Hampton University Celebrates the Class of 2020 and 2021 in the 150th and 151st Commencement Ceremonies

It was a momentous day for thousands of Hampton University students, their families and alumni who celebrated the achievements of the classes of 2020 and 2021 on May 9th, Mother's Day, during Hampton University’s 150th and 151st Commencement Ceremonies.

The virtual ceremonies were the first graduation events held by Hampton University since the COVID-19 pandemic began. In keeping with Hampton University’s commitment to keep the campus community, students, faculty, staff and the families of the graduates safe and healthy, the ceremony was filmed on campus in the historic Robert C. Ogden Hall and Rashida Jones, President of CNBC, filmed her commencement address at CNBC studios in New York City. The main ceremony was broadcast to audiences via the internet.

Dr. William R. Harvey, Hampton University President, celebrated the resilience of the graduates who, despite the challenges brought by COVID-19, persevered to accomplish their goals.

“Graduates, during some extremely challenging times, each of you has successfully completed multiple years of rigorous training and skill development to earn your place at this ceremony,” said Dr. Harvey. “The regalia you are wearing and the traditions we are observing attest to your proven readiness for success. You have done well. In honor of the graduating classes of 2020 and 2021, I pay tribute today to you our very best wishes as you continue your quest for personal and professional fulfillment.”

The ceremony also featured a special appearance from Emmy Award-Winning gospel recording artist Earnest Pugh who dedicated the song “Rain on You” to the graduating classes for persevering through economic challenges, social and racial unrest and the pandemic.

A similar message of perseverance and outlook on the future came from keynote speaker and Hampton alumna Rashida Jones. Jones, a 2002 graduate, has had a very successful career in the journalism industry. Jones became the first Black executive to lead one of the major television news organizations when she assumed her current position Feb. 1, 2021. Under Jones’ leadership, MSNBC finished February as the #1 network in all of cable television.

“Graduating from college is a big achievement. Graduating from Hampton is an even bigger deal, and graduating during a global pandemic is next level,” said Jones. “You’ve been given so many gifts here at Hampton. You leave here knowing how to carry yourself with confidence, how to prepare like no one else in the room, and how to instill a level of Black excellence in everything you do. That’s what Hampton students do. For the rest of our lives, we have the responsibility to represent our shared standard of excellence. Because we are forever part of something bigger than ourselves.”

As the ceremony came to a close, class Valedictorian, Brittney Mamon and class Salutatorian, Cassie Herring each gave the class of 2020 and 2021 one final charge before embarking on their next stage in life.

“I want to encourage my fellow Orges to do something that has never been done, blaze your own trail,” said Herring. “Above all, dream with reckless abandon and let nothing stand in your way. Congrats to the greatest class of all.”

Awards Presented at the Ceremony:

• 2020 Outstanding Alumnus-at-Large Award – Dr. Mirian Graddinck Weir
• 2021 Outstanding Alumnus-at-Large Award – Atty. Marilyn Cain Gordon
• Class of 2021 Valedictorian – Brittney Mamon
• Class of 2021 Salutatorian – Cassie Herring
• Norma B. Harvey Character Award – Dr. Chutima Boonthum-Denecke
• Edward L. Hamm, Sr. Distinguished Teaching Award – Dr. Alkesh Punjabi
**Hampton University Valedictorian Joins Head of Instagram and other Class of 2021 Valedictorians for Round Table Discussion**

Hampton University Class of 2021 Valedictorian Brittny Mamon participated in an Instagram Live conversation led by Adam Mosseri, Head of Instagram, along with the valedictorians from Morehouse College and NYU New York University, on Monday, May 17th. The broader theme of the conversation centered on the importance of passion and talent in the context of graduating amidst a global pandemic.

“It is wonderful to see the best and brightest Hampton University students like Ms. Mamon engaging with corporate leaders like Mr. Mosseri and other young scholars in such an innovative way,” said Hampton University President, Dr. William R. Harvey. “I believe it’s paramount for all students to learn the importance of working hard and reaching the highest levels of academic achievement, especially with the added pressures of a global pandemic. Thanks to Mr. Adam Mosseri and Instagram for providing this platform and spotlighting these future leaders.”

The discussion, led by Mosseri and featuring Mamon, along with Morehouse College valedictorian Kymani Joachim and NYU valedictorian Raffi Laitamaki, revolved around the students’ experiences of graduating during a pandemic, ways they coped, what advice they would give to the incoming freshman class of 2025 and their thoughts about Instagram as a platform.

“This conversation served as an extension of an existing series Instagram recently launched, wherein Mosseri conducts casual conversations with rising digital creators to provide a global platform for them to showcase their work. The first episode featured 20-year-old astronaut trainee, Alyssa Carson. Mamon, graduated from the Hampton University James T. George School of Business with a BS in Business Administration, with a minor in Leadership Studies. Mamon finished her academic career with an overall GPA of 4.068.

To view the entire 20 min conversation visit: https://www.instagram.com/p/CO_UsqjJoYZ/

**Hampton University President Dr. William R. Harvey Awards Inaugural Norma B. Harvey Character Award to Dr. Chutima Boonthum-Denecke**

Dr. William R. Harvey, Hampton University President, has named Dr. Chutima Boonthum-Denecke, Professor of Computer Science, as the inaugural recipient of the Norma B. Harvey Character Award. The newly established award, born from Dr. Harvey’s latest gift of $100,000 to Hampton University and named for his wife of 54 years, is given to a faculty member whose actions demonstrate good character and encourage character development in other University constituents.

As a recipient of the award, she will receive a $1,000 bonus to be used at her discretion.

“Congratulations to Dr. Chutima Boonthum-Denecke as the very first recipient of the Norma B. Harvey Character Award,” said Dr. Harvey. Thank you for demonstrating good character and serving as a role model to faculty and students. Both her personal and professional demeanor are always positive. Members of the campus community find it a joy to work with her. Thanks again to her for setting an example for others to follow. The award is very dear to me because it bears the name of my wife,” said Dr. Harvey. “I wanted to name this award in my wife’s honor because Norma demonstrates the traits of truth, respect, integrity, trust, and responsible personal behavior.

The recipient of this award is chosen by the President based on recommendations from a committee comprised of the chief academic officer, the chief financial officer, two deans and two faculty members. The deans and faculty members serve a two-year term on the committee.

“I am deeply honored to have been selected as the first recipient of the Norma B. Harvey Character Award,” said Boonthum-Denecke. “Thank you to Dr. Harvey for his leadership and vision for the University, to Dr. Ero-Tolliver for her support, and to Dr. Muhammad for her mentorship. It is teamwork that makes this dream work. I am delighted to be a part of the Hampton University team, our Home by the Sea, fifteen years and counting!”

Dr. Boonthum-Denecke has dedicated herself to ensuring that the Department of Computer Science maintains the highest standards in the field of Cyber Security Education as the Chief Security Officer for the department. Dr. Boonthum-Denecke is also the National Science Foundation Primary Investigator for the Scholarship for Service in Cyber Security. She has diligently carried forward the Department of Computer Science’s distinction as the Center of Academic Excellence in Cyber Defense Education. Dr. Boonthum-Denecke recently represented Hampton University and the Department of Computer Science in the US Department of Homeland Security’s virtual event, “Confronting Realities: A Vision for Cybersecurity Resilience.” The purpose of this special event with Homeland Security Secretary, Alejandro N. Mayorkas, was to outline his vision and roadmap for the Department’s cybersecurity efforts.

Dr. Boonthum-Denecke joined the Hampton University Department of Computer Science in Fall 2006 as an Assistant Professor. She earned her Ph.D. in computer science from Old Dominion University; M.Ss in Applied Computer Science from Illinois State University; and B.S. in Computer Science from Srinakharinwirot University.
Awarded $59,700 to Acquire Desktop Scanning Electron Microscope

Dr. Rupak Dua, an assistant professor in Hampton University’s Department of Chemical Engineering in the School of Engineering and Technology, recently received a supplemental award of $59,700 for his continuing Research Initiation Award by the National Science Foundation. The supplemental award will allow Dua to acquire a benchtop Scanning Electron Microscope (SEM) that can magnify to 175,000x without a dedicated operator.

“Congratulations to Dr. Rupak Dua on receiving another exciting and very deserving award. His work is sure to make strides in the biomedical field,” said Hampton University President, Dr. William R. Harvey. “Our faculty at Hampton University continue to make important contributions to society. Their research is being recognized in their respective fields as well as making an impact on the global community.”

Acquiring a benchtop desktop SEM at Hampton University will help Dua advance his research successfully and positively impact the institutional infrastructure and other investigative research. This new instrument on campus will make a huge impact on research and create new research opportunities for students. This is the only benchtop SEM with an integrated navigation optical camera microscope system which makes navigation on a sample even at high magnification very easy. The camera has the same point of view as the detector and provides an overview of the sample at 20x magnification. Navigation is done via the monitor, using the optical camera as a reference. The optical camera allows sample evaluation before doing SEM. It also provides bright field and dark field images.

This latest award follows Dua receiving a Research Initiation Award last year to develop a biomimetic surface at the nanoscale on a customized polyether ether ketone (PEEK) structure to provide inherent antibacterial properties.

Additionally, Dua won the best poster award for his research work at the Annual Leading Emerging and Diverse Scientists to Success (LEADS) Summit that was held virtually from Feb 17-19, 2021. The competition was very competitive and had faculty from LEADS partners institutions, including Howard University, Morehouse School of Medicine, Meharry Medical College, Charles R. Drew University of Medicine and Science, North Carolina Central University, the University of Texas at San Antonio, University of Hawaii Manoa, and the University of Puerto Rico.

Earning his doctoral degree in Biomedical Engineering in 2014 with a specialization in Tissue Engineering and Biomaterials from Florida International University located in Miami, FL., Dr. Dua worked for two years as a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Institute of Orthopedic Research, and Education housed in Texas Medical Center (World’s largest Medical Center), located in Houston, TX. Before joining Hampton University in the Department of Chemical Engineering, Dr. Dua was working as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Chemistry at Hampden-Sydney College, where he taught and supervised undergraduates on clinically translated research projects.

Famous Painting Residing in Hampton University Museum Makes Cameo in Oscar Award Winning Disney/Pixar Film ‘Soul’

If you have seen Disney/Pixar’s Academy Award-winning Best Original Score and Best Animated Feature Soul, then you might have seen a Hampton University Easter egg!

“Our collection in the Hampton University Museum is one-of-a-kind. We are excited that Disney/Pixar decided to share a piece from our remarkable collection with the world in Soul. It is fitting that the movie is now their latest Academy Award-winning film,” said Hampton University President, Dr. William R. Harvey.

Soul, released on Christmas Day via Disney+, introduces Joe Gardner (voiced by Jamie Foxx) – a middle-school band teacher who gets the chance of a lifetime to play at the best jazz club in town. One misstep takes him from the streets of New York City to The Great Before – a fantastical place where new souls get their personalities, quirks, and interests before they go to Earth.

So where does Hampton University come in? When Joe returns to Earth in the body of the cat, he goes back to his apartment. There, you will see a very familiar picture hanging on the wall (approx. at the 46:12 mark).

The picture is The Banjo Lesson, Henry O. Tanner’s most famous painting, which reflects his conscious commitment to depicting African Americans in a compassionate manner. This painting has resided in Hampton University’s Museum since 1894.

“A favorite of visitors to the Museum today, the painting was also well received in its time. The Banjo Lesson was admitted into the Paris Salon, the most prestigious annual juried exhibition in the city. Robert C. Ogden, a philanthropist, and chair of the then Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute’s Board of Trustees bought the painting and donated it to Hampton in November of 1894,” said Dr. Vanessa Thaxton-Ward, Director of the Hampton University Museum and Archives. “The Banjo Lesson and another Tanner piece, The Lion’s Head (also owned by the Hampton University Museum), represent the first works of African American art to be collected by an American institution and form the cornerstone of Hampton’s outstanding fine arts collection.”

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Henry O. Tanner (1859-1937)
The Banjo Lesson, 1893
Oil on canvas
49” x 35 ½”
Gift of Robert C. Ogden
Collection of Hampton University Museum
If you’re wondering how Tanner’s famous piece found its way to the “Magic Kingdom” or appears in other instances in pop culture, Dr. Thaxton-Ward explains the process of sharing this gem with the world.

“The Hampton University Museum was contacted in 2019 by a representative from Disney requesting permission to use the image of The Banjo Lesson in their upcoming Pixar feature, Soul,” said Thaxton-Ward. “We went through all of the proper administrative paperwork, signatures on both sides, and exchange of a fee for them to use the image. Although The Banjo Lesson is in the public domain because of its age, interested parties, are requesting the use of the official, high-res, image, as well as providing Hampton University with the correct credit for owning the original painting. We also recently permitted Google Lens, which is in partnership with The New York Times, to utilize The Banjo Lesson image in a Google Lens Ad for their app. This is probably the most requested image for scholarly publications, including school books, journals, and museum exhibitions since they can’t have the original. The Banjo Lesson has not traveled a lot.”

Soul is available on 4K Ultra HD, Blu-Ray, digital streaming on Disney+.

Hampton University Marine and Environmental Science Alumni Serve Leadership Roles with New Non-profit Called Black in Marine Science

Four Hampton University Marine and Environmental Science (MES) alumni serve leadership roles with a new non-profit called, Black in Marine Science. This non-profit group of Black marine scientists and allies organizes and coordinates an online event to engage all Black marine scientists and supporters.

“We produce the best and the brightest here at Hampton University. We love to see our alumni doing great things and making a positive impact in the world,” said Hampton University President, Dr. William R. Harvey.

Black in Marine Science began as a week to highlight and amplify Black voices in the field and encourage younger generations, while also shedding light on the lack of diversity in marine science. After the harassment of Black birder Christian Cooper and #BlackBirderWeek, the need for #BlackinMarineScienceWeek was evident. It started with a tweet from Dr. Tiara Moore and developed into a team of organizers putting together an online event.

“The time for racial and ocean justice is now. I think the biggest thing is that we need to stop thinking small scale. We want black people in Marine Science, and we are providing the space to do that. That is my goal with Black in Marine Science,” said Founder of Black in Marine Science, Tiara Moore.

After a rewarding turnout from #BlackinMarineScienceWeek, the non-profit was created to continue highlighting and amplifying Black voices. “We hoped to have a successful week, but we were blown out of the water when we discovered that so many people were impacted by our events. We created a community of Black marine scientists that was much needed during the isolation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic,” said Moore.

Black in Marine Science Leadership Team Members

Dr. Tiara Moore ('13) – Founder

“I am an environmental ecologist, with a background in marine science. I currently use environmental DNA (eDNA) to conduct community biodiversity assessments. I enjoy marine science because I absolutely love asking questions and traveling to awesome locations to answer them. I am involved with #BlackInMarineScienceWeek to promote ocean literacy and diversity, and to shift the narrative of what it looks like to be a scientist.”

Dr. Camille Gaynus ('14) – Chief Financial Officer

“Black in Marine Science has allowed me to work and amplify the voices of other Black marine scientists. It is something the field needs more of.”

Dr. Jeanette Davis ('08) – Chief Innovation Officer

“I enjoy marine science because I love finding solutions for problems that impact humanity. I am involved with #BlackInMarineScienceWeek to promote ocean literacy and diversity, and to shift the narrative of what it looks like to be a scientist.”

Mrs. Symone Barkley ('12) – Chief Learning Officer

“We are #BlackInMarineScience. It is not just a week. We are in this work and we deserve to share our science and expertise as widely as anyone else in the field. We are here to support one another and to tear down another and to support one another and tear down the systems that have traditionally left us out of the conversation.”

Black in Marine Science plans to continue to highlight and amplify Black voices while inspiring younger generations. In doing so, they will create outreach opportunities, scholarships for the youth, as well as a documentary and coffee table book highlighting Black marine scientists past and present. Their goal is to increase the diversity in marine science while also providing a place to uphold the excellent Black scientists who already exist in the field.