



HIP HOP AND HIGHER ED

In 1995, a young Donovan Livingston listened to Nas’ “If I Ruled the World,” featuring Lauryn Hill, for the very first time.

Hearing the lyrics marked a before and after in Livingston’s life. The empowering song allowed him to imagine new possibilities. Hip hop inspired him in ways that other genres hadn’t.

“After that, I was hooked,” he says. “From then on, I was just trying to hone my craft.”

And he has. Livingston made national headlines in May 2016 when his spoken-word convocation speech to the Harvard Graduate School of Education went viral.

A few months later, Livingston – with a bachelor’s and two master’s degrees in hand, from UNC Chapel Hill, Columbia, and Harvard, respectively – arrived at UNCG to further his academics and his art.

“Dr. Leila Villaverde, my chair, approaches a lot of her work through an artistic lens. She really insisted that I incorporate hip hop into my research,” he says, describing his work in UNCG’s Educational Leadership and Cultural Foundations program. That kind of support is one of the reasons he chose UNCG. “Had I gone somewhere else for my PhD, I’m not sure if my advisor would have pushed me that way.”

With a background in the field of college access, Livingston is particularly interested in how hip hop allows us to “remix spaces on campus for the purposes of celebrating students whose voices are historically left out of mainstream narratives in colleges and universities.”

Livingston defended virtually in May. His dissertation, “Speech is my Hammer, Bang the World into Shape: Making Meaning in College Through Hip-Hop Lyricism,” explores how hip-hop artists use lyricism as a means for navigating college life.

For his qualitative, arts-informed study, Livingston conducted in-depth interviews and a focus group with five participants. Each participant recorded a song describing their college experience and then engaged in a “coding cypher,” in which they listened to the songs as a group and worked together to identify themes and patterns that emerged.

Livingston found the student lyricists acquired transferable skills – such as critical thinking, goal setting, and time management – from being involved in hip hop in college. Hip hop also contributed to the artists’ knowledge of self, emotional intelligence, and community building.

Livingston himself was president of a spoken-word poetry group as an undergraduate. While hip hop often appears in those types of co-curricular spaces, Livingston found that several of his study’s participants were also engaging with hip hop in the classroom.

“A lot of the artists talked about how their final papers and projects incorporate some form of music or hip-hop expression,” he says. “Their faculty have been receptive to that type of thinking, and I think that’s really important. How do we make students feel comfortable with inserting their cultural forms of expression into an academic space?”

Over the years, Livingston has continued to develop his craft – writing and performing on campus, in the community, and across the country. In 2017, his Harvard convocation speech was published by Random House as a book, “Lift Off: From the Classroom to the Stars.”

In May, he was one of eight best-selling authors – a group that included Lauren Graham, George Saunders, and Martha Stewart – to participate in Random House’s Virtual Commencement for the Class of 2020. He’s presented and performed at universities such as Auburn, Vanderbilt, and Florida International, and at events like SXSW in Austin, Texas.

On July 18, Livingston released his third studio album, titled “Molasses.”

Livingston views his art, and hip hop more broadly, as a vehicle for identifying social problems and then imagining solutions to those problems.

“A lot of the themes that come out in my writing deal with inequality, injustices, and systemic change.”

Last September, Livingston was named an assistant dean in the Office of the Provost at Wake Forest University in nearby Winston-Salem.

He graduated from UNCG this August. Currently, he’s continuing his work at Wake Forest and teaching a hip hop in higher education course there this fall. Livingston hopes to turn his dissertation study into a book – and put out a mixtape featuring the artists’ songs.

Long term, he plans to continue this work of “remixing and reimagining” spaces of higher education.

“As a hip-hop scholar, it’s important that I’m not just publishing, but I’m recording, writing, and finding ways to make hip hop matter on my own campus. I want to continue to build this bridge between hip hop and higher education.”

by Alyssa Bedrosian • learn more grs.uncg.edu | go.uncg.edu/elcf