FAYETTEVILLE STATE UNIVERSITY

FALL 2026

BRONCO *PRIDE*



Celebrating the Faculty and Staff Who Power Student Success

FAYETTEVILLE STATE UNIVERSITY

BRONCO PRIDE

FALL 2026

ON THE COVER
Aerial view of FSU faculty and staff gathered on the campus lawn to form a heart in celebration of Bronco pride. **Photo by TopEndShoots, LLC**

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Chancellor Darrell T. Allison at the Rudolph Jones Student Center Amphitheatre. Photo by Ezekiel Best.

Celebrating the THE HEART OF FSU

A letter from Chancellor Darrell T. Allison, J.D.

Every achievement at Fayetteville State University begins with people. Behind every milestone reached, every student supported, every discovery made and every opportunity created is someone whose dedication strengthens our university and transforms lives.

Since our last issue of Bronco Pride, our community has continued to demonstrate what is possible when purpose and service come together. We saw that most clearly this spring, when Fayetteville State conferred 1,247 degrees, including 1,003 undergraduate degrees, marking the largest undergraduate graduating class in our history. For those graduates and their families, commencement represented years of hard work coming to fruition. For our university, it was also a reminder of why the work we do every day matters.

That work begins long before students reach the commencement stage. This summer, a record 4,827 students enrolled in our 30-60-90 Free Summer School Program, allowing thousands of Broncos to continue making progress toward their degrees. As FSU continues to embrace a three-semester model, summer has become an integral part of the student journey, giving our Broncos another opportunity to stay on track toward graduation. With a new $2 million recurring state investment, we can continue building on that commitment and expand what is possible for our students.

We are creating that same sense of possibility across our academic programs. Our nursing program is expanding its prelicensure enrollment capacity to 300 students, opening the door for more future nurses to prepare for careers serving communities across North Carolina. A $500,000 investment from the Golden LEAF Foundation will support that growth through expanded simulation training and clinical learning opportunities. At the same time, a $300,000 National Institutes of Health award is creating new pathways for students interested in biomedical science and health careers through FSU-GROW.

Our commitment to opportunity also extends to those who have served our nation and the families who serve alongside them. Today, more than 2,300 military-affiliated students call FSU home, representing 34% of our student body and the largest share in the UNC System. Our relationship with Fort Bragg continues to deepen through our education partnership with the XVIII Airborne Corps, creating opportunities to connect higher education with the training, research and talent needs of the military community we are proud to serve.

You can see that same spirit of investment taking shape across our campus. This fall brought the openings of the new College of Education, The Shoe food truck park, and the Health and Wellness Center. Each reflects our continued commitment to creating an environment where students have the resources and experiences they need to thrive.

There is much to celebrate in these accomplishments, but the numbers and milestones tell only part of our story. Each one is made possible by people. Faculty who challenge



College of Education Ribbon Cutting. **Photo by Ezekiel Best.**

students to discover what they are capable of. Staff whose work shapes the university experience every day. Students who continue to pursue their goals with determination. Alumni and community partners who invest in FSU because they believe in our mission and in the promise of our students.

That is why the theme of this issue, The Heart of FSU: Our People, Our Pride, feels especially fitting.

Within these pages, you will meet members of our Bronco family whose work touches nearly every corner of this university. Their stories offer a closer look at the people behind the Fayetteville State experience and the passion they bring to serving our students and our community each day.

I hope you enjoy the stories ahead and discover something new about the people who make FSU such a special place. As you turn each page, I hope you see the dedication that defines our Bronco community and gain an even deeper appreciation for the people whose work continues to shape the future of this institution.

Thank you for being part of the Bronco family and for helping write the next chapter of our story.

With Bronco Pride,



Darrell T. Allison, J.D.

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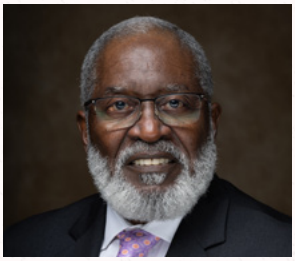
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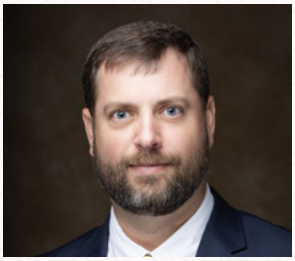
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Dr. Robert W. McGee, professor in the Broadwell College of Business and Economics. Photo by Ezekiel Best.

MAKING THE NEWS

Highlights of great things happening at FSU

Excellence Takes CENTER STAGE

BY LINDA GERRON

If the past few months proved anything, it's that Fayetteville State University's reputation continues to grow well beyond campus. From national rankings to faculty achievements, Broncos have been making their mark in classrooms, research and graduate education.

That recognition was evident when the university's undergraduate elementary education program earned an A+ rating from the National Council on Teacher Quality, placing FSU among a select group of institutions recognized for excellence in preparing future teachers through the Science of Reading. This is part of the University's commitment to equipping future educators with the skills they need to help children become confident readers from the very beginning.

Faculty excellence also captured attention on the global stage. ScholarGPS ranked Broadwell College of Business and Economics professor Dr. Robert W. McGee as the world's leading researcher in both business ethics and tax evasion, highlighting decades of influential scholarship that continues to shape conversations around the world. Closer to home, students celebrated another familiar face when Dr. Melissa J. Haithcox-Dennis was named the university's 2026-27 Teacher of the Year, recognizing her passion for teaching and commitment to student success.

The accolades didn't stop there. The Princeton Review once again recognized FSU's online MBA among the nation's best, making it the highest-ranked among historically Black colleges and universities on the list and one of only three North Carolina institutions to earn a place in the Top 20. Whether through innovative teaching, groundbreaking research or nationally recognized academic programs, FSU continues to demonstrate that excellence isn't a destination. It's part of who we are.



Sierra Osborn delivers the graduate commencement address during FSU's 2026 Spring Commencement. **Photo by Ezekiel Best.**

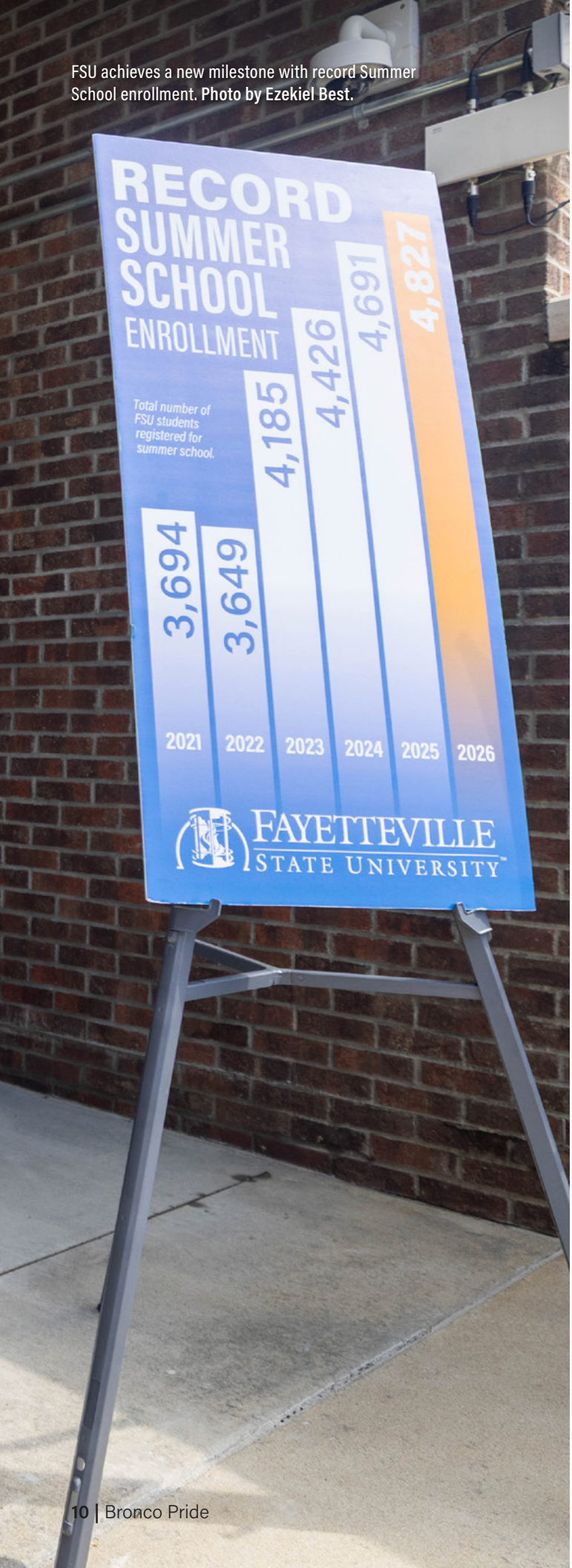
A Season of MILESTONES

BY LINDA GERRON

Some moments become part of a university's history, and this past spring delivered more than a few. Commencement weekend was filled with firsts, records and homecoming celebrations. More than 1,000 undergraduate students crossed the stage, making it the largest graduating class in Bronco history. Before the first diploma was awarded, another milestone unfolded as MBA graduate Sierra Osborn became the first graduate student ever selected to deliver a commencement address. Her heartfelt reflections on perseverance, gratitude and the people who help us reach our goals served as a reminder that the community around us strengthens every Bronco's journey.

The celebration continued as Fayetteville welcomed home one of its own. Army Gen. Xavier T. Brunson returned to his hometown to deliver the undergraduate commencement address, encouraging graduates to lead with purpose, remain humble and use their education to make a difference. During the ceremony, Chancellor Darrell T. Allison presented Gen. Brunson with the Chancellor's Medallion in recognition of his extraordinary leadership and distinguished military service.

The spirit of giving also reached new heights. During the second annual Scholarship Gala, the FSU National Alumni Association presented a record-breaking $250,000 gift to support scholarships, athletics and the Broncos Helping Broncos Student Emergency Fund, reflecting the deep commitment alumni continue to have for future generations of Broncos. The celebration came full circle as members of the Class of 1976 returned to campus to celebrate their 50-year reunion and join the Golden Bronco Society, proving that while students eventually leave campus, Bronco pride never really graduates.



FSU achieves a new milestone with record Summer School enrollment. **Photo by Ezekiel Best.**

Growing for THE FUTURE

BY LINDA GERRON

As one academic year came to a close, another began with a powerful vote of confidence in FSU's future.

This summer, Chancellor Allison announced the largest private gift in university history as an anonymous trust committed $6.5 million to support the University's mission. The announcement came alongside a recurring $2 million annual investment from the North Carolina General Assembly to expand FSU's nationally recognized 30-60-90 Free Summer School Program, an initiative that continues to remove financial barriers by covering tuition, fees, housing, meals and textbooks for eligible students taking summer courses.

Together, those investments helped fuel another milestone as FSU welcomed a record 4,827 students for summer enrollment. More importantly, they reaffirmed a vision that every Bronco deserves the opportunity to graduate on time with less debt and greater opportunities waiting after commencement.

The University also continued bolstering its foundation with the arrival of new academic leadership, including Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs Dr. Scott Krawczyk, along with several new deans and senior administrators who will help guide the university's next chapter. From expanding academic excellence to investing in student success and attracting historic levels of public and private support, Fayetteville State is building for what comes next. As another academic year begins, the university is doing more than celebrating where it has been. It is confidently shaping where it is going.



FSU athletic director Anthony T. Bennett proudly displays the championship trophies earned in 2025-2026. **Photo by TopEndShoots, LLC.**

Champions in the Classroom AND BEYOND

BY LINDA GERRON

Success at FSU isn't measured only by championships. It's also reflected in the discipline and dedication Broncos bring to the classroom every day. During the spring semester, FSU student-athletes once again demonstrated that academic achievement remains a cornerstone of the athletics program. More than 140 Broncos earned a 3.0 GPA or higher, including 36 who finished the semester with a perfect 4.0, contributing to an overall departmental GPA of 3.33.

The university also expanded opportunities for future Broncos with the addition of men's indoor and outdoor track and field beginning in the 2026-27 academic year. The new varsity programs will give student-athletes another avenue to compete while building on the success of FSU's cross-country program and strengthening the university's presence in the Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association.

Recognition followed throughout the spring. Director of Athletics Anthony T. Bennett was named CIAA Athletic Director of the Year, while nursing major Faith Kiplimo earned Female Scholar-Athlete of the Year honors. The Broncos also captured the Loretta Taylor Women's All-Sports Award for the fifth consecutive year, another reflection of the program's sustained excellence across multiple sports. Whether earning top marks in the classroom or bringing home conference honors, FSU's student-athletes continue to show that success is about more than the final score.

Taken together, the headlines of the past several months tell a story that reaches across every corner of Fayetteville State. They tell of students reaching new milestones, faculty earning recognition far beyond campus and a Bronco community continuing to invest in what comes next. With a new academic year underway, there will be plenty more stories to tell. For now, there's plenty to be proud of.



Dr. Anthony L. Jenkins '95, president of Coppin State University. **Photo by Coppin State University.**

Alumni Spotlight

COPPIN STATE UNIVERSITY PRESIDENT

ANTHONY L. JENKINS

BY LINDA GERRON

President Jenkins '95 has spent more than a decade leading universities. The Fayetteville State University alumnus still traces the foundation of that leadership back to the place where he first discovered what was possible.

Dr. Anthony L. Jenkins has built a career around one of higher education's biggest responsibilities: creating places where students can see greater possibilities for themselves.

Today, the Fayetteville State University alumnus serves as president of Coppin State University in Baltimore, following an earlier presidency at West Virginia State University. Across both institutions, his leadership has centered on student success, institutional growth and expanding opportunity.

His path also makes him part of a larger FSU story. Broncos are leading institutions, shaping communities and influencing higher education well beyond Fayetteville. Dr. Jenkins represents what that reach can look like across a career, while maintaining a strong connection to the university that helped prepare him for it.

That connection brought Chancellor Darrell T. Allison to Coppin State last year, where the two presidents discussed higher education, leadership and the importance of recognizing FSU alums whose impact extends far beyond campus.

For Bronco Pride, Jenkins reflects on the family ties that brought him to Fayetteville, the experiences that shaped him at FSU, what he has learned through two university presidencies and what today's Broncos should know about pursuing their own ambitions.



Coppin State University President Dr. Anthony L. Jenkins '95 speaks during an interview. **Photo by Coppin State University.**

LINDA: Your family's connection to Fayetteville reaches back generations. How did that history eventually lead you to Fayetteville State?

JENKINS: My family's ties to North Carolina run deep. My grandmother was born in Clinton, North Carolina, in 1921, and my mother was born in Fayetteville 30 years later. Although I was born in Washington, D.C., we spent summers in North Carolina, where I created lifelong memories with my cousins, aunts and uncles. During my teenage years, my mother returned to Fayetteville, and I graduated from Douglas Byrd Senior High School.

After high school, I enlisted in the U.S. Army. After completing my military service at Fort Bragg, I used my GI Bill benefits to pursue higher education.

As I researched colleges, several people encouraged me to consider other institutions and questioned whether FSU could provide the opportunities I was seeking. Their perception was not my reality. The moment I stepped onto campus, I felt a sense of belonging and purpose.

I enrolled in 1991. Chancellor Vic Hackley's leadership set a standard of excellence, and faculty and staff poured into me. They challenged me and believed in my potential long before I fully recognized it myself.

When I graduated in 1995, Fayetteville State had given me the confidence to discover who I was and who I could become. It was also where I met my college sweetheart, Toinette, with whom I have now shared 26 wonderful years.

LINDA: At what point did you begin to see a university presidency as something you could actually achieve?

JENKINS: My aspiration to become a college or university president began early in my career while I was working in admissions and financial aid at Jackson State University.

Later, during orientation for my doctoral program at Virginia Tech, I shared that my goal was to become a university president. One of my professors expressed skepticism. He explained that very few people advanced to the presidency through student affairs and suggested that becoming a vice president might be a more realistic ambition.

That conversation strengthened my resolve.

I realized that if I wanted to become a university president, my journey would need to be intentional, strategic and disciplined. With the guidance of mentors and sponsors, I carefully planned my career. In 2016, nine years after earning my Ph.D., I was selected as the 11th president of West Virginia State University.

LINDA: You have now led two universities. What have those presidencies taught you about leadership?

JENKINS: Leading an institution is exhilarating, humbling and demanding. The presidency requires resilience, sound judgment and the ability to inspire people through periods of challenge and opportunity.

When I arrived at West Virginia State, the state had just experienced a devastating flood. The university also faced enrollment and financial pressures and had long sought approval for nursing and engineering programs.



President Jenkins '95 is joined by daughter Alicia Jenkins (left), wife Toinette Jenkins (center), and daughter Ashley Jenkins (right) at the 2025 Coppin State University Gala. **Photo by Coppin State University.**

> **I am living proof that a Fayetteville State University education can open doors that once seemed unimaginable.**
>
> — Dr. Anthony Jenkins

Working alongside an exceptional team, we launched the university's first Bachelor of Science in Nursing and Bachelor of Engineering programs, achieved record enrollment growth and balanced the budget for the first time in more than a decade. We also secured the university's full land grant funding match for the first time since its founding in 1891.

I arrived at Coppin State in 2020 during the global pandemic. The university had experienced 12 consecutive years of enrollment decline along with challenges in retention, finances and stakeholder confidence.

We developed a shared vision for what Coppin could become. Today, Coppin is the fastest-growing university in Greater Baltimore. We have improved student retention and graduation outcomes, expanded our academic portfolio, increased research and fundraising, and strengthened partnerships throughout the region.

Those accomplishments reflect what is possible when talented people unite around a shared vision and remain committed to student success.

LINDA: Chancellor Allison visited you at Coppin and has spoken about the importance of FSU celebrating its own. What did that recognition mean to you?

JENKINS: I deeply appreciate Chancellor Allison's confidence in my leadership and his recognition of me as a proud product of Fayetteville State University.

There will always be people who question your ambitions or attempt to define your limitations. Stay focused on your purpose.

— Dr. Anthony Jenkins

I would describe myself as driven. That drive, coupled with a competitive spirit and the opportunity to work alongside talented faculty and staff, motivates me to create transformational opportunities for students.

When Chancellor Allison visited Coppin, we talked about the transformative power of higher education. My hope is that every student who graduates from Coppin experiences what I experienced at Fayetteville State University: unwavering school pride, confidence in the quality of their education and an unshakable belief in their own potential.

LINDA: When today's Broncos look at your journey from FSU student to two-time university president, what do you want them to take from it?

JENKINS: Never underestimate the power of a quality education.

As a first-generation college student raised by a single mother in Southeast Washington, D.C., I am living proof that a Fayetteville State University education can open doors that once seemed unimaginable. That education has allowed me to engage in conversations about higher education across five countries and 32 states and contribute to work that creates lasting educational impact.

There will always be people who question your ambitions or attempt to define your limitations. Stay focused on your purpose.

Enjoy the journey as much as the destination. Believe in what Fayetteville State University has taught you. Hold fast to the values your family instilled in you. Lead with integrity and remain humble. Remember those who helped you along the way, open doors for others and give back to your alma mater.

The world is waiting. Go change it.





Coppin State University President Dr. Anthony L. Jenkins '95, left, and Chancellor Darrell T. Allison view memorabilia in Jenkins' office.
Photo by Ezekiel Best.

Tiffany Watson, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF ADMISSIONS: WHERE POSSIBILITY BEGINS

BY LINDA GERRON

For Tiffany Watson, helping students find their way to Fayetteville State often starts with a simple conversation about what is still possible.

When a prospective transfer student from California first applied to Fayetteville State University, the answer was no.

She had never visited FSU. Still, she had done her research, learned about NC Promise, and decided she wanted to move across the country for a different college experience.

There was one problem. She did not meet the transfer requirements.

For Tiffany Watson, Fayetteville State's senior assistant director of admissions for transfer and online degree completion, that did not have to be the end of the conversation.

The student stayed in touch. She completed additional coursework, kept track of what she needed to do and tried again.

This fall, she arrived in Fayetteville and started classes as a junior.

"I'm so incredibly proud of her," Watson said. "She just said, 'This was the right decision for me, and I need to make it happen,' and she has."

For Watson, experiences like that reinforce something she wishes more prospective students understood.

"The conversation is always worth it," she said. "There's a strong possibility that there is a path forward, and you just may not be aware of it yet."



Tiffany Watson, assistant director of admissions. **Photo by Ezekiel Best.**

> **There's a strong possibility that there is a path forward, and you just may not be aware of it yet.**
>
> — Tiffany Watson

Before You Decide No

Watson encounters students at nearly every stage of life.

Some are 18 and have discovered their first college was not the right fit. Others have spent decades away from the classroom. Watson remembers admitting a 72-year-old who told her an unfinished degree still nagged at him.

She hears from parents returning to school while raising children and from service members trying to continue their education through moves and career changes.

"That's the beauty about transfer," Watson said. "There are so many different stories that we get to help find an education and find a home here."

Many arrive carrying assumptions about what might keep them out.

They wonder whether previous credits will count or whether too much time has passed. Some hesitate to submit transcripts because they already expect the answer.

Watson would rather they ask.

"Let us tell you the answer," she said. "You might be making assumptions about what's possible or what can be done, and we may be able to give you at least a path forward. Even if it's not this semester, there's always a plan."

Sometimes that path leads through one of FSU's community college partners. Sometimes it means completing additional coursework and applying later. Watson also works with former FSU students who left before earning their degrees and are ready to return and finish what they started.

For Watson, helping people see those possibilities is personal.

The Reason She Keeps Showing Up

She grew up in Fayetteville and graduated from Westover High School. Her mother and sister later graduated from FSU. Her mother began as a teacher assistant, earned her degree at Fayetteville State, and became a classroom teacher.

Watson's own education opened doors she never could have imagined for herself.

Her career began in the classroom and eventually took her into teacher recruitment, higher education and technology, including human resources at Google. Eventually, Fayetteville called her home.

"I am a little girl from Fayetteville, North Carolina, a Westover High School graduate," she said. "I worked at Google. You would never have told me that was even possible for me."

For Watson, the connection between those experiences and the students sitting across from her today is clear.

"I know firsthand that education opens doors," she said. "I've seen it. I've done it. I've done it for other people. I want everyone to experience it."

That belief shapes the experience Watson wants students to have from their first conversation with her. She knows returning to college can require courage, particularly for someone who has already convinced themselves that the opportunity may have passed.

Her job is to help them find out what is actually possible.

"I know how much courage it takes to want to do something new," Watson said. "Getting a degree, there are going to be enough challenges. Meeting me should not be one of them."

Dr. Evandrew Washington, ADJUNCT ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF BIOLOGY:

A HEART FOR STUDENTS

BY JANET GIBSON

FSU biology professor leads with knowledge, Bronco commitment – and bold style.

Dr. Evandrew Washington will tell you in no uncertain terms that students are his No. 1 priority. Their welfare, learning and success.

He calls himself "a student-driven professor." Others might also describe him another way – as "one of the unsung heroes of Fayetteville State University" who goes above and beyond to show he cares. From his storytelling teaching techniques to an open-door office policy to acts of kindness he performs when no one is looking, Dr. Washington is revered by students, past and present, and his peers.

"I had him for Principles of Biology and had a very rough semester with personal issues. He was very understanding of my situation and allowed me to make up work. Lectures were very fun and entertaining," writes a former student on Ratemyprofessors.com, adding a score of 100/10.

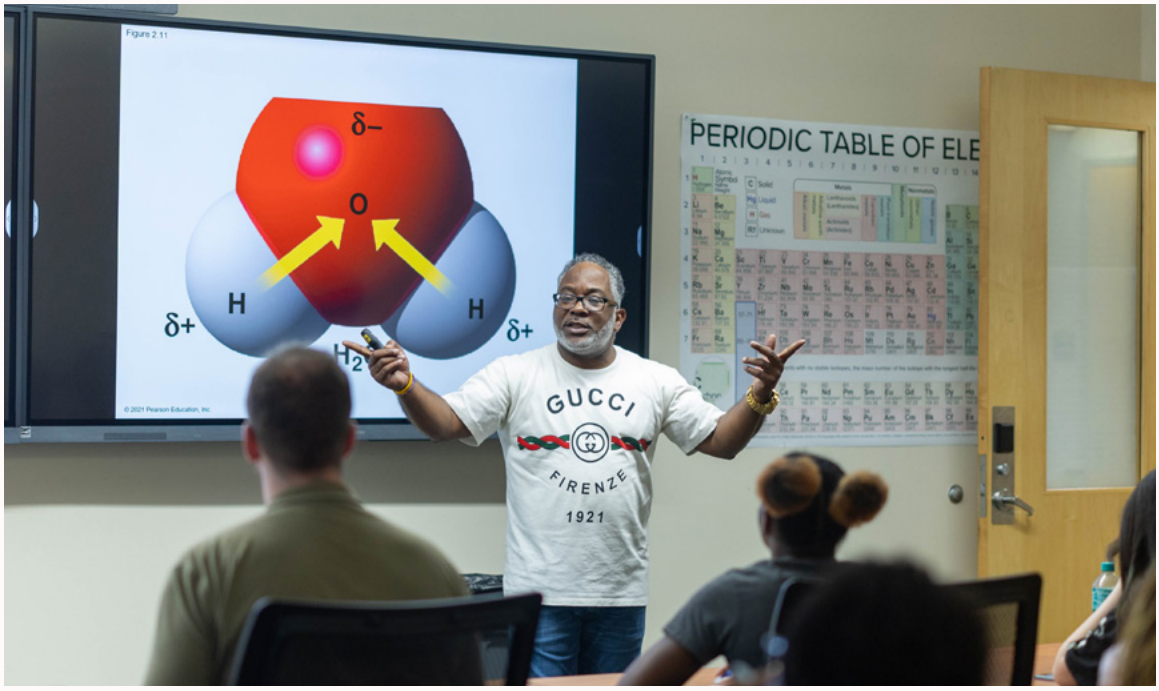
"I had him for Intro to Biotech and Cellular Biology. He's so kind, makes the lectures funny, and presents them in a way that makes the information stick," writes another, offering up one of the professor's pet peeves: "Be on time for class!!!"

Dr. Erin N. White, Dean of the Lloyd College of Health, Science and Technology, has known Dr. Washington since 2005, just a year after he earned a bachelor's degree in biology from FSU and began working as a lab manager on campus.



Dr. Evandrew Washington, adjunct assistant professor of biology. Photo by Ezekiel Best.





Dr. Washington teaches a biology class at Fayetteville State University. **Photo by Ezekiel Best.**

> **I want my students to be better than me. I tell my students, 'Come back and take my job one day.'**
>
> — Dr. Evandrew Washington

"I've seen the transition, his personal and professional growth," she says. "He's very personable and has never met a stranger. He makes sure to end conversations on a light note, so you leave with a chuckle. He is a very caring individual."

He's also extremely fashionable, a fact that can't be denied, even at a glance. (But more on that later…)

What's His Story?

At 54, Dr. Washington has been a fixture at FSU since 2001. He sees Fayetteville State through the eyes of a "triple Bronco" – an undergraduate and graduate biology student and alumnus, plus an Ed.D. holder – and also an employee, lab manager and longtime adjunct assistant professor of biology.

"I love sciences," he says. "It's always evolving, always changing."

His journey has been one of dogged determination and empathy born out of personal experience.

He grew up as a PK — a preacher's kid — in rural Arkansas and enrolled at the University of Central Arkansas after high school to study biology. After two years, he left to join the U.S. Army and become a combat medic.

After completing basic and medical training, the young man, who had never traveled out

of the country, was shipped to a base in Germany. Deployments would follow in Kuwait, Iraq, and Macedonia, as well as NATO missions. His leadership skills caught the attention of top brass, and he was assigned to be a section chief, making him responsible for 13 soldiers and medical equipment.

"It teaches you to grow up quickly," he says.

Dr. Washington served for 10 years and says his bad knees and back prove it. As a veteran, he better understands FSU's military-affiliated students, who make up roughly 33% of the student body.

After leaving the military, he worked for Labcorp as a phlebotomist, drawing blood for DNA testing. "One day," he recalls, "the light bulb came on, and I said, 'I can't do this for the rest of my life.'"

Fayetteville State University was his answer. In three years, he earned a bachelor's degree in biology, learning from such mentors as Dr. Sherrice Allen and Dr. James Raynor.

He still couldn't shake a gnawing feeling, though: "I must improve myself… I want more."

Then-married and the father of a thriving son and daughter, he opted for evening classes and earned a master's degree in biology in December 2009. He credits Dr. Abdelmajid Kassem for his guidance in achieving that goal.

He was a full-time student and working full-time teaching at FSU when he achieved another milestone in 2021 by earning a doctorate in education. He gives a shout-out to Dr. Paris Jones for helping him on that leg of his journey.

Looking Your Best, Being Your Best

"When you're comfortable, students can relate to you," says Dr. Washington, who happens to feel the most at ease in the classroom while wearing Burberry, Gucci, Prada and Versace.

He has a strategy for making his style work. Consistency. "If I wear Burberry sneakers, I wear a Burberry watch and Burberry glasses." And so forth.

He shops outlet stores and also online for deals and looks for sales at retailers such as Nordstrom.

A member of Omega Psi Phi Incorporated fraternity, he likes setting a positive example and reflecting Bronco Pride. Students inevitably remark about his sharp apparel. "You fly," he says, imitating those who notice and comment.

He tells them they can have the quality stuff, too. "Get your degree, get a good job, and you can get what you want," he says. "But I also tell them that this didn't happen overnight!"

He writes recommendation letters for those who are excelling, possess something special, or show promise for the future, with one caveat. One day, when they are in a position to help someone, pay it forward.

The energy you put out, he believes, is the energy you receive.

"I want my students to be better than me. I tell my students, 'Come back and take my job one day.'"



Dr. Washington displays one of the watches that complements his signature style. **Photo by Ezekiel Best.**

Dr. Melissa Haithcox-Dennis, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF COMMUNITY AND PUBLIC HEALTH: THE COMMON THREAD

BY LINDA GERRON



Dr. Melissa Haithcox Dennis, associate professor of community and public health. **Photo by Ezekiel Best.**

For more than two decades, Dr. Haithcox-Dennis has brought public health into communities. At FSU, she prepares students to do the same.

Dr. Melissa Haithcox-Dennis had already crossed the commencement stage once when her name was called again.

During Fayetteville State University's spring 2026 commencement, she first stepped forward to receive the University of North Carolina Board of Governors Award for Excellence in Teaching, presented annually to a tenured faculty member at each of North Carolina's public universities. Minutes later, she was back before the crowd as FSU's 2026 to 2027 Teacher of the Year.

Two teaching honors in one morning.

She remembers the recognition as humbling, particularly because students and colleagues helped put her name forward. Yet spend a little time with her and the awards quickly give way to the work itself.

Ask her to explain public health, and she brings a sprawling field down to street level.

A neighborhood. A church opening its doors for a vaccine clinic. A family trying to understand whether something in its environment is affecting its health. Someone searching for reliable information before deciding on care.

"We're the ones that go out to the community," Dr. Haithcox-Dennis said. "We get with the churches and say, 'We have a vaccine clinic.' That's what public health does."

There is an ease to the explanation, the kind that comes from knowing a subject well enough to leave the jargon behind.

Dr. Haithcox-Dennis has spent more than 25 years doing the work she now teaches. Her experience spans community health, nonprofit leadership and higher education. Along the way, she has helped secure more than $3 million in grant funding supporting health initiatives involving breast cancer, HIV, obesity and environmental health injustice in New York, New Jersey and eastern North Carolina.

For all that ground covered, she can sum up what connects it in one word. "Community's the common thread," she said.

From the Community Up

Long before there was an FSU classroom, there were girls in Anson County whom Dr. Haithcox-Dennis believed deserved better information about their health.

Working with young people early in her career, she became frustrated by the limits on what she could discuss with girls who were facing real questions about their bodies and their futures. She responded by creating GIFT, Girls In It For Themselves, a program that combined health education and mentoring.

The experience pushed her deeper into public health. She earned a master's degree in health education from Montclair State University, spent roughly a decade working in nonprofit public health, and later earned a doctorate in health education from Southern Illinois University Carbondale. She eventually served as CEO of a nonprofit organization in Raleigh. She earned her undergraduate degree in biology from North Carolina Central University.



Flanked by FSU Board Chair Glenn Adams and Chancellor Allison, Dr. Haithcox-Dennis is honored as Teacher of the Year at the May 2026 Commencement ceremony. **Photo by Ezekiel Best.**

By the time Fayetteville State came into the picture in 2016, Dr. Haithcox-Dennis understood public health from the community level up.

She also knew what kind of campus she wanted.

"I really wanted to be at an HBCU," she said.

FSU was developing its Public Health program, and Dr. Haithcox-Dennis saw an opportunity to help shape something still taking form.

There were six students. Today, enrollment approaches 60.

Dr. Haithcox-Dennis calls public health a "discovery major." Students sometimes arrive knowing they want to work in health or serve people, yet they have not found the profession that fits.

"There's a place for everyone," she tells them.

Helping students find that place has become a large part of her work.

Learning to See People

For Dr. Haithcox-Dennis, preparation means allowing students to encounter public health beyond a lecture.

They have worked with health departments and community organizations and gained access to internships and research opportunities. A partnership with Southern Regional Area Health Education Center connects students in participating programs within the School of Education and School of Social Work with the North Carolina Area Health Education Centers (NC AHEC) Program.

This summer, she and a faculty colleague used a research mini-grant to introduce 10 students from several disciplines to undergraduate research. Students learned research methods, analyzed data and developed posters from their findings.

She wants them to see where the work can take them, and sometimes that means leaving Fayetteville altogether.



Dr. Haithcox-Dennis speaks with FSU Board of Trustees Al Ragland during the College of Education ribbon-cutting event. **Photo by Ezekiel Best.**

In 2025, Dr. Haithcox-Dennis led students to Toronto for a study abroad experience examining religion and health. Over the course of the trip, students encountered 13 faith traditions while considering how belief can shape health decisions and the relationships people form with those who care for them.

For her, the lesson is practical. Public health professionals have to understand the people behind the information they are trying to deliver.

That interest now reaches into new technology. She is working with Lawrence Treadwell, director of Library Services at the Charles W. Chesnutt Library, to develop virtual reality and artificial intelligence simulations focused on religious literacy. The communities represented in those simulations will help review how their identities are portrayed.

The tools may be changing. Dr. Haithcox-Dennis' interest in people has remained remarkably consistent.

Years after GIFT ended, an FSU student approached her with a question.

"Did you use to do the program called GIFT?"

The student standing in front of her had once been one of those girls in Anson County. Years later, she was at Fayetteville State preparing to graduate in health.

For a career built around trying to reach people before knowing where those efforts might lead, the moment landed deeply.

"It really affirmed my decision to be in public health and to work with young people," she said.

At spring commencement, Chancellor Darrell T. Allison challenged the graduating class to carry what they had gained at FSU into the lives of others.

"Allow your life to give life to others," Allison told them.

By the time Dr. Haithcox-Dennis' name was called twice that morning, she had spent much of her career doing exactly that.

She still has more she wants to do. She hopes to expand undergraduate research and study abroad opportunities at FSU. She can see administration somewhere in her future.

The classroom, however, is staying with her.

"I always want to keep a foot in the classroom," Dr. Haithcox-Dennis said.

More than 25 years after a group of girls helped her discover where she belonged in public health, Dr. Haithcox-Dennis is still helping students discover where they belong in it.

Letter from THE PROVOST

A letter from Scott Krawczyk, Ph.D., Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs

As I settle into my first academic year at Fayetteville State University, I have made it a point to get out and experience this university for myself.

I have walked the campus, visited our colleges, stopped by the library and athletics facilities, and talked with faculty, staff and students along the way. In those conversations, I quickly discovered that Fayetteville State has a remarkable sense of community.

That sense of community was clear to me from my very first visit to FSU, and it has only grown stronger since I joined the institution. Here, people truly know and care about one another, and above all, they share a deep commitment to our students.

Having spent much of my career in higher education, I also arrived at Fayetteville State with the benefit of seeing this university through fresh eyes. What I see is an institution with much to be proud of.

The quality of our academic programs is gaining national attention. Our faculty bring expertise and energy into their classrooms. Our students are achieving remarkable outcomes. There is excellent work happening across FSU, and part of what excites me about being here is helping ensure more people recognize it.

At the center of that excellence are our people.

Faculty have an extraordinary influence on the student experience. Ask a student about a professor who made an impact, and you can often see the answer before you hear it. That relationship is one of the most powerful parts of higher education. Supporting our faculty, their teaching, scholarship and continued growth ultimately means creating stronger experiences for the students they serve.

We also have a responsibility to prepare those students for what awaits them beyond FSU. The workplace is changing rapidly, particularly with advances in artificial intelligence. Yet the ability to think critically, communicate effectively, and understand others remain essential. Our opportunity is to build upon those enduring skills while ensuring students are prepared to use emerging technologies thoughtfully and confidently.

I want our graduates to walk out the door ready to learn. Their education at Fayetteville State should give them a foundation that allows them to enter their careers prepared to grow, adapt and contribute as the world around them continues to evolve.

That responsibility belongs to all of us.

With the academic year now well underway, I have continued to challenge our campus community to make every engagement count. Every conversation with a student, every class session, and every timely piece of guidance matters. Each encounter is an opportunity to shape someone's experience at Fayetteville State.

I am still relatively new to this community, but I already understand why there is so much Bronco pride. I see it in the people I meet across campus and in their commitment to this university and its students.

It is an honor to be part of it.



Dr. Krawczyk shares his passion for strengthening faculty/student relationships at the Opening Day event during Bronco Kickoff Week. **Photo by Ezekiel Best.**

Daniel Core,

DIRECTOR OF ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH AND SAFETY:

THE SCIENCE OF PREVENTION

BY LINDA GERRON

Daniel approaches every obstacle with a positive mindset, transforming daily challenges into campus improvement.

Daniel Core stood a few feet away from two Facilities Management employees, watching as they carefully positioned river rock outside one of Fayetteville State University's academic buildings. He offered a few quiet directions, answered a question and then stepped back, letting the crew settle into its work.

Once they did, he motioned for us to follow.

A few yards away sat a large wire basket filled with more stone. Daniel reached inside, lifted one about the size of a softball, and held it comfortably in one hand. As he pointed toward the newly constructed bed running alongside the sidewalk, his reserved demeanor gave way to unmistakable enthusiasm.

"This is a rain garden," he said.

Only weeks earlier, stormwater routinely flooded this stretch of sidewalk, washing sand across the walkway and creating a hazard for pedestrians. Now, rainwater would collect beneath the rock, slowly soaking into the ground before overflowing into a nearby drain. It would protect the building's foundation, improve drainage and even help nourish the surrounding landscape.



Daniel Core, director of Environmental Health and Safety. **Photo by Rakeem Jones.**



Daniel Core examines a rain garden designed to improve stormwater drainage on campus. **Photo by Rakeem Jones.**

"The idea," he explained, "is turning water, instead of it being a liability to the university, into an asset."

Spend enough time with Daniel, and a pattern begins to emerge. As director of Environmental Health and Safety, he rarely sees problems. He sees possibilities. A flooded sidewalk becomes an opportunity to create a greener campus. An outdated laboratory becomes a chance to improve research safety. A residence hall inspection becomes another step toward ensuring thousands of students can move into a building without ever thinking about the systems quietly protecting them.

It's a perspective most people never witness because, if Daniel is doing his job well, they never have to.

"The best safety department is one that you rarely have to hear from," he said. "The barriers have already been built into the process."

Raised in rural North Carolina, Daniel originally planned to work in healthcare before discovering environmental safety during his undergraduate studies. He realized he was drawn not to treating problems after they occurred but to prevent them altogether. The work matched the way he naturally approached the world: observe carefully, understand systems, and improve them before someone else even notices they need attention.

That same curiosity carried us into one of the university's science buildings.

Walking through research laboratories, Daniel spoke with the same energy he had shown outside with the rain garden. He pointed to updated chemical storage areas, explained how years of accumulated materials had been reorganized and described improvements to fume hoods, laboratory procedures and safety practices. Every room held another lesson—not about regulations,

> **"The idea is turning water, instead of it being a liability to the university, into an asset.**
>
> — Daniel Core

but about creating spaces where students and faculty can focus on discovery instead of unnecessary risk.

What stood out wasn't technical expertise.

It was how naturally he became a teacher.

Every answer turned into a story. Every project became an opportunity to explain why something mattered. Even discussing campus drainage, his thoughts quickly expanded beyond infrastructure. He envisioned additional

> **The best safety department is one that you rarely have to hear from. The barriers have already been built into the process.**
>
> — Daniel Core



Daniel Core inspects a campus facility. **Photo by Rakeem Jones.**

seating, shaded gathering areas and outdoor spaces where students and employees could pause between classes. Resilience, to him, wasn't simply about preparing for the next storm. It was about building a campus people genuinely enjoy experiencing.

For someone whose career revolves around identifying risk, Daniel spends remarkably little time talking about danger.

Instead, he talks about solutions. He talks about partnerships. He talks about the people around him.

Recognition rarely enters the conversation. Purpose always does.

Near the end of our visit, almost as an afterthought, he mentioned something he had never brought up before.

His grandmother once attended Fayetteville State.

She never graduated. Family responsibilities required her to leave school and care for her mother.

He shared the story matter-of-factly before moving on to another topic.

Still, the moment lingered.

Long before Daniel helped shape the university's future, Fayetteville State had already become part of his family's story.

Today, he continues that story in a way few people ever see.

Students arrive at residence halls that are ready for move-in. Researchers work in safer laboratories. Employees walk across sidewalks that no longer flood after every heavy rain. Parents entrust the university with their sons and daughters, never realizing how many quiet decisions, inspections and improvements took place long before move-in day.

That's the nature of work behind the scenes.

When it's done well, it doesn't ask to be noticed.

It simply allows everyone else to focus on what matters most.

And perhaps that's the highest compliment someone like Daniel could receive. His greatest accomplishments aren't measured by the problems he solved, but by the ones the Fayetteville State community will hopefully never experience.

Abiodun "Abi" Awoyemi,

DIRECTOR OF EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT:

THE SAFEST STORY NEVER TOLD

BY LINDA GERRON



Abiodun "Abi" Awoyemi, director of Emergency Management.
Photo by Ezekiel Best.

The safest campus isn't built by accident. It's shaped every day by people most of us will never meet.

In high-stakes planning meetings at Fayetteville State University, Abiodun "Abi" Awoyemi brings a steady, comforting presence to the room.

As campus leaders discuss potential emergencies, questions move rapidly around the table. Abi listens carefully, absorbing every detail before offering his perspective.

When eyes turn toward him, his response is measured. While others focus on the immediate crisis, Abi considers the quiet preparation required long before a situation ever arises.

"The best outcome is when nothing happens," Abi said. "You can't wait until the day of an emergency to figure out what you're going to do. The preparation has to happen long before it ever does."

That commitment to silent preparation touches every corner of campus life.

Every August, parents carry storage bins into residence halls and wrap their children in one final hug before beginning the drive home. Somewhere along the road, one quiet question lingers in their minds.

Will my child be safe?

For Abi, that answer began taking shape more than 6,000 miles away.



Abiodun "Abi" Awoyemi plays the cello on the Fayetteville State campus. **Photo by Ezekiel Best.**

A Tragedy That Shifted Everything

In 2012, Abi was building a promising career as a geoscientist in Nigeria's oil and gas industry. He had earned a degree in applied geophysics and imagined a future in one of the country's most financially rewarding professions.

Everything changed that June when Dana Flight 992 crashed just minutes before landing in Lagos.

Abi wasn't on the flight, but the tragedy stayed with him. It happened the same month he was preparing to board an airplane for the first time.

As he followed the investigation, one truth changed everything.

The deaths of all 153 passengers and crew on board, along with six people on the ground, could have been prevented.

"I could have been the one on that plane," he said.

The question that followed was simple.

What if someone had prepared sooner?

Instead of continuing down the path he had planned, Abi chose another one. He pursued graduate studies in homeland security, trained at FEMA's Emergency Management Institute, and expanded his expertise in cybersecurity.

Today, the question that first took shape in Lagos shapes the work he does every day.

As director of emergency management, Abi develops emergency plans and leads preparedness training alongside campus partners, expanding his focus toward complete enterprise resilience. His work ensures FSU sustains its core academic mission through major disruptions, protecting everything from digital infrastructure

> **You can't wait until the day of an emergency to figure out what you're going to do. The preparation has to happen long before it ever does.**
>
> — Abiodun "Abi" Awoyemi

to physical campus operations. By preparing for cyber threats alongside severe weather events, he helps keep learning moving forward uninterrupted.

"An institution can get through an emergency and still lose its ability to function," he said. "My job is to make sure that never happens here."

Ask him about emergency management, and the quiet professional sitting around the conference table begins to change.

His eyes brighten.

His voice carries more energy.

The work becomes personal.

Because every plan eventually comes back to someone else's child.

Full Circle

Abi points to his mentors when reflecting on his journey.

Mentors have shaped every stage of his journey, from encouraging him to embrace a field he never expected to enter to offering guidance throughout his career.

"I've always had mentors throughout my life," he said. "Even now, they're the people I call when I need guidance, or I'm making an important career decision."

That same belief in people shapes his work at FSU.

He credits Vice Chancellor and Chief of Staff Samantha Holmes, alongside Police and Public Safety leaders Chief Damon Williams and Major Alpha Clowney, for helping make preparedness a shared responsibility across campus.

Then, earlier this year, the career he chose became deeply personal.

Family members in Nigeria believed his father was suffering from heartburn.

Abi heard something different.

He urged them to take his father to a hospital equipped to provide cardiac care.

His instincts were right.

Doctors confirmed his father was having a heart attack and performed a lifesaving procedure.

"If there was ever a reward for choosing this path, it was knowing it helped save my dad's life," he said. "That was all the confirmation I needed."

That same quiet focus extends to his life outside the office. An accomplished cellist and pianist, Abi finds balance in classical music, bringing methodical precision to every note while seeking a local orchestra to join.

For years, Abi had wondered whether walking away from the career he once imagined had been the right decision.

He holds absolute certainty today.

"If I had to do it all over again," he said, "I'd make the same decision. Again, and again. I wouldn't change a single thing."

Capt. Richard Yandle, POLICE AND PUBLIC SAFETY: BEYOND THE BADGE

BY LINDA GERRON

The lessons that shaped Captain Richard Yandle's life continue to shape the students he serves today.

Most people will never remember the officer who wrote them a ticket. Richard Yandle did. As a teenager, he was stopped by State Trooper Mike Sellers for an expired registration tag while driving to work. Sellers issued the citation, explained exactly what needed to happen next and treated the nervous young driver with respect.

More than two decades later, Yandle still remembers the encounter.

"I look back at that as being the kickstart of what I thought you should be and how people should be treated," he said.

Today, that lesson shapes every interaction he has as a captain with Fayetteville State University's Police and Public Safety Department.

Whether leading emergency preparedness training, mentoring young officers or helping students through difficult moments, Yandle believes dignity and accountability belong together.

"They're people just like me," he said. "I'm the same person with the badge on and with the badge off."

A Defining Lesson in Dignity

Growing up in Bladenboro, Yandle admired his grandfather, Wilbur Davis. After Davis underwent triple bypass surgery, Yandle watched the cardiologist care for him with quiet confidence. Hearing the physician explain that the operation had added years to his grandfather's life inspired him to pursue medicine.



Capt. Richard Yandle of Fayetteville State Police and Public Safety. **Photo by Ezekiel Best.**

"That fascinated me," Yandle said. "He had truly saved his life."

He enrolled at East Carolina University with plans to become a cardiologist.

Life, however, had other plans.

At 17, away from home for the first time, Yandle struggled and eventually made the difficult decision to leave school and return home.

Rather than allowing that setback to define him, he started over. He earned an associate degree, completed Basic Law

Enforcement Training, graduated from UNC Pembroke with a bachelor's degree in finance and eventually earned an MBA while working full time and raising a family.

Those experiences continue to shape the conversations he has with students navigating challenges of their own.

"I've been there," he said. "A bad decision or a bad year does not define who you are as a person."

That perspective also reflects the people who invested in him.

After his parents divorced, his stepfather, William Smith, stepped into a role he never had to accept. He coached baseball, attended practices, took Yandle hunting and fishing and quietly became the father he needed.

"Everything that a father should do, he did with me," Yandle said.

His Little League coach, Ernest Ray Long, taught character alongside baseball. Later, veteran leaders like Fayetteville Police Chief Roberto Bryan and FSU's Capt. Steve Lesane reinforced those same values throughout his law enforcement career. Bryan was instrumental in helping Yandle become the leader he is today.

Most people know Yandle as the calm voice during emergencies or the confident instructor leading campus training.

What they don't see is the work behind that confidence.

"I'm extremely shy," Yandle admitted. "If I didn't have to do it, you would not see me."

The commanding presence students see today grew from mentors who challenged him, encouraged him and helped him develop confidence one step at a time.

Strengthened by Family

Outside the department, another role defines him even more.

Father.

His oldest daughter competes in dance, making him a proud dance dad who carries costume bags and cheers from the audience. His youngest son lives with Fragile X syndrome, and every milestone feels hard-earned. When his son recently began walking years earlier than doctors expected, it became a celebration for the entire family.

Through every promotion and late-night shift, one constant has remained beside him: his wife, Heather.

While Yandle attended the FBI National Academy, Heather managed life at home with three children, including frequent trips to Duke Children's Hospital for their son.

"I would not be able to accomplish what I've accomplished without her support," he said.

The same lessons that shaped Yandle continue to shape Fayetteville State University's Police and Public Safety Department today. Every conversation with a student, every mentoring opportunity and every campus interaction reflects his belief that people deserve dignity, respect and the opportunity to grow.

For the Bronco community, that philosophy helps create an environment where safety is built through relationships, trust and a commitment to helping students succeed.



Capt. Yandle and Officer Phillip Flick. **Photo by Ezekiel Best.**

Nicholle Young St. Leone,
ARCHIVES TECHNICIAN AND AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES RESEARCHER:

LIVING, BREATHING HISTORY

BY JANET GIBSON



Nicholle Young St. Leone displays a historic Fayetteville State University photograph in the university archives. **Photo by TopEndShoots, LLC.**

Nicholle Young St. Leone's roots run deep at Fayetteville State – and her influence extends even further.

Nicholle Young St. Leone, Fayetteville State University's archives technician and an expert on African American history, has a connection that dates back to the school's inception in 1867. One of her extended-family ancestors is David A. Bryant, who joined six other visionaries to pool $136 and establish what would become one of the nation's most respected historically Black colleges and universities.



Another relative, George H. Williams, was an early principal. Nicholle and several family members are proud alumni, including her mother, Dawn Young, who earned a business degree in 2001 after serving in the U.S. Army.

Nicholle's journey at FSU began in 1991 at the University's on-campus preschool. After graduating from Western Harnett High School, she began her college studies at FSU, but as life sometimes happens, she would travel full circle to arrive at her calling – all the way back home.

From Housekeeper to Historian

In her 20s, Nicholle used her organizational and people skills in customer service and janitorial roles, cleaning buildings on Fort Bragg and Pope Army Airfield. But it was when she worked as a housekeeper at North Carolina State University from 2011 to 2014 that her life's direction changed in miraculous ways.

One day, she wandered into the archives room at an N.C. State library and was immediately smitten. Always an avid and curious reader, she asked a helpful librarian several questions, including how she might get an internship.

Within months, she began an internship in Fayetteville at the Cumberland County Public Library and Information Center. That experience paved the way for her next role when FSU hired her in 2015. Today, her passion is apparent to anyone who meets her, especially in her sanctuary on the fourth floor of the Charles W. Chesnutt Library. There, she is surrounded by shelves of archival volumes, restored documents and photos, yearbooks spanning decades, and boxed collections of history.

"Knowing that I was hired and involved in protecting and preserving the University's legacy has been a very big deal to me," she says. "I take that very seriously."

Over the years, she has immersed herself in projects ranging from digitizing priceless archives to tracing and recording history for exhibitions and special events. That includes preparing for the University's 150th anniversary in 2017 and providing historical military research from FSU's archives to retired Gen. Lloyd J. Austin III, former U.S. Secretary of Defense, for his keynote speech at the spring 2023 commencement.

> **I love to research and share the legacy of the institution and its connections to local, state, national, and international history.**
>
> — Nicholle Young

When the University launched the recent buildings-renaming project, she was tapped to assist. Tasked with researching historical information to honor the seven founders, she used her genealogy skills to locate Craig VanDevere, a living descendant of A.J. Chesnutt, one of FSU's founders, and his son Charles W. Chesnutt, principal and namesake of the library. VanDevere attended the ceremony within a few days of being contacted.

And yet that only scratches the surface of her tremendous reach.

Martin Luther King Jr. Docuseries and Much More

Family. Education. History. Legacy. All are intertwined for Nicholle. When she pieces together her life's puzzle, it's clear she was meant to be a conduit for information and storytelling. She lives and breathes history and knowledge.

In 2021, she earned a bachelor's degree in interdisciplinary studies from FSU and balanced her work with earning a master's in library and information science from North Carolina Central University. She now aims to pursue a doctoral degree.



Nicholle Young St. Leone examines a historic photograph from the university archives. **Photo by TopEndShoots, LLC.**

Her influence is expansive as she has served on several regional and state boards dedicated to historical preservation. She contributes information and research for documentaries and helps others—on and off campus—discover their roots in genealogy workshops. She blushes when people call her the "Henry Louis Gates Jr. of Fayetteville State," referencing the Harvard professor and host of PBS's "Finding Your Roots."

Nicholle has had a busy summer. In June, she collaborated with the City of Fayetteville, speaking in an informational video connecting FSU to national Juneteenth and Emancipation Day celebrations. She also co-directed "Experiences of Black Women of Cumberland County," a documentary featuring Fayetteville State alumnae and faculty, which screened at the Cameo Collective art house theater in downtown Fayetteville.

In July, just days after her 40th birthday, Nicholle traveled to Atlanta for the premiere of "When Faith Calls," a docuseries exploring Martin Luther King Jr.'s faith and its impact on his legacy. She contributed her archival research skills to the project after connecting with fellow Bronco and distinguished alumna Dr. Kelisha B. Graves, who serves as the chief research, education and programs officer for The King Center.

"I love to research and share the legacy of the institution and its connections to local, state, national, and international history. In this way, I hope to live up to the University motto, Res Non Verba," she says.

"Ultimately," she adds, "my goal is to become a public historian who works at the intersection of scholarship and storytelling, focusing on Black life, memory and space, producing history through documentary film, oral history and exhibitions."

The Archives and Special Collections department is on the fourth floor of Charles W. Chesnutt Library. Hours are Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Students, alumni, faculty, staff, and community members are welcome to visit, ask questions, and explore what is available for research. Whether it's genealogy or university history, "We are here to help you connect with the story," says archives technician and historian Nicholle Young St. Leone.



Nicholle Young St. Leone examines a document in FSU's Archives and Special Collections. **Photo by TopEndShoots, LLC.**



Professor Sondra "Soni" Martin in her studio at Fayetteville State University. **Photo by Ezekiel Best.**

Professor Sondra "Soni" Martin,
PROFESSOR OF ART:

WHEN PUBLIC ART BECOMES A CLASSROOM

BY LINDA GERRON

From public art to community partnerships, Professor Martin has spent three decades creating transformative opportunities for Bronco artists.

Professor Sondra "Soni" Martin doesn't stop moving. She brushes concrete dust from her hands, checks a mold curing on a worktable, and points toward an exhaust system designed to handle the demands of sculpture work.

Nearby, unfinished lily pads, water lily flowers, and plaster molds wait for their next step. Every surface tells part of the story of a monumental public art project in progress, yet nothing feels out of place.

Before the interview, Martin apologized for the studio's condition, describing it as "messy."

Instead, it reflected the person leading it: purposeful, disciplined, and always looking ahead.

Even while sanding the surface of a plaster water lily, Martin was already talking about what came next, not for herself, but for her students.

"I like working with students to raise their consciousness, believe in themselves, and see the potential of their career and who they can be," she said.

That philosophy has guided her three-decade career at Fayetteville State University.

Since joining the Department of Performing and Fine Arts, Martin has helped grow the art program from three faculty members serving 20 students to six full-time faculty and adjuncts teaching over 100 majors.

She expanded the curriculum, developed new areas of study, and created hands-on opportunities well beyond the classroom. Her dedication earned FSU's Teacher of the Year award and the North Carolina Board of Governors Award for Excellence in Teaching while establishing her reputation as a nationally recognized visual artist.

"It's been wonderful to have a career where I can engage with students, share new ideas, and foster creativity," she said. "That's what I value most."

That perspective led her to postpone retirement.

When Cape Fear Valley Health approached Martin about artwork for a rooftop courtyard surrounded by

> **"I like working with students to raise their consciousness, believe in themselves, and see the potential of their career and who they can be.**
>
> — Sondra "Soni" Martin

I hope that they have developed the courage to be themselves. Stay an artist. Keep that part of yourself.

— Sondra "Soni" Martin

patient rooms, the original request centered on painting exterior walls. After touring the space, she envisioned something much larger.

The result is a $200,000 public art installation spanning 6,800 square feet. Nearly 2,000 concrete lily pads and flowers will transform the rooftop into a peaceful pond beneath a four-sided mural of open sky. Every design decision focuses on patients and their families, creating a sanctuary of comfort, reflection, and hope.

Martin knew the project needed to become something more than a commission. It needed to become a working classroom in FSU's Rosenthal Building.

She invited students into every stage of the process, from creating molds and casting concrete to documenting the installation on film. She collaborated with Dave Griffie, FSU professor of Theatre, Design, and Production, whose expertise helped shape the project's lighting and scale.

Approximately 20 to 30 students are contributing to the installation, with each student's name permanently recognized on a hospital plaque. Cape Fear Valley Health is also donating $40,000 in equipment to improve FSU's sculpture program for years to come.

Long before the hospital rooftop, Martin was pioneering this model of collaborative public art across the region.

From 2009 to 2011, Martin was commissioned through the Arts Council of Fayetteville & Cumberland County to lead the $250,000 "Casting of Hands" feature for the $13.7 million North Carolina Veterans Park. She developed the casting process for all 500 hands representing every



Professor Martin works on a piece for the Cape Fear Valley Health public art installation. **Photo by Ezekiel Best.**



Dave Griffie, professor of Theatre, Design, and Production, examines a mold for the Cape Fear Valley Health public art installation. **Photo by Ezekiel Best.**



Professor Martin works on a piece for the Cape Fear Valley Health public art installation. **Photo by Ezekiel Best.**

county across the state—400 in cement and 100 in bronze—and brought FSU students into every phase of production. Working alongside Martin and professional artists, students gained real-world experience creating a signature landmark while earning $5,000 each for their work.

"During the project, it became something else for all of us," Martin said. "We felt honored to be working with so many veterans on an impactful project."

A decade later, the Arts Council again tapped Martin to co-facilitate the $280,000 Ramsey Street and I-295 mural project, "We Are Fayetteville: Legacy and Future." Once again, she brought FSU students into production alongside professional artists to help shape the city's visual landscape.

Altogether, Martin has facilitated or created public art projects valued at nearly $1 million over the past 15 years. Yet through every major commission, her ultimate focus remains centered on her students.

"I hope that they have developed the courage to be themselves," she said. "Stay an artist. Keep that part of yourself."

The Cape Fear Valley Health installation is scheduled for completion in April 2027.

Not long after, another group of Fayetteville State students will walk through the doors of Rosenthal's studios, ready to learn a new technique, tackle another challenge, and begin work on whatever project comes next.

For Martin, that has always been the point.

Dionne Lugue, VISUAL ARTS SPECIALIST: AN ARTFUL LIFE

BY JANET GIBSON



A passion for graphic design drives Dionne to excel.

Dionne Lugue knows what it feels like to have someone believe in you so much that it changes the trajectory of your life.

That person was Scott Schaller, a graphic design teacher, at Cabrillo High School in her native Lompoc, California. He encouraged the shy, talented student to leave small-town life behind and travel about 300 miles north up the coastline, all the way to San Francisco. At California College of the Arts, she immersed herself in the world of design, and graduated with distinction in 2020, earning a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree.

Dionne's voice is gentle and melodic as she speaks about her journey. Family ultimately brought her to Fayetteville, North Carolina. She worked as a graphic artist for a family-owned business before hearing about an opportunity with Fayetteville State University.

She began working as a contractor in 2023 and was officially brought into the FSU family about a year later. It didn't take long for her colleagues to recognize her innovative designs and calm demeanor under pressure. Her skills have helped the University capture a bevy of national design honors, including a Gold in the Collegiate Advertising Awards for Bronco Pride Magazine.



In her leisure time, Dionne, who turns 29 in September, draws anime characters and reads books on philosophy, including Plato. Travel is also a source of inspiration. In 2025, she and three friends visited Croatia and Slovenia, staying in four bed-and-breakfasts and exploring the countries' natural wonders.

"It was beautiful," she says, "and the people were really nice, kind and helpful."

Beyond the biography, here is Dionne's perspective on her work, her growth, and the art of solving problems through design.

JANET: How long have you worked here?

DIONNE: Three years, first as a contractor, and now two years as a permanent, full-time team member.

JANET: Tell us about what you do ... is there a "typical" day?

DIONNE: My projects range from smaller flyers to large-scale graphics, such as billboards and bus wraps, and publications like Bronco Pride Magazine. Each morning, I go through the open work to request tickets submitted and assigned to me. I always have numerous tickets to work on. I prioritize what to work on depending on the deadline and then move on to the next project while I wait for any edits.

JANET: What assignments do you enjoy the most?

DIONNE: The outward-facing graphics, such as the marquee and billboards around town, or the mural at Segra Stadium, because while working on the internal



Dionne Lugue, visual arts specialist poses in front of the mural she created at Segra Stadium.
Photo by Ezekiel Best.



graphics serves a great purpose, seeing FSU graphics around town and sometimes even in other cities is a rewarding experience to know that what I'm creating is appreciated by people from far and wide.

JANET: What's been your most challenging assignment so far?

DIONNE: Bronco Pride Magazine. Typically, I'm creating a graphic for one flyer or one billboard, but with the magazine, I must think about multiple pages, like around 40-50, while making sure it looks visually consistent across every page. Organizing all of the text, photos, and graphics in a limited amount of time to meet printing and delivery deadlines also adds to the challenge.

JANET: Why and when did you want to become a graphic artist? Was there an AHA! moment?

DIONNE: I was always drawn to art. Always drawing growing up, but knew that being successful as an artist would be difficult. I found out about graphic design because my high school had it as an elective. I ended up taking graphic design all four years of high school and went to CCA (California College of the Arts) to study graphic design based on my high school graphic design teacher's recommendation. Graphic design combined my love of art with something more situated in the professional workforce. I draw as a hobby anyway – so when I'm at work, I'm designing to solve problems, and when I go home, I draw to express myself.

JANET: What are your future goals?

DIONNE: To continue to improve my design skills so that my work can reach more audiences and potentially inspire others who were like me, growing up believing that pursuing art professionally may be difficult, or even sometimes looked down on. And regardless of all of that, if you really love creating, you can do it.

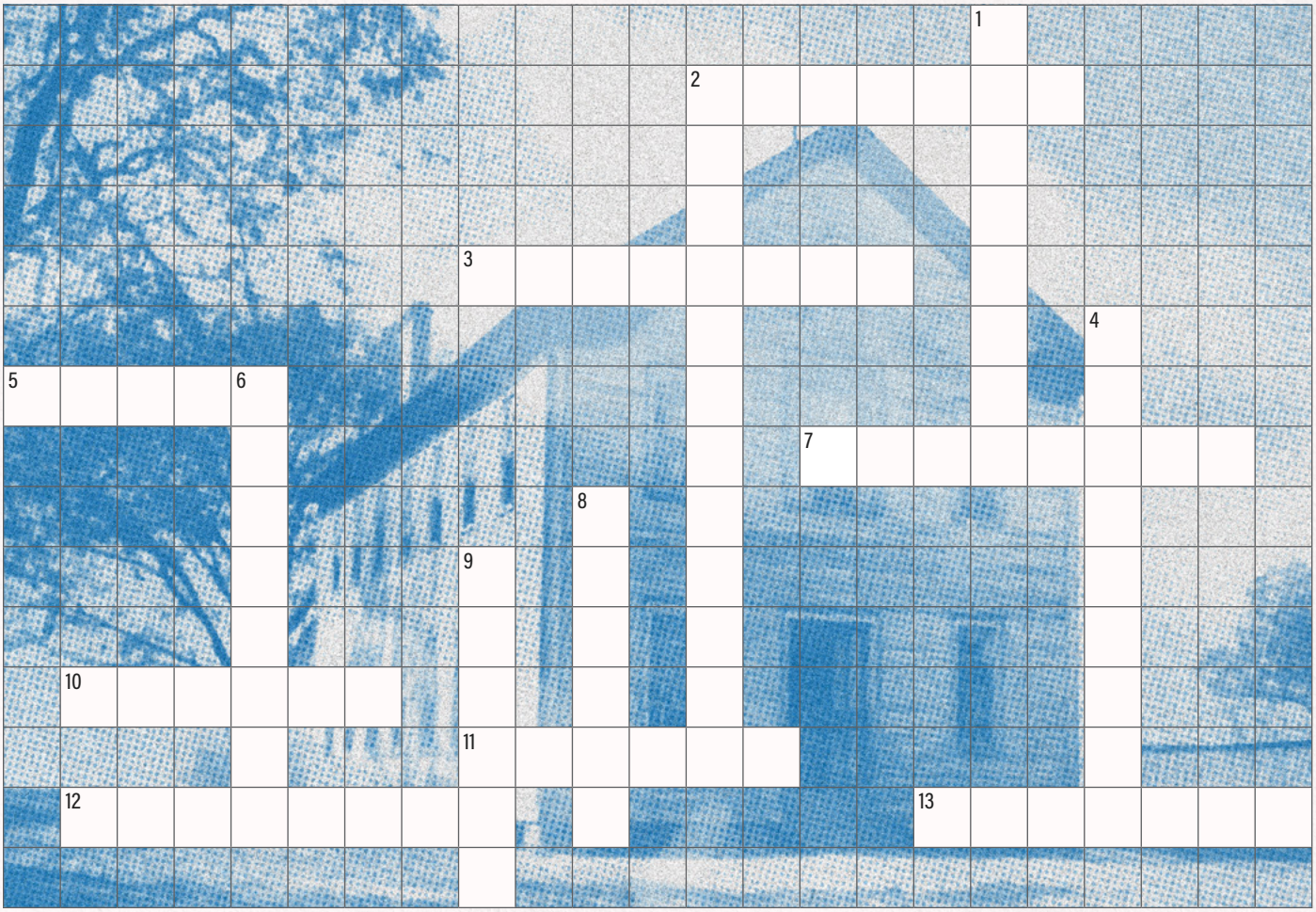
JANET: What does Bronco Pride mean to you?

DIONNE: Staying true to yourself, what you want, and taking the steps to accomplish that.

JANET: Name five words that describe you?

DIONNE: Contemplative. Artistic. Optimistic. Introverted. Idealist.

FSU History CROSSWORD



ACROSS

2. FSU was _____ in 1867 after the Civil War
3. Degree level first awarded by FSU in 1939: _____ of Science
5. E. E. _____ distinguished principal who led the school 1883-1933
7. Charles W. _____ famed author and FSU principal (1880-1883)
10. Original name of the school: The _____ School (1867)
11. First name of General _____ Otis Howard, the school's namesake
12. The _____'s Bureau helped establish the Howard School
13. FSU's official athletic mascot

DOWN

1. FSU was originally established to train Black _____
2. City where the university is located
4. Academic field central to FSU's founding mission
6. FSU celebrates its rich African American cultural _____
8. Robert _____, the school's first teacher and leader
9. FSU is the _____ oldest state-supported school in North Carolina

TURN MAGAZINE TO REVEAL ANSWERS

Across
2-Founded 3-Bachelor 5-Smith 7-Chesnutt 10-Howard 11-Oliver 12-Freedman 13-Broncos

Down
1-Teachers 2-Fayetteville 4-Education 6-Heritage 8-Harris 9-Second



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