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# Gardner-Webb University Hires Interim Dean of New School of Performing and Visual Arts

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Office of University Communications

April 11, 2011

## *Professor James W. Thomas to Assume Role on July 1*

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C. – Gardner-Webb University is pleased to announce that Professor James W. Thomas has been hired as Interim Dean of Gardner-Webb’s new School of Performing and Visual Arts. During his two-year term beginning on July 1, Thomas will help develop the structure and vision for the School, assist in the enrichment of the academic programs and facilities in the arts, and provide leadership in the national search for a permanent Dean of the School.

Thomas is best known for his 38 years at Mars Hill College, where he Chaired both the Theatre Department and the Division of Fine Arts, developed the Theatre (B.A.) and Musical Theatre (B.F.A.) majors, and oversaw the accreditation of those programs by the National Association of Schools of Theatre. He also founded the Southern Appalachian Repertory Theatre, a professional summer theatre currently in its thirty-seventh season.

Thomas has also won numerous awards and accolades for his work in the arts, and has taught or directed at a number of institutions like Penn State University-Harrisburg, Montana State University, Western Carolina University, and Furman University. He holds the B.S. degree in English Education (with minors in art and drama) from Western Carolina University, the M.A. in Dramatic Arts from UNC-Chapel Hill, and work toward the Ph.D. in Theatre from the University of Georgia.

“Gardner-Webb President Dr. Frank Bonner, Provost Dr. Ben Leslie, and I believe that Professor Thomas is uniquely qualified by his experiences and his gifts to help establish the philosophical vision of the School. We are also thrilled that Dr. Patricia Sparti, current chair of the department of fine arts, has chosen to remain in her leadership role in the music program and that she will continue to use her considerable skills as Chair of the Department of Music in the new School,” said Dr. Earl Leininger, associate provost for arts and sciences at Gardner-Webb.

“The new School will contain the Departments of Music, Visual Art, and Theatre,” Leininger explained. “The goal is to have an entity that has internal integrity as the home of the arts on campus, and in which the three pillars can be strong in themselves and yet also integrated in ways that serve one another.” Leininger insists that Thomas is “a fierce advocate for the arts,”

and that his hiring—and the School’s formation—demonstrates that even as support for arts programs is waning all over the country, Gardner-Webb is looking to “bolster the arts rather than bury them.”

“I have been aware of Gardner-Webb for a long time because of my work at nearby Mars Hill,” said Thomas, “and I think our arts programs are quite strong, academically. We have excellent faculty and, for the most part, complex curricula. My job, as I see it, is to raise the funds necessary to make these programs truly successful, to find out what goals and objectives are common among our three departments, and to help the departments work together to achieve those goals. I am excited to see what we can accomplish here.”

Located in Boiling Springs, N.C., Gardner-Webb University seeks a higher ground in higher education – one that embraces faith and intellectual freedom, balances conviction with compassion, and inspires in students a love of learning, service, and leadership.”