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UVI Returns to First In-Person Commencement Since 2019 With Guest Speaker Dr. Robert M. Franklin; Encarnacion, Nunez-Smith to Receive Honorary Degrees

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Left, Dr. Robert M. Franklin; upper right, Health Commissioner Justan Encarnacion, lower right, Dr. Marcella Nunez-Smith. By. THE UNIVERSITY OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS.

The University of the Virgin Islands announced Thursday that Dr. Robert Franklin, Jr., former president of Morehouse College, will deliver the keynote address at the 58th commencement ceremony of UVI, taking place on May 12 at the Orville E. Kean Campus on St. Thomas and on May 13 at the Albert A. Sheen Campus on St. Croix.

Returning to an in-person event for the first time since 2019, the university will welcome graduates and their guests to celebrate the successful completion of their collegiate studies as they prepare to begin new chapters in their academic and professional lives, according to the release.

“The Board of Trustees, our faculty, staff and administrators are looking forward with great excitement to gathering in person once again to commemorate the remarkable achievements of our graduating students,” stated UVI President Dr. David Hall. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the University’s commencement ceremonies were held in a virtual format for the past two years.

“As a university family, we are collectively anticipating the experience of a live commencement,” noted President Hall. “Sharing the energy and joy of this significant occasion with the Class of 2022 will be unforgettable.”

According to UVI, addition to celebrating the academic achievements of its newest alumni, UVI will bestow honorary degrees on Dr. Franklin, Dr. Marcella Nunez-Smith and USVI Commissioner of Health Justa Encarnacion, signaling the university’s appreciation for their outstanding accomplishments and contributions in their respective fields of professional endeavors, stated the release.

Dr. Robert Franklin, Emory University's Distinguished Professor of Divinity, is a renowned scholar, academic leader, and theologian who spent a portion of his sabbatical at UVI and shared his thoughts on moral leadership and the role of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) when he spoke at the University’s 60th Charter Day Anniversary event.

Dr. Nunez-Smith co-chaired the Biden-Harris Administration’s Transition COVID-19 Advisory Board and served as chair of the Presidential COVID-19 Health Equity Task Force, ensuring that a comprehensive plan and strategy was developed to curb the devastating incidences of COVID-19 in the United States and the world.

At the helm of the V.I. Department of Health, Commissioner Encarnacion provided critical leadership, advice, and service to the Territory and the University throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, helping to keep the Territory’s residents and visitors safe, healthy and educated about resources available to overcome COVID-related challenges.

“Each of these eminent individuals is deserving of this tribute from the University. Dr. Nunez-Smith, an outstanding medical educator, has been a national leader and voice of reason and insight in the midst of the pandemic. Commissioner Encarnacion is an exemplary public health leader and source of wisdom for our community. Dr. Franklin is a riveting speaker and a reservoir of hope. We are grateful and honored to share our Commencement Day with them, knowing that their life stories and successes can further inspire and instill in our students a sense of the greatness that lies within each one of them,” said Mr. Hall.

Dr. Marcella Nunez-Smith will be recognized with an honorary degree at the Kean Campus on St. Thomas which will be accepted by her mother, Dr. Maxine A. Nunez, and Commissioner Encarnacion will be honored at the Sheen Campus on St. Croix campus, UVI said.

UVI said it awards honorary degrees to individuals who have demonstrated outstanding accomplishments in the arts, sciences, humanities, and other areas. This year, each honorary degree recipient will be awarded the Doctor of Humane Letters degree. Recipients can be nominated by any member of the University administration, faculty, student body, staff, alumni, or Board of Trustees.

According to the release, in consideration of the ongoing challenges with Covid-19, all attendees to the university's in-person ceremonies will be required to present proof of Covid-19 vaccination or a valid negative COVID-19 test taken 24 hours prior to commencement. The University is working closely with the V.I. Department of Health on its protocols and to provide free testing. Attendees are strongly encouraged to wear face masks and to maintain social distance and sit in family groups. On both campuses, admission to the ceremonies will also require a ticket.

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