

Best Practices in McNair Scholars Programs

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The Ronald E. McNair Post-baccalaureate Achievement Program is one of several TRIO programs within the U.S. Department of Education. There are 179 McNair programs at four-year colleges and universities, each funded through a competitive grant that is written every four years. Named after Dr. Ronald E. McNair, one of the astronauts killed in the 1986 Challenger accident, the McNair Program's ultimate goal is to help diversify the American professorate. To that end, the individual programs offer a number of services that are designed to help facilitate participants' entry into graduate programs.

Federal law requires that two-thirds of the individual students in each program be within the first generation in their family to attend college and must also meet federal low-income guidelines. If they do not meet both these criteria, the other one-third must be members of groups underrepresented in academia, specifically African-American, Hispanic, and American Indian students. Program funds may be used to support only students who have not yet earned a baccalaureate degree. Only juniors and seniors may earn a stipend of up to \$2800, which is usually given for participation in an intensive research experience.

In 1989, the first fourteen programs were funded. By 2002, there were 156 programs and over 4000 participants, with 23 more programs added in 2003. Becoming a McNair scholar is a competitive process, as the programs tend to be very popular on their individual campuses, but each program serves an average of only 26 students each year. As the number of programs has grown, the national community of McNair program directors and other staff have developed and refined a basic list of best practices and services that are designed to prepare nontraditional students for graduate school and an academic career.

The capstone experience that is offered by most programs is an intensive research project that involves working closely with a faculty member as well as graduate students or a research team in a laboratory setting. The research experience provides most McNair scholars with several "firsts," such as their first experience writing an abstract and a literature review and presenting their research at the end of the research program. In addition, a well-designed research experience allows students to establish a comfortable working relationship with a faculty member. This may be the most important outcome of the research experience because first-generation and low-income college students often feel out of place or inappropriate in faculty-student interactions. Students receive exposure to the way in which research is conducted in a particular field, and begin to acquire a rudimentary understanding of graduate school expectations and the pressures and constraints that an academic career entails. Many McNair research experiences are structured so that students work full-time for eight to ten weeks (often, but not always, during the summer), thus affording an opportunity for faculty-student interaction in informal settings

and through observation. Several weeks of full-time immersion in an academic department should also provide the opportunity for social interaction in informal settings and thus help nontraditional students to ultimately transition more easily into graduate school.

Another opportunity for developing academic presentation skills and facilitating networking with faculty and other McNair scholars at a regional or national level is afforded by attendance at one of several annual McNair research conferences. Besides the opportunity to present and attend research talks, most of the conferences also feature a graduate school fair. Therefore, students have an opportunity to present their research findings to a less local audience, to meet other students who are similarly serious about their academic work, and to meet and be courted by faculty and graduate school representatives. A listing of these conferences appeared in the June 2005 issue.

Besides the capstone research experience and McNair research conferences, all programs offer academic counseling, information about funding for graduate school, and various types of assistance with graduate admissions. The latter usually range from initial seminars on requirements and the application process, to intensive individual assistance during the senior year on such specific aspects as seeking effective letters of reference and crafting a successful personal statement. Most programs also sponsor campus visits to doctoral-granting institutions and many provide career-awareness activities that include workshops and classes on higher education in general and academic career opportunities in particular.

The McNair Scholars programs across the nation provide an excellent source from which to recruit diverse students for graduate school. The joint committee of the Council for Opportunity in Education, (the national organization for TRIO staff), and the Council of Graduate Schools pledged to continue communicating and collaborating to provide graduate opportunities that enhance both the lives of the student participants and the institutions at which they matriculate.

References:

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