practice the structure and content do not reflect a conservatory-level distinction. This ambiguity limits the department’s ability to deliver targeted, differentiated experiences that align with student goals.

Additionally, to deepen alignment with the “New Plays, New Ways” vision and the department’s stated goals around civic engagement and ethical practice, expanding required coursework in Theatre for Social Change would strengthen the program. Courses in this area can help students critically engage with real-world issues through performance and storytelling, expand their understanding of theatre as a tool for activism and inclusion, and reinforce the department’s commitment to compassionate, informed artistry. The theatre curriculum would also be enhanced with required playwriting and directing courses, further supporting original student work and the development of multi-disciplinary artists. These enhancements, paired with a clearer degree structure, would not only reinforce the department’s mission but also create a more robust and forward-thinking academic identity.

In summary, this is a mission-driven department doing exceptional work. With some strategic restructuring and thoughtful curricular additions, the academic programs will be fully equipped to meet—and even exceed—their ambitious and inspiring goals.

What is the students’ perception of the quality of the program and their evaluations of the faculty’s teaching and mentoring?

Students consistently express high levels of satisfaction with the program, particularly in regard to the quality of teaching and the depth of faculty mentorship. They describe the department as a place where they feel fully

engaged, both creatively and personally. This sentiment was echoed broadly and speaks to the department's strong culture of inclusion, collaboration, and active learning.

Faculty are praised not only for their expertise, but for the care and individualized attention they provide. Students feel genuinely seen and supported in their growth as both artists and people. The high level of one-on-one mentorship, personalized advising, the encouragement of original work, and the department's willingness to make space for a wide range of student interests all contribute to a strong sense of community. The program's emphasis on artist-as-citizen, coupled with its innovative devised production work and values-driven approach through the stories being told, clearly resonates with students and helps distinguish this department from more traditional, conservatory-style training programs.

Additionally, there is a desire for professors to hold students more accountable for absences in rehearsals and classes. When asked what this should be, there was no definitive answer, nor should students be kicked out, but there should be consequences for unprofessional behavior.

In short, students feel inspired, empowered, and deeply connected to the work they're doing—testament to a faculty deeply invested in student success.

Are the proposed directions of growth of the program consistent with the nature, mission, and overall plans and priorities of the College and the University? Please comment on the overall quality of the program relative to its aspirational peers.

The Theatre Department supports the overall mission of the university through development of students' soft skills including communication and collaboration. These soft skills ensure theatre students will be well-prepared for entering the workforce. The department is also deeply committed to social responsibility and lifelong learning, engaging students in their studies of dramatic literature and history, as well as exploration of self and others in their performance classes. Faculty are discussing opportunities for inviting K-12 students to productions with a new focus on Theatre for Young Audiences. Overall, the department is consistently reflecting back to the mission and vision for UMBC and how the work they do can actively support it.

Overall, the BA in Theatre is competitive with the exciting vision of "New Plays, New Ways," a new track in Theatre Education, and a successful production and design track. The Acting BFA is not competitive with peer programs and should be addressed and re-imagined.

What is the quality of the curriculum? Do teaching materials and pedagogical methods reflect state of the art within particular areas?

Overall, the curriculum appears to be on par with some national standards. However, there are some areas of concern.

It appears that the BFA in Acting curriculum has not been reviewed in several years and is past due for an overhaul. With the recent retirement of faculty and hiring of two new faculty, the department seems poised for massive curricular revision. The new faculty should be encouraged and empowered to lead this charge. Please see below for further details.

It is concerning that there has not been a full time faculty member in the Theatre History and Dramatic Literature track since 2022. In almost every theatre program in the country, history and literature courses are required by every degree and should be taught by a full time faculty member. The current trend is for many professors with this research agenda are also dramaturgs or intimacy coordinators. A faculty with this education and training would greatly enhance any new curriculum.

The design and technology curriculum meets industry standards. In reality, it is closer to a BFA in practice and could easily be converted to one. There are appropriately credentialed faculty and staff in all areas with the exception of needing a dedicated lighting or sound professor. Currently, one person is serving as both.

Considering the program's assessment of student learning outcomes, discuss ways the faculty might most effectively "close the loop" by enhancing its use of the outcomes of assessment to improve teaching and learning.

The self-study noted the lack of rubrics associated with some courses and assignments, particularly in performance courses. These rubrics are essential to clearly evaluating student learning outcomes in the courses. It also gives the student a clearer understanding of the expectations and goals of the course, helping them to assess their own progress. The rubrics will assist the department in final assessment of the student learning outcomes for the courses and the program of study. An opportunity for faculty to engage in a professional development workshop to help them build skills in the creation and assessment of rubrics would be helpful.

Is the level of scholarly work by faculty members in the program suitable for this program?

Does the program as operating or planned provide sufficient opportunities for continued growth in quality of scholarship, creativity of faculty, and research opportunities for students?

The faculty members are all engaged in exemplary scholarly work appropriate to this program. New tenure-track faculty have both an internal and external mentor to support them as they engage in the TAP process and develop their individual scholarly profiles. The theatre faculty collaborate with students on numerous professional projects, affording students the opportunity to gain "real world" experience and

make important industry connections. This element is one of the strengths of the program and was highlighted in our meeting with the students.

Please comment on the adequacy of program's facilities for fulfilling its goals.

The department benefits from excellent facilities that are well-designed to support both academic and production work. The performance and rehearsal spaces are flexible, functional, and conducive to the kind of devised, collaborative, and interdisciplinary work that defines the program's identity. Students and faculty clearly value the quality of these spaces and make full use of them in support of the department's mission.

However, while the physical infrastructure is strong, there is a clear need for equipment updates and a consistent maintenance schedule to ensure safety, functionality, and long-term sustainability. These updates are not merely technical concerns—they are essential to preserving the quality of student learning and artistic output. Additionally, as the Department of Theatre is part of a STEM-focused university, the technology must be maintained and refreshed regularly.

Additionally, the current staffing structure places an outsized burden on Theatre Department staff to manage, maintain, and operate facilities that serve a broader performing arts ecosystem. It is recommended that all performing arts departments collaborate to advocate for a centralized, shared facilities support team. This coordinated model would more equitably distribute responsibilities, improve efficiency, and better serve the interdisciplinary nature of contemporary performance practice.

With thoughtful investment in equipment, maintenance, and shared staffing, these already impressive facilities will continue to serve as a cornerstone of the department's success.

Given your review, do you think the program resources are being used effectively? Are there other ways you can suggest for them to be used? Are there additional ways the program might generate revenue?

In service of the students, the program resources are being used effectively. The performing arts lobby area could be used more effectively to generate opportunities for community and interdisciplinary engagement. Festivals of work led by the arts programs and installations could generate more audience flow from the Maryland local communities. Revenue could be generated for Theatre for Young Audience (TYA) productions in partnership with local schools. K-12 students could attend the productions and Theatre Education students could facilitate pre and post-show workshops as part of their Theatre Education curriculum.

To what extent does or should the program collaborate with other units of the University?

Theatre should be a central part of all UMBC students' university experience. It helps to build community and strengthen retention. There are a number of ways this can be done successfully: 1. Require freshmen course syllabi to include a visit to two performing arts events per year and write a reflection on the experience; 2. Activate the building more by collaborating across the various performing and fine arts departments to create permanent and temporary installations and a yearly arts festival of student and faculty works; 3. A 24 hour play festival that is non-major specific and engages the community; 4. Guest artists on a panel that excite students across arts departments in conversation with each other.

The "New Plays, New Ways" vision creates a fantastic opportunity for further collaboration in productions across all arts programs. There also is an appetite for interdisciplinary, co-taught courses that should be explored. Implementation of a co-teaching model will need guidance from the Dean and Provost.

With regard to any resources identified as needed in the self-study or the external evaluation, which one is most urgent and/or most likely to benefit the program and how?

There are equipment needs that directly impact the safety and well-being of the students on stage, back stage, and patrons in the audience. If the power fails on campus, the emergency relays will not engage the emergency lighting needed to get people to safety. The 8 wall panels and the associated relays need to be replaced immediately.

The large roll door between the Proscenium Theatre and Scene Shop that has "failed down" since October 28, 2024, is more than a hindrance. It is impeding moving equipment like personnel lifts and scenery into and out of the space.

The part-time status of the staff member General Associate needs to be rectified into a full time status as they are currently cramming 40 hours worth of work into 19.5 hours. This is not sustainable.

The lack of a full-time faculty member in the area of Theatre History and Dramatic Literature is a critical need. Currently, the needs of the department are being fulfilled with an adjunct faculty member and while economically efficient and expedient, it is not sustainable nor in the best interest of the students and the department.

Specific Questions to Theatre

We are experiencing in our profession a decline in funding and resources, and reduced activity in the regional theatre. Can you provide insight into the current state of the profession and how our programs are preparing

students for success in it? Given how much the field and the socioeconomic and political world have changed since our 2017 assessment, where do you see gaps in our program?

The world and our industry is ever-changing and all of us feel the pressure of the current moment. Performing arts has faced these challenges before and the need for creative expression and collective live experience will always be there. Education in theatre fosters flexible, creative, engaged, organized, artist-citizens. This training is applicable across many fields of study and will still be needed regardless of future trends in theatre and the performing arts.

The largest gap is in the BFA Acting program, which is lacking in comparison to other BFA Acting programs across the country. A BFA Acting program needs to have a steady cohort of students prepared for the rigors of training. The foundational work has to be scaffolded carefully with communication between faculty and one course building on the next. A BFA in Acting for today's students must have opportunities to study acting on camera, self-tape, and have a showcase experience to be competitive. Given the students that are attracted to the theatre department, it would be advisable to re-design and re-think the Acting BFA. Currently, it is unclear what the differences are or distinct benefits between the BA in Theatre Studies and the BFA in Acting.

To better support both students and the mission, the department should consider a BFA in Theatre Making with a foundational curriculum and possible concentrations in 3rd and 4th years. This could be an exciting opportunity to lean into the department's strengths and vision: new plays, theatre and social justice, and devised works. If this is not the direction the department wants to go, perhaps implementing a BA-first model, where all students enter under the Theatre Studies umbrella and may audition into a restructured three-year BFA in Acting program at the end of their first year. This would allow for more intentional training, create a stronger foundation for transfer students, and clarify degree pathways. Alternatively, if the department continues to evolve away from conservatory-style distinctions, it may be better served by fully embracing a BA-only model, with focused tracks in Acting, Production & Design, and Theatre Education.

The strength of the training at UMBC lies in the "New Plays, New Ways" vision. Content-creation and a strong ability to be a good storyteller will serve these students well after graduation. They will be able to generate their own work, which is deeply important for today's performing artists. Focusing the curriculum to further develop those skills will be a real benefit to the students. Adding in more requirements in playwriting, directing, and design for all of the students will best serve the departmental vision and the students as they enter the ever-changing industry. Increasing collaboration across the performing arts departments will also help the students think creatively and develop lasting connections that they will be able to draw upon as they continue their artistic endeavors after graduation.

A healthy work/life balance requires time, funding, resources, and people. As we refine our own workload policies and work expectations for students, we find it difficult to produce a robust season with opportunities for

faculty, staff, and students at the pre-pandemic scale. Can you provide insights as to how we might produce university theatre while maintaining this desired healthier work-life balance at a sustainable rate for faculty, staff, and students?

Interestingly, the department has already made great progress in this endeavor by creating a modular unit set for the Black Box Theatre and incorporating rehearsals during the day in a class. If this modular set was coupled with a standard or repertory light plot, the change over between productions would be greatly minimised. These initiatives would cover half of the production season. It could also be beneficial to have a design and production component or course at the same time as the devising course to allow for further efficiencies and greater collaboration.

Additionally, the shops are not open on the weekends, and close in the early evenings. The faculty appears to be loaded appropriately for an R1 institution, possibly on the low side as some institutions are loaded 3/3 and 4/4 respectively for TT and NTT. It is interesting that the performance faculty are tenured and therefore have a smaller teaching component than the design and technical faculty who are all non-tenure track or visiting lines. To adequately deliver the acting curriculum, it might be better if any future hire in performance could be at the non-tenure rank.

With the exception of part-time employees and lack of upward mobility opportunities for full-time staff, the department appears to be appropriately staffed for the number of students they are serving and the number of productions they create in a given academic year. It is a perennial challenge for any theatre faculty member to practice their craft professionally and it is incumbent on the department as a whole to make this a priority. It is unclear where any additional issues are coming from regarding work-life balance except for what is self imposed. The concerns involving the undue strain of building maintenance falling disproportionately on design tech faculty need to be addressed at the chair and dean levels. There is a staff position of Director of Operations that should be doing more regarding the building maintenance and upkeep of PAHB. The performing arts departments (Theatre, Dance, and Music) should continue to work together and create a position, perhaps under the Director of Operations, that could better address the specific maintenance needs of the performance venues in the building.

The self-study mentions that the faculty in the department have a greater amount of service than their peers across the CAHSS by 16%. However, in the Department of Theatre Tenure and Promotion policies, service is identified as:

“DPTC considers membership in and leadership of departmental and university committees, participation in national and international professional organizations, engaged service within or without the larger campus community, and recruitment efforts for the department as examples of qualifying service towards promotion.

Theatre Department service includes departmental production responsibilities, committees, academic advising, and special projects assigned regarding the department's Administration."

The work on productions appears to be considered teaching as well as service since there is course release for faculty. Additionally, the students enroll in classes for being on stage, serve on crews, and work in the shops for each production. The department may need to re-classify the pivotal role productions play in the education and training of its students.

Additionally, it is not best practice to have faculty supervise staff. They are working side by side and yet there is potential for an imbalanced power structure. This could be particularly true when it comes time for staff performance evaluations. Administrators like chairs and deans have training when it comes to supervising staff and setting performance expectations and goals. It is not clear if this is the case with the Design and Production faculty. All of the staff should have the chair as their supervisor.

As a public university, we are committed to training all accepted students, including traditional four-year students and community college transfers. However, we struggle to scaffold learning objectives across diverse learning styles, abilities, and levels of artistic and academic preparation. Can you offer insights into how a small liberal arts department might effectively train students with varying skill levels in shared classrooms and production spaces?

The learning objectives shared in the self-study can be met for a wide variety of students. The first learning outcome needs some thought in terms of how the department is growing and changing:

DLO 1: Apply fundamental critical thinking skills to the analysis and interpretation of dramatic literature with particular attention to acting, designing, or technical production. Such skills include close reading of dramatic text, analysis of genre, written and verbal presentations, and cross-cultural and cross-period research and analysis. They must use both verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication in the presentation of resulting creative works. (UMBC Student Learning Outcome Goals I.i. and III.iv).

This is a challenging outcome to meet without a full time tenure track faculty member in the department to oversee and teach history/literature/dramaturgy courses. Although the needs are currently being met by an adjunct faculty member, it is unclear if they are involved in curriculum development.. This is a critical missing perspective in the department.

It is also a challenge to have a true Acting BFA and that scaffolded training with students entering the program in later years without the shared foundational courses. The rigor is not there with students moving in and out of the BFA courses at will. A few suggestions include: 1. Move the acting track to a BA as it currently operates in that manner; 2. All first year students enter as BAs in Theatre Studies and then pick a focus in their second year; 3. Consider a BFA in Theatre-making and build a thoughtful program of study that leans in on the “New Plays, New Ways” vision.

The movement work in the department is outstanding as evidenced in the production, *in the darkest forest*. To build on those skills and the departmental strength, it may be helpful to create an elective in Alexander Technique that transfers and students from other programs across the university can take.

Finally, it is a true gift to meet a group of students with differing backgrounds and experiences in their secondary education (transfer, homeschooled, left college and returned etc.) and hear from them that they all feel supported and inspired. The faculty are doing a phenomenal job of meeting these students where they are and mentoring them through their college years.

We've taken a step toward sustainability with our flexible unit Blackbox set. Do you have insights on how other companies and institutions are producing theatre sustainably while maintaining quality? Are there successful models for reducing waste in university production?

Sustainable theatre has been a goal for the industry for decades. However, with limited onsite storage, and a non-climate controlled storage facility off-site, the creation of the unit set in the Black Box Theatre is a boon for the department. By using it for two of the four shows in a given season the department has probably reduced its waste in creating theatre by more than a third as there will always be consumable items and materials. Additionally, it creates a definable sandbox for any play that should reduce time in design, production, and rehearsal. This modular set could be coupled with a repertory light plot with a definable number of specials to be refocused per show, rather than re-hanging the entire lighting system each time. With appropriate 3D computer or physical models, student scenic and lighting designers could manifest their visions to the design team quickly and efficiently. There are other theatres that have implemented a reconfigurable unit set, but this multilevel modular structure is one of the best implementations of the idea. In addition to material waste, it will save a valuable amount of time.

We've been working hard to establish a vibrant identity that distinguishes us from the other drama programs in our region – and to make ourselves accessible and central to campus life. From your perspective, what is attractive about our program? How might we further elevate our profile?

There are many attractive things about the Theatre program at UMBC. The “New Plays, New Ways” branding sets it apart from its regional peers. With the level of ensemble building and devising new works, the department could lean into this branding. On campus there could be a new play festival or 10-minute play festival of student works from the playwriting course or local communities. Additionally, it could be expanded with creative writing or choreographic works from the English and Dance departments respectively. It could be a New Works Festival. The department has already established partnerships with professional theatres in the region and perhaps there could be the occasional co-produced work or festival.

The facilities are an incredible strength of the unit. Each performance space creates an intimate environment for effective storytelling. The shops are well-equipped and spacious laboratories staffed with conscientious professionals focused on the safety of the students.

The dedicated faculty and staff are also a strength. The individualized attention, advising, and mentoring that each student receives is commendable. It is clear in conversations with the students that they are unaware of how hard everyone is working, but only that they are cared for and that they matter. The Civic Compass Committee is a great idea and should be implemented in every department that considers itself to be student-centered. The faculty and staff do not “weaponize” the students against each other or the administration, and they are to be commended for the community they have fostered.

In conclusion, the Department of Theatre at UMBC is strong and is poised for continued growth and excellence. The department should not be one of the best kept secrets at UMBC; they are a critical and vibrant aspect of the university community. They are also to be commended for their work since their last APR and are thriving in a post-pandemic theatre industry despite some concerns that could be easily rectified with appropriate funding and planning. Below are some additional recommendations in addition to what is in the body of the document.

Respectfully submitted,

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Specific Recommendations:

- Hire a Tenure Track History/Lit/dramaturgy faculty line
- Convert the part time General Associate position to a full time staff position - Kate (social media, swipe, box office, recruitment)
- Everything listed in Appendix K1 is critical to the education of the students at a STEM-focused university like UMBC - some of those items are safety concerns that must be addressed immediately
- Performing arts dept collaborate to have a performing arts facilities staff member that is shared

- Freshmen courses across UMBC have an arts events requirement - maybe 2 performances - in the syllabus
- Rethink the Acting BFA - could be a concentration in a Theatre-Making BFA
- Consider a Production and Design BFA - could be a concentration in a Theatre-Making BFA
- Once the new curriculum is in place, consider the possibility of UMBC becoming NAST (National Association of Schools of Theatre) accredited, completing the Fine Arts accreditation as the University is already NASD, NASAD, and NASM accredited.
- New Works Festival and/or Resident Playwright recommended
- Activate arts building lobby with interdisciplinary works
- Explore co-teaching models with help from the Provost office
- Add in required playwriting and directing courses to the curriculum - lean into “New Plays, New Ways”
- Students should continue to do set builds, costume production, hang lights, etcetera, as part of their education
- Implement Alexander Technique elective for transfer theatre students open to any other discipline
- Evaluate job descriptions and titles for staff promotions
- Have all staff report directly to the Chair of the department.
- Co-schedule a production and design class for the devised production
- 4+1 for Theatre Education - good calling card that sets UMBC apart from the competition
- Opportunities for Theatre Education students to create pre and post-workshops or production guide for the Theatre for Young Audiences productions as part of their curriculum
- Formalize the season selection process and include student input