



Humanities in the **DIGITAL AGE**

BY QUIANA SHEPARD

The study of humanities – or how one understands and defines the human experience – is being transformed through a digital lens on the campus of North Carolina Central University.



THE NCCU-DUKE PARTNERSHIP,

now in its second year, was initiated in 2012 by NCCU faculty members Matthew Cook, Ph.D., a language and literature professor, and Joshua Nadel, Ph.D., associate professor of history, as well as former NCCU history professor Rhonda Jones, Ph.D. At the time, the three were conducting research and developing teaching projects as part of a separate Mellon grant for historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and other smaller colleges in partnership with Duke University.

When that grant expired, members of the Franklin Digital Humanities Institute approached the NCCU researchers seeking innovative ideas to implement with support from an additional Mellon grant, explained Cook, who serves as a fellowship coordinator.

“We wanted to explore rewriting humanities into the future and suggested embedding digital humanities within the grant,” Cook said. “It’s a growing field, and we knew that this would be a great opportunity for other NCCU faculty in the humanities to be innovative in their research and classrooms. It was a win-win situation.”

The study of digital humanities is more than 70 years old. Its origins reach back to the late 1940s with the development of humanities computing, in which researchers used mainframe computers to automate tasks like word-searching, sorting and counting. The term itself, however, dates back to just over a decade.

As the field of digital humanities has continued to expand, researchers have not settled on a



precise definition. However, in practice, digital humanities combines methodologies from traditional humanities disciplines and social sciences with tools provided by computing and digital publishing to explain and develop new concepts and knowledge.

Despite the ongoing debate over the term's definition, researchers can agree that the diverse and dynamic nature of the field presents many opportunities in academia, especially on HBCU campuses.

According to Nadel, co-coordinator of the fellowship, HBCUs traditionally haven't had a huge footprint in digital humanities.

"Our goal for this project was to position NCCU and our faculty members at the forefront of the field," he said.

Seven NCCU faculty members in various departments were selected to lead the effort during the recent academic year.

THE 2017-18 FELLOWS ARE:

← PICTURED, LEFT TO RIGHT

- ❑ **JULIE NELSON, PH.D.**, assistant professor in the Department of Language and Literature
- ❑ **CAROLYN FULFORD, PH.D.**, associate professor in the Department of Language and Literature
- ❑ **TONY FRAZIER, PH.D.**, assistant professor in the Department of History
- ❑ **LENORA HELM HAMMONDS**, assistant professor in the Department of Music
- ❑ **CHARMAINE MCKISSICK-MELTON, PH.D.**, associate professor in the Department of Mass Communication
- ❑ **W. RUSSELL ROBINSON, PH.D.**, assistant professor in the Department of Mass Communication.
- ❑ **SHELVIA DANCY**, adjunct instructor in the Department of Mass Communication (*not pictured*)

Each of the fellows received a \$4,500 stipend to spend on resources for their digital projects, as well as a \$500 honorarium for presenting their final project at the fellowship's symposium held annually in May. In addition, they are given access to a host of digital tools on Duke's campus. The fellows are also supported by program co-coordinator Kathryn Weymer, Ph.D., associate professor in NCCU's Department of Language and Literature.

THE DIGITAL HUMANITIES TRANSFORMERS

For Fulford, who teaches language and literature courses, the decision to apply to the fellowship was an easy one after she saw last year's symposium presentations.

"The presentations were fantastic, and it felt good to be there. I liked the speaker and it was great that the decision-makers were there to answer questions about the fellowship," she said. "I told myself to apply and see what happens."

Fulford said that her experience as a fellow provided insights into her own weaknesses in the digital arena, and through mentorship, allowed her to build up those skills and become a more effective teacher for her students.

Going forward, Fulford will incorporate digital tools in her professional writing course. Students will learn to create websites and use graphic-design tools to communicate professionally using digital magazines and other online platforms. In the end, it is her hope that students will learn to take an interdisciplinary approach to thinking about their lives and future professions.

"Our students have to learn to be critical citizens who are embedded in a digital world," she said.

Like Fulford, Robinson, a fellow from the Mass Communication department, knew that the fellowship was a program he needed. "We have been given the opportunity to think big and fail big," Robinson said. "And, if it doesn't work out, that's okay. To me, this journey reinforces my scholarship and gives credibility to what I do as a budding intellectual."

Robinson's project will leverage his American Media and Mass Pop Culture class to explore black masculinity during the era of former President Barack Obama. His plan is to collect interviews from black men, as well as gender studies experts regarding masculinity from a parenting to criminal justice system perspective.

At the end of the fellowship, Robinson will use part of his stipend for a summer study program at Oxford University, where he can continue enhancing his digital humanities skills.

Nelson, who serves in the Language and Literature department, felt inspired to apply to the fellowship after speaking with colleagues about the resources available at Duke.

"I have had some experience doing digital projects; however, it was always difficult to implement," said Nelson. "The technicality of it was intimidating. So, I was looking forward to an opportunity to focus more on that."

Students in her History of Rhetoric course for English majors, which focuses on the use of written, spoken and visual language, will assist Nelson in creating a web-based collection of rhetoric examples at NCCU – from historic to contemporary – and analyzing how they have evolved over the years. It is Nelson's hope that both the project and her students will gain community recognition and awareness.

"Thus far, I have been in discussion with the Museum of Durham History and they have agreed to share the project on their website," she added.

McKissick-Melton, a last-minute applicant to the fellowship program, will leverage her Mass Communication course, Media Business: Advertising, Sales

and Marketing, to explore the past 100 years of advertising to see how pop culture, music, economics, politics and race relations were portrayed through the years. Each student in the class will be responsible for providing a narrative covering their assigned four-year period. McKissick-Melton hopes that this will broaden her students' perspective.

"I want them to think out of the box more and not take everything at face value," she said. "In this particular research, especially those who are assigned an early era, it may be difficult to find certain facts, depending on the year, especially when researching people of color. I want them to dig harder."

History professor Frazier said it was his unfamiliarity with the digital humanities field that inspired him to apply to the fellowship.

"It seemed exciting after talking with colleagues in the field regarding the tools you can use and the different learning outcomes for students," he said.

"Generally, in the history field, you write a lot of papers and students give presentations, but with digital humanities, you can create a blog, a timeline story or story map to show the public what students are doing," Frazier added. "It's also hands-on, and most digital projects are collaborative in nature, so you learn to work together in groups."

Frazier's project will explore prominent African-British people from the 18th century and digitally map their travels. Additionally, in honor of abolitionist Frederick Douglass' 200th birthday, he will digitally chart the nationally renowned orator's travels, from his escape from slavery in the Chesapeake, Md., area to his international visits to Haiti and London.

"What is unique about incorporating digital tools into this project is that I can take different characteristics of runaway slaves, including their age, status or places they departed, and use them as geographical markers," he said. "Before, I would write them down, but now I can digitally mark them and turn it into a whole project."

Like Frazier, Dancy, who lectures in the Mass Communication Department, saw the fellowship as an opportunity to tell a story about a prominent journalist that she felt her students should know.

Digital Humanities Fellow Lectorna Helm Hammonds (middle) gathers a research team of music students and colleagues to create a digital story map of soul singer Robert Flack's career. Pictured, left to right: Dupresha Townsend, Professor Maurice Meyers, Malachi Blanding and Malik Denny.

"It's a travesty if our mass communication students leave campus not knowing investigative journalist Ida B. Wells," Dancy said. "This project allows me to share her trailblazing story with people who need to know it, especially if they have a desire to work in the journalism field."

Dancy plans to develop a multimedia testimonial of Wells by journeying to Memphis, Tenn., where Wells owned the Memphis Free Speech and Headlight and, later, the Free Speech newspapers in the late 1890s. Dancy will interview area historians and capture footage of some sites Wells frequented, including Rust College, a school that her father, James Wells, started for newly-freed slaves. Dancy's students will sharpen their broadcast skills by helping compile a few of the segments.

"My students will see how writing for the web is necessary and a little bit different from writing for print," she said. "It will also help them with broadcast speaking, because they will be voicing some of the parts that will be on the website, as well."

Helm Hammonds, from the Department of Music, used the fellowship program to develop a more creative and efficient approach to her curriculum and a richer experience for students.

"The millennial generation is used to a digital environment, and you don't want to be the same old professor stuck in your ways or approaching course materials in the same way," Helm Hammonds said. "It doesn't allow you to grow as a professor. I like the challenge of recreating or re-inventing new ways to bring materials to life so the experience can be fun for the students and for me."

The fellowship will support Helm Hammond's curriculum for the new online Teaching Artist Certificate Program that was introduced to the NCCU campus in fall 2017. The certificate prepares performing artists with job-readiness tools to create auditorium performances, school residencies and cultural-arts programs for school and community-based organizations.



Helm Hammonds' personal experience as a teaching artist sparked an idea to leverage her student researchers and other NCCU faculty and staff to create a digital library for the online program.

"In my early years as a teaching artist, tried and true materials were hard to find, and it would take me hours to secure research," she said. "It should have not been that difficult."

"The library will include a repository of historical film footage of curated research materials that could be used in the curriculum. It will also involve a curated encyclopedia of veteran artists, researchers and professors in the areas of dance, theater and music."

RIDING THE DIGITAL WAVE FORWARD

Throughout the years, studies have shown a growing public perception that graduates of humanities programs face underemployment and incomes too low for the investment.

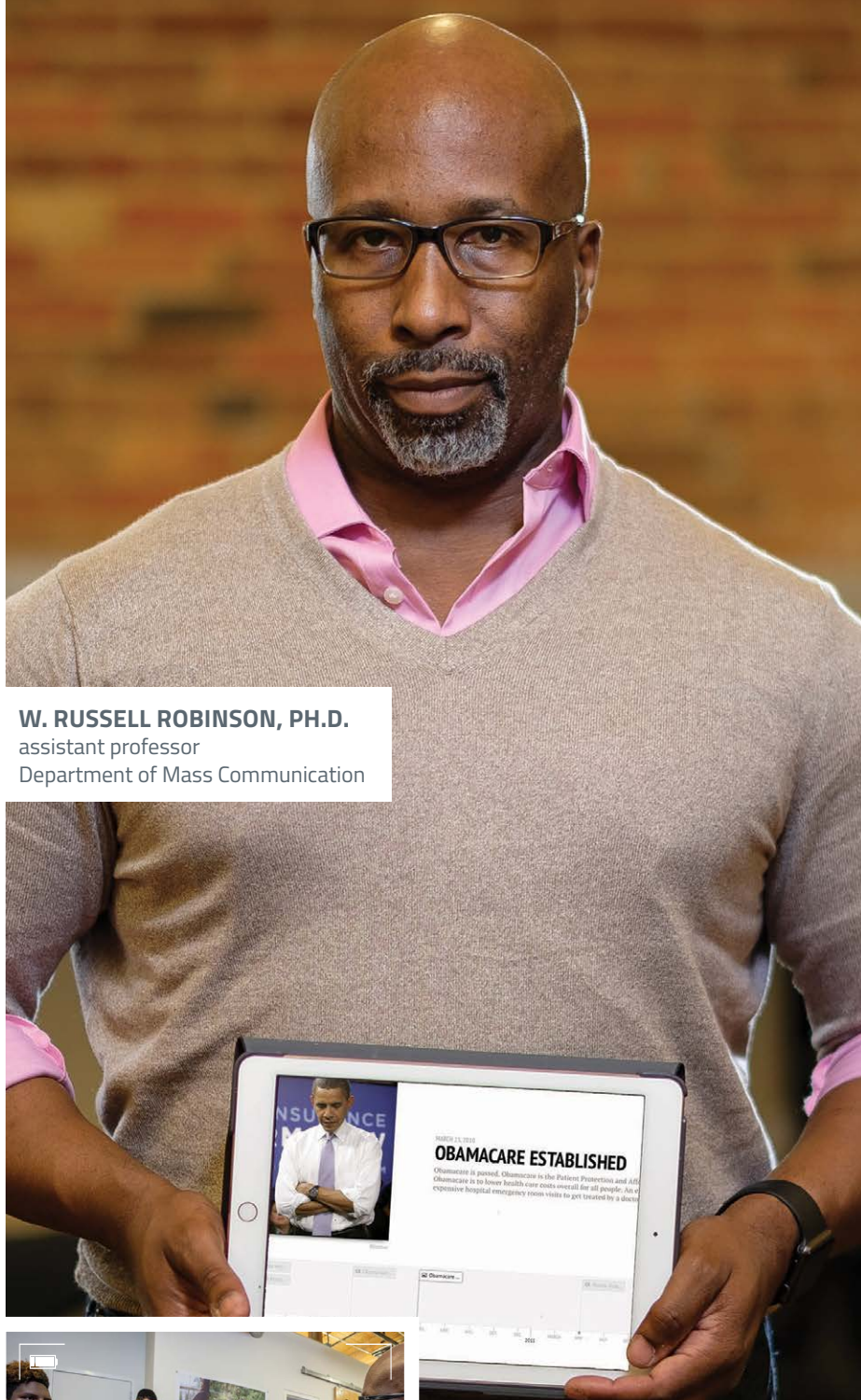
"At many institutions of higher education, focus is being placed on students pursuing science, technology, engineering and mathematics in terms corporate and business careers," Helm Hammonds said. "However the humanities are the root of who our students are, so they need history, language and art to build a bridge to STEM for their success."

However, according to a 2014 report by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, humanities majors who are now in their peak earning ages (56-60) actually earn more than their peers who chose professional or pre-professional majors, and they are more likely to have attained valuable graduate degrees.

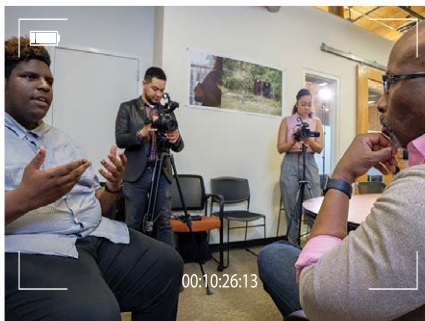
Yet, a decline in the number of humanities majors continues nationwide, with the number of degrees in the field conferred in 2015 down five percent from the year before and nearly 10 percent from 2012, according to a Humanities Indicator report.

The Digital Humanities fellows hope that their work will further showcase the need for research and study of humanities and its value in preparing students for the workforce.

"Humanities allows us to teach students to write, think and communicate – the basic skills that one needs to be successful," Frazier said.



W. RUSSELL ROBINSON, PH.D.
assistant professor
Department of Mass Communication



Mass communication students (left to right) Thurman Tatum III, Daniel Hargrove and Jasmine Hall learn the art of telling stories through a digital lens.

"Though the field may need some changes to re-engage students and provide a new understanding of career options, other fields cannot exist without it."

Similar to Frazier, McKissick-Melton believes that the humanities and sciences help each other. "Students need humanities to excel in other areas by learning to think outside of the box and enhance their critical thinking," she said. □

**World of
Possibilities**

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**Digitizing the
Human Condition**

SCHOLARS ENRICH HUMANITIES
THROUGH ONLINE EXPERIENCES

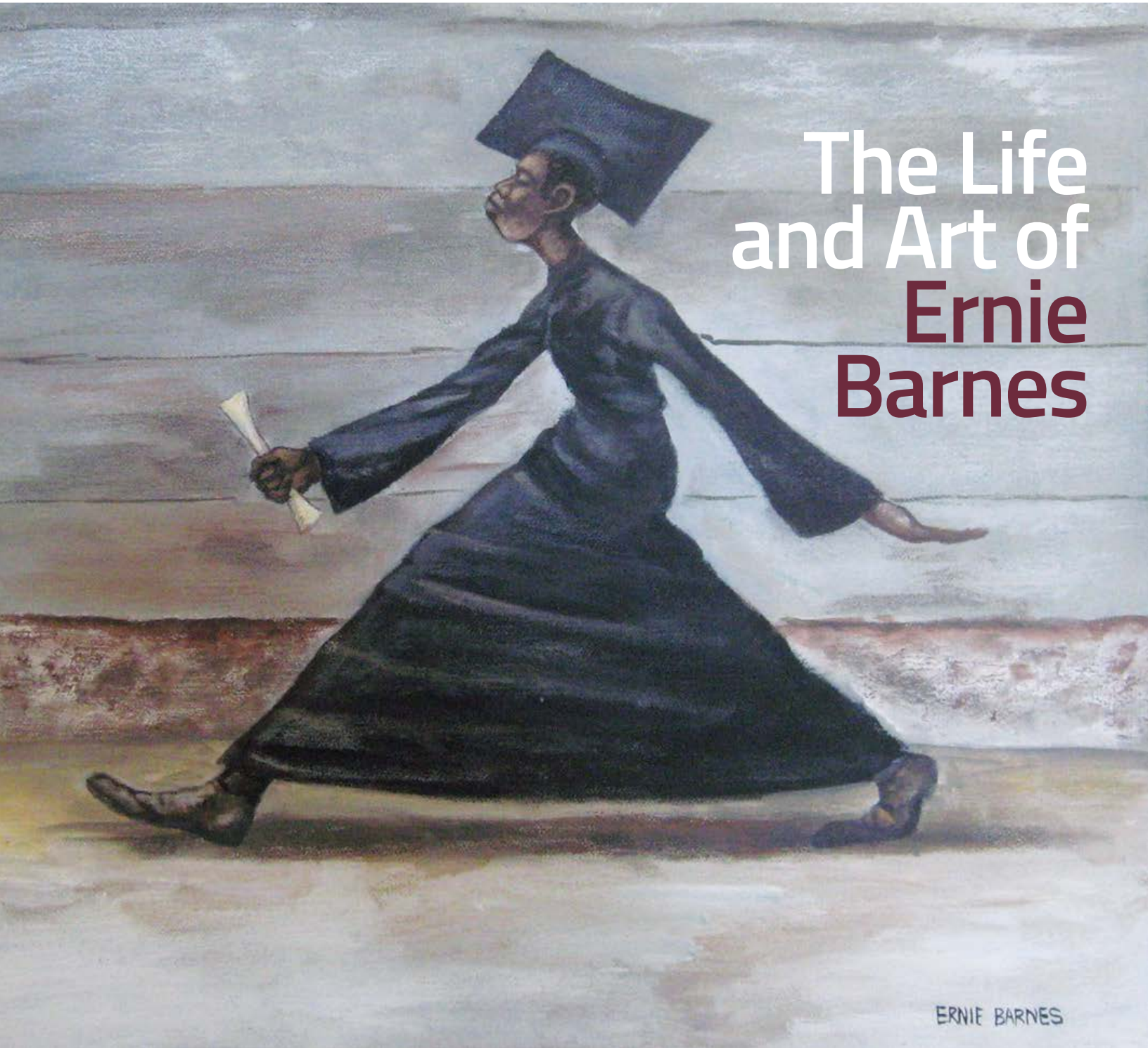
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COMMUNITY COLLEGES GIVE
EAGLES A HEAD START

NCCU NOW

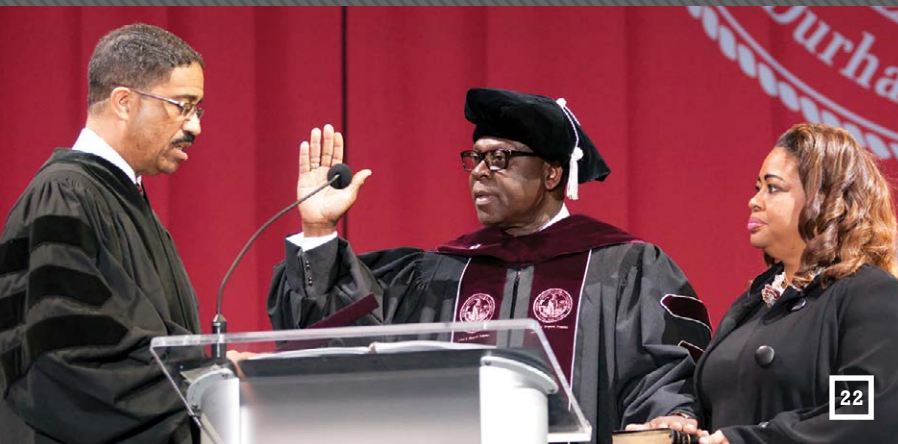
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and Art of
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ERNIE BARNES

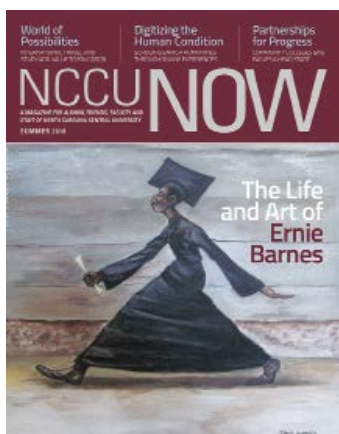


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CHANCELLOR'S NEW REIGN

Dr. Johnson O. Akinleye was sworn in as the 12th chancellor on April 19, 2018, launching a new era at NCCU.



ON THE COVER: This painting by Ernie Barnes, titled “The Graduate,” depicting a graduate walking proudly with diploma in hand, was created in 1972.

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