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Portland State University McNair Research Journal 2013

**Beyond the Program Year: Graduates Students' Understanding of How  
McNair Scholars Program Participation Impacts Their Experiences in  
Graduate School**

by  
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## **ABSTRACT**

The Ronald E. McNair Scholars Program's goal is to introduce first-generation, low-income, under-represented group college students to effective strategies for succeeding in graduate programs. One way to explore program effectiveness beyond graduate admission is to ask the McNair graduates themselves. This interview study explores McNair graduates' understandings of issues they face in adjusting to graduate school and how McNair participation prepared them for addressing these issues. Typically McNair program evaluations emphasize the collection and analysis of quantitative data – e.g. academic performance and degree attainment; however, little qualitative research has been conducted on graduate's perceptions of the impact of program participation on graduate school adjustment and success. Using Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, along with Sociology-based ideas of role-as-resource and role mastery, this study will explore students' perceptions of the McNair program's effectiveness in regards to helping them understand the "graduate student" role and to use that role to succeed in graduate school.

## **INTRODUCTION**

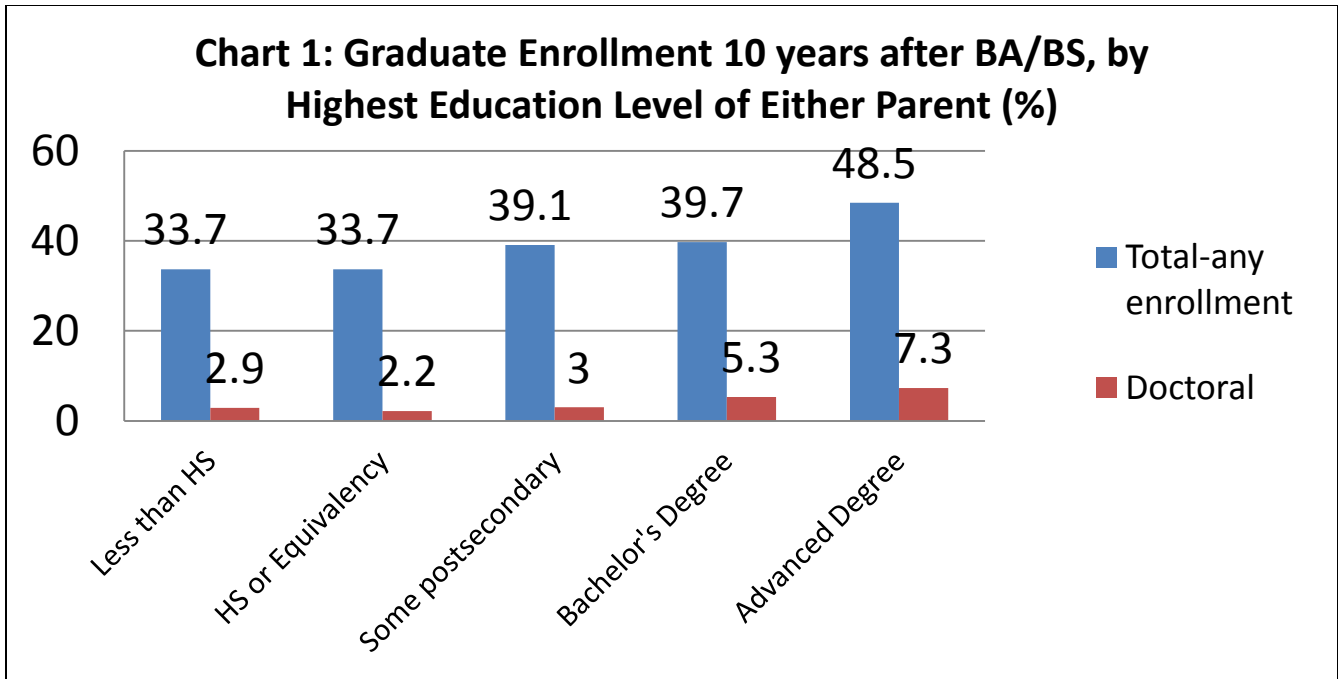
### ***Background***

The McNair Scholars Program, a U.S. Department of Education TRIO Program, is funded at 194 institutions across the United States and Puerto Rico. Last year, total funding reached over \$46 million—of which, Portland State University received approximately \$224,000. The program accepts first-generation and low-income, or underrepresented group undergraduate students who have demonstrated academic potential. The goal of the McNair Scholars Program is to provide disadvantaged college students with effective preparation for doctoral study to ultimately pursue an academic career. The intent is that professors from diverse backgrounds will change traditional perspectives on college campuses and will contribute to the success of future students from underrepresented groups.

Students are prepared through program elements such as involvement in research and other scholarly activities, summer internships, tutoring, academic counseling, and activities designed to assist students in securing admission and financial aid for graduate programs; optional program elements include educational and counseling services designed to increase student financial and economic literacy, mentoring programs with faculty members, and exposure to cultural events and programs not generally available to disadvantaged students (US Department of Education, 2012).

### ***The Problem***

First-generation students are less likely than their traditional peers to pursue advanced degrees. Recent studies suggest that a student's enrollment in a doctoral or any graduate program is profoundly influenced by her or his parents' education, even after attainment of a bachelor's degree (NCES, 2012). Students whose parents received advanced degrees are three times more likely to enroll in a doctoral degree program than those students whose parents received high school diplomas or equivalent (7.3% compared to 2.2%), and almost 15% more likely to be enrolled in any graduate program (see Chart 1).



Source: NCES. 2007. "The Path Through Graduate School: A Longitudinal Examination 10 Years After Bachelor's Degree"

There are a number of recent studies on the impact of the McNair Program on students at the undergraduate level (Beal 2007, Derk 2007, Greene 2007, Ishiyama 2002, and Lam 2003); most are from schools of education and are focused on practical solutions for factors of the program that require improvement. Some (Beal particularly) adopt Bourdieu's concept of social reproduction to better understand the disadvantage that McNair students face; however, the results are analyzed through education theory. This study will add to the current understanding of the effectiveness of the McNair Program by employing a theoretical model from sociology that can explain identity acquisition through role-as-resource theory.

The majority of subjects studied in research on the McNair Program have been students at the undergraduate level, with little regard to their current academic standing. Greene (2007), who conducted a survey of McNair alumni perceptions of the program's effectiveness, specifically calls for further study on McNair alumni. There are several suggestions about the nature of future study, including that these studies:

- Be qualitative in nature, in order to elicit more in-depth responses from respondents.
- Include alumni in graduate school to see if perceptions change from the undergraduate level.
- Examine the careers of alumni after earning a doctoral degree to see if they are increasing diversity in faculty of higher education, to determine whether the McNair Program is meeting its ultimate goals of increasing representation of disadvantaged populations in academia.

This study, then, will increase the limited qualitative research on this subject, as well as addressing students who are currently enrolled in graduate programs.

**Research Questions**

This study will address the following question:

How do graduate students from the PSU McNair Scholar Program understand how their McNair experiences have impacted their first-year graduate school experience?

More specifically:

- In what ways has program participation influenced these students' understanding of professor expectations of graduate students?

This question addresses students' knowledge of role standard (Callero, 1994), meaning that students understand what the role of graduate student is.

- In what ways has program participation influenced these students' understanding of how to enact the role of graduate student to meet professor expectations?

This question addresses students' differentiated role mastery (Collier & Morgan, 2007), meaning that the student begins to understand that it's possible to enact different versions of a single role. For example, two professors may have vastly different expectations regarding how a graduate student should behave. Students who recognize this difference and can enact different versions of the role of graduate student are at an advantage compared to those who do not.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This study investigates the ways that the McNair Program transmits cultural capital to students who generally enter college with less than their traditional peers. Cultural capital is a concept introduced by Pierre Bourdieu that describes intellectual assets that promote social mobility. Dumais (2002) describes this as ways of acting and understanding that are consistent with dominant culture. One reason that first-generation students are less likely to enroll in graduate programs is that there has been little to no transmission of cultural capital from parent to child. This could include advice about which classes to take, the most effective ways to interact with professors, how to navigate college and financial systems, etc. Parents who did not attend college would not be able to provide this cultural capital to their children. This is where the McNair Program attempts to intervene with first-generation, low income, and underrepresented students, all of whom lack the cultural capital necessary to succeed in college.

The McNair Program attempts to import cultural capital to students who would not otherwise have it. In this way students learn what it means to be a 'scholar' and often a 'graduate student.' This is a role that they have not previously been exposed to—McNair attempts to equip students with knowledge of this role to help them succeed at the graduate level. The benefits of providing this type of knowledge can be best understood through the concept of role as resource: people first understand a role through imitating examples they have seen of a role—or "role playing". The individual will then begin to identify themselves through this role and adapt that role to fit their needs and characteristics; in other words, they will begin to use their understanding of this role as a resource—or "role using" (Callero, 1994). This new role is a resource used not only so the individual has a new way of defining their social self but also has new ways of thinking and acting that were not previously available to them. Finally, the individual can use this role to achieve political ends. Students with less cultural capital are role-playing, students who have already had examples (implicit and explicit) of what it means to be a college student are working on their role-using, as well as the more advanced differentiated role mastery—their understanding that different versions of the same role will benefit them in different situations (Collier, 2001). This again puts McNair-eligible students at a grave disadvantage, and this is another way that the Program attempts to import cultural capital: by providing students a script for the role of 'graduate student' by giving them a new definition of themselves as 'Scholars', showing them new ways of thinking

and acting like a graduate student, and sharing the ways that being a McNair Scholar can aide them in becoming a graduate student.

In the last five years, numerous Master's theses and Doctoral dissertations have been presented exploring the impacts of the McNair Scholar Program on Scholars from their own perspectives—none of which focused on Scholars after completion of the McNair Programs or on into their graduate programs. Kathleen Greene (2007) conducted interviews of McNair Scholars at Kansas Universities to explore their perceptions of the effectiveness of the program. Ramona Beal (2007) conducted interviews and observations of McNair Scholars' evolving identity of "Scholar" throughout the program. None of these studies address Scholar perceptions **after they have begun graduate school**. Greene explicitly states that this type of research is missing in our understanding of the effectiveness of the program and highly recommends further exploration.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### ***Using a Qualitative Approach***

This study is qualitative; interviews were conducted on a purposive sample of first-year graduate students who were alumni of the PSU McNair Program between 2007 and 2011 (the most recent complete funding cycle for the PSU McNair Program). Using the guidelines provided by Michael Quinn Patton (1987) regarding depth interviewing, a standardized open-ended interview was conducted with those Scholars who were available and willing to participate.

A qualitative study of this nature is useful for understanding the lived experience of participants through their own experiences. Hearing participants' experiences in their own words is important for understanding their unique understandings of the expectations of graduate students and effective ways of enacting that role. Each Scholar's personal story is thoroughly explored through in-depth interviews.

### ***Setting***

Portland State University (PSU) is a large, urban, public university. Approximately 21,000 undergraduates were enrolled at PSU, about 21% were considered minorities (PSU Institutional Portfolio Campus Profile, 2011). According to the 2010 SINQ Prior Learning Survey, administered in Sophomore Inquiry (PSU's General Education Program) courses, about 47% of sophomores were first-generation in 2010.

### ***Participants***

The participants in this study were students of Portland State University who participated in the McNair Scholars Program between 2007 and 2011 and who had completed one year of graduate study at the time of the interview, regardless of when they completed the program. In order to be eligible for the McNair Program, students must be either a first-generation college student and low-income or from a underrepresented minority group. All were required to attend PSU full-time, hold a cumulative GPA of 3.0 or higher, and be US citizens or permanent residents.

### ***Recruitment***

The PSU McNair Program database was used to contact 107 students who participated in the program between 2007 and 2011 via email (see Appendix # for email invitation to participate). Of those 107 emails sent, 92 successfully reached the students (15 emails were rejected because the accounts listed were disabled). Of those contacted, four interviews have been completed at this

time. When students replied to the invitation emails, interviews were scheduled at the time and place of their choosing. Out-of state students were interviewed via Skype or phone.

### **Data Analysis**

Thematic content analysis was conducted on transcriptions of all interviews conducted. Responses were coded, and then clustered by type. Recurring themes were then identified from those clustered responses.

## **RESULTS**

### **Issues Encountered in Graduate School and Strategies for Resolution**

This section will discuss issues students encountered during their first year of graduate school. Students' strategies for resolving these issues, as well as their understanding of strategies that may have been more effective than those they employed will also be explored. Linking strategies to issues can help us understand ways that students learned to resolve challenges they faced understanding and enacting the role of graduate student. Students were asked "What issues have you encountered in the first year of your program?" followed by "How have you dealt with this issue?" and "Would you do things differently now?" Four themes emerged from the discussion of issues: *adjusting to new environments, developing new relationships with faculty, understanding the current program, and lifestyle challenges.*

#### **Adjusting to a New Environment**

One theme discussed by several students was *adjusting to a new environment*. This included issues associated with different aspects of becoming comfortable with a new situation—adjusting to a new city, to a new lab in the department, and to the culture of the new location.

#### **ADJUSTING TO A NEW CITY**

One of the practical challenges of adjusting to a new city was the cost. One student explained, "*the first thing to overcome obviously was moving to a city that was, to me, probably twice as expensive as Portland. Rent is just really expensive; food, transportation, it's just all of it.*" Interestingly, this student did not discuss strategies she used for dealing with this challenge. Low-income students may not have any strategies for coping with financial challenges and may not have the skills necessary for financial planning, such as experience maintaining a budget. This type of skill set, as well as the knowledge that relocating for school can be extremely costly, is something that first-generation students have likely not received from their parents.

#### **ADJUSTING TO A NEW LAB**

Navigating a lab that was set up in ways that were different from the labs at Portland State was another challenge. One student stated that she never overcame this challenge:

*"It was weird because I never really got past it... there were post-docs in the lab but they were in a different room. And though that really shouldn't have been a big issue, it was that geographical issue. We didn't have lab meetings and there wasn't a kind of collaborative spirit; it made it really hard for me to find someone to, you know, teach me something. In the program that I'm in I don't take classes. I can take classes if I want to, but it's very much the approach that you learn while you're in the lab. You learn from... working on projects and picking up the skills you need and it just seemed like I didn't really have access to pick up those skills there."*

This student felt she was unable to develop an effective strategy for navigating a new lab. Because the student perceived that she wasn't learning anything in this setting, whether or not her perception was correct, it is clear that she had little understanding of what it meant to be a graduate student in this new setting.

### **ADJUSTING TO A NEW CULTURE**

Adjusting to the culture of a new location was challenging for some students. One student noted, *"I was on the East Coast so there was like this huge cultural difference, like the cultural difference among faculty I thought was really strange."* This cultural adjustment was more than just geographic for her:

*"Most of the cultural differences were mostly class differences. Because I come from lower class, lower middle class, and then I'm going to school with all these people who don't think twice about paying a fifty thousand dollar tuition a year you know, they're not even taking out loans, some of them."*

When discussing the strategies she used in addressing this issue, this student explained that she simply *"got used to things"* and that she *"sat back and waited until everything really just clicked and I came up with a good group of people."* Thinking back and considering alternative approaches, she said that she would not have done anything differently because *"I learned a lot from being in a different culture... about networking and just being exposed to a different kind of people."* This understanding of the ways that being exposed to students from upper class families helped her in regard to establishing an appropriate support networks suggests that she learned ways of acting and understanding that were consistent with the dominant culture at her new school. Though she did not explicitly link this approach to a specific McNair experience, this student's choice of strategy demonstrates that she possessed the level of cultural capital she needed to better associate with her more affluent peers. Even more importantly, her reflection on why she did not try an alternative approach demonstrates that she understood the effectiveness of her choice.

After examining the strategies employed (or not employed) by students adjusting to new environments, it is clear that some students had a better understanding of the role of graduate student in these environments than others. None of the students who discussed adjusting to a new environment as a challenge in their first year discussed any strategies other than those they used initially; this suggests that these students had not yet developed differentiated role mastery. They were not able to envision enacting any other versions of the role of graduate student that may have been more effective in resolving that issue.

### ***Developing Relationships with Faculty***

A second theme that emerged when students discussed issues they encountered was *developing new relationships with graduate school faculty*. Students cited faculty using different mentoring approaches from those they had grown accustomed to at the undergraduate level, challenges communicating with new advisors, and not feeling comfortable reaching out for help.

### **FACULTY USING DIFFERENT MENTORING APPROACHES**

The same student who had challenges navigating a new lab also had trouble with the mentoring styles of the faculty in that lab:

*"It seemed to be a different mentoring style where it wasn't so much a kind of a scaffolding approach found in PhD programs or just a more academic setting. In*



*those settings they say 'Oh here's an intermediary person that you can work with that can, you know, give you a new set of tools that you can then go on and use for your project.' Whereas [those in my graduate program] were like, 'okay, here's your desk, figure out your project' and it was a big surprise."*

This student also noted that she never overcame this challenge. Her immediate strategy was to confront her mentors about this issue, an approach that met with little success. Her long-term strategy was to avoid those mentors whose approaches she'd had trouble with in the future. While this employment of various strategies shows her willingness to think strategically and try to enact different versions of the graduate student role, none of those strategies proved effective. This student felt that this issue had not been resolved during her first year. Her surprise that she encountered this situation also should be noted. Clearly, her expectations of what being a graduate student entailed did not match the reality of the program she entered. This variance between student expectations and actual experiences in their graduate programs arose at some point for every student interviewed in this study.

### **COMMUNICATING WITH NEW ADVISORS**

A second issue that arose with students in developing relationships with graduate faculty was communicating with advisors about their work. This student explains that the lack of contact with her advisor was a constant challenge for her:

*"There have been some issues when it would have been really great to get his feedback sooner than in a couple weeks. I haven't really talked to him in almost like a month and a half because he's been travelling and away and he's really bad with email."*

This student's initial strategy for addressing this issue was to try and set up weekly meetings with this advisor, which "*happened for two weeks and then dropped off.*" This student did not explicitly discuss considering any alternative strategies for dealing with this lack of communication, though later in the interview she noted an alternative approach—that she sometimes is able to direct her questions to a second advisor. She is still dealing with this issue.

### **NOT FEELING COMFORTABLE REACHING OUT FOR HELP**

In a broader sense, the theme *developing relationships with faculty* also included the issue students experienced with feeling unable to ask for help from faculty. One student noted that this challenge directly related to her first-generation status:

*"I think that as a first-generation college student I have kind of gone through life knowing that the only person that I can count on is myself and the only way that I'm ever going to get anything done is if I just go and do it and figure it out on my own. And I'm realizing that no, the faculty and administration in the department, they want us to succeed and graduate and get jobs. So they are really there for us and they have ways of supporting us and assisting us and helping us to figure things out, but it's just not really in my nature to reach out."*

Not only did this student understand that being first-generation contributed to her 'preferred strategy' that she must do everything on her own, she also understood that not every student feels this way:

*"I was talking to a friend of mine the other day and she was mentioning 'Yeah you know I'm thinking about applying to this internship and I just popped into the office*

*and knocked on my advisor's door and had a little conversation with her, blah blah blah' and I'm like, I would never think to just like drop in on my advisor."*

Though she may not yet have enacted a different, likely more successful, version of the role of graduate student (one who would feel comfortable asking for help), the fact that she understands this option exists shows a deeper understanding of that role. When asked if she would have done things differently, she simply stated that she will *"work harder on that next year"* and that she understood that she should be the one to pursue that help in the future.

### ***Understanding the Current Program***

A third theme reflected issues students had with understanding their new programs in the first year of graduate school. Much of the discussion centered on *being in a newly developed program* and *encountering a program that vastly differed from students' expectations*.

### **BEING IN A NEWLY DEVELOPED PROGRAM**

A student who was in a newly formed dual PhD-Masters program had troubles with administrative as well as social aspects of the program. Administrative issues had to do with a lack of established procedure for dual-enrolled students:

*"We get forgotten about a lot because we're on two different listservs. So there [are] totally two different programs. So when I have to sign up for my PhD classes I have to hound the registration people and be like 'you need to allow me access' they're like 'oh we forgot about you' or when I have to do my Masters registration I have to go track those people down and say 'you need to give me access,' they're like 'oh yeah we forgot about you'."*

This student used two strategies for dealing with these challenges: 1. to be mindful that the program is new, and 2. to remind administration that she's in a dual program. She noted that she was unable to find any more effective alternative approaches.

In addition to administrative challenges involved with a new program, this student had challenges feeling disconnected from those students who were in cohorts in one of the two programs, but not in both. This led to feelings of alienation and boredom:

*"I mean we all like respect each other and we all like each other but they all left this year with some really close friendships and I kinda left with none... because my program is very different. My first year I'm with all PhD students, my second year I drop down to being with Master's students. So my cohort changes. I'm not even with them next year, which is another reason I felt really disconnected. I'm in limbo. And the Master's students don't really like me either because I'm not really a Master's student."*

She stated that the most effective strategy she had employed to deal with this challenge was to spend time with those few students who were in her dual-enrolled cohort. When asked how she may have handled things differently, she very much looked forward to increasing her workload and becoming more involved in the program by taking an internship during her second year. Because of the newness of her graduate program, this student did not know what to expect in the program and had little preparation for dealing with both the procedures and the people in her program. This student was dealing with trying to learn a very specific definition of what it means to be a graduate student in a brand new program. By gravitating toward those students who were expected to enact

this same role, she was able to feel more connected. This is evidence that her chosen strategy proved effective.

### **ENCOUNTERING A PROGRAM THAT VASTLY DIFFERED FROM THE STUDENT'S EXPECTATIONS**

A second sub-theme had to do with students' expectations not matching the realities of the graduate program. One student stated that she was shocked that the faculty in her program did not fit her idea of what graduate faculty should be:

*"I had this perception of grad school that I would have all these instructors that had their Ph.D.s. and were very knowledgeable of the field and then in this program there was a lot of instructors that didn't even have their Masters [but] that had worked in the field for years and years and years and years ... so I feel like that was a challenge to try to overcome my perceptions of who I thought an instructor should be and who the instructors actually were."*

This student's expectations of her graduate program were very different from the program itself. She went on to explain that the entire program was far 'less academic' than she had expected after her experiences in the McNair program. This discrepancy suggests that graduate programs are far more diverse than what Scholars come to expect in the program. This lack of understanding may not be limited to McNair students, but could be true of graduate students in general. The diversity of experiences in this limited sample suggests that graduate programs vary greatly and that students may not be prepared to handle this wide range of experiences.

### **Lifestyle Challenges**

The fourth theme discussed by students was lifestyle challenges. These challenges included *time management, the need to modify study habits, and conflicts in personal relationships* during their first year.

#### **TIME MANAGEMENT**

When discussing the sub-theme of time management, students seemed to gain more understanding of this challenge through hindsight. One student reflected, *"I am not quite as organized or on top of things as I thought I was. You know because you compare yourself to other people and so that's one big thing."* The fact that this student was comparing herself to her peers shows that she recognized that her current time management strategy was not particularly effective.

*"That's kind of my plan for the summer is to like go back through my calendar, go back through my files; go back through and try to figure out a different system for you know keeping things organized, keeping myself together, keeping myself on schedule, setting aside time that I need for school, work, applying for jobs, for a social life, for my marriage, for staying on top of the house."*

The fact that she is aware of different approaches to time management while considering which approach might work best for her shows that she is adjusting her understanding of the issue with regard to what is required to effectively enact the role of graduate student in her program.

#### **NEED TO MODIFY STUDY HABITS**

The need to modify earlier study habits became clearer to students over the first year of graduate school. One student noted that during her first year, she had done much of her homework on her

couch, and she didn't feel that this was a good strategy for effective studying. She recognized the increased pressure of graduate study compared to what she needed to do in order to succeed as an undergraduate. Her revised strategy for the upcoming year was to set aside a more formal space to study and to "*shut the world out and just get it done.*" By reflecting on the limited effectiveness of her initial strategy and developing an alternative approach, this student is adjusting her ideas of what it takes to successfully enact the role of graduate student.

### **CONFLICTS IN PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS**

Another sub-theme students discussed involved conflict in personal relationships. One student discussed balancing the demands of her program and purchasing a house with her new husband while maintaining that relationship. Another student described ending an engagement and moving during her first year in the program. Her chosen strategy for dealing with this challenge was to throw herself into her schoolwork. She explained "*that was my getaway, was doing homework.*" She found this strategy effective both for succeeding in her program and for handling these major changes in her life.

#### **Summary**

While students attempted to address some of the issues that arose in their first years in graduate school, they found few strategies that were effective in dealing with these issues and had even more difficulty envisioning alternative strategies that may have been more successful. When discussing both strategies employed and alternative approaches that may have been more effective, students primarily focused on vague goals for future actions (e.g. "I will deal with that next year" or "I should try harder in the future"), this suggests that even with additional cultural capital acquired from their McNair experiences, students were struggling to develop effective strategies for resolving issues encountered in the role of graduate student at the end of their first year.

### **McNair Preparation for Graduate Study**

This section will discuss the ways that students felt their experiences in the McNair Program prepared them for their first year of graduate study. Exploring student understanding of specific ways they were prepared demonstrates students' understanding of the skills and knowledge needed to effectively enact the role of graduate student as well as the ways that the Program helped them to develop them. Students were asked "In what ways did the McNair Program prepare you for graduate study?" Students listed all the ways they felt McNair had prepared them, and then were prompted with a list of the stated goals of the program: applying for and getting into graduate programs, conducting research, working with faculty, and presenting. Often, students felt that they would not have been admitted into their graduate programs had they not participated in the McNair Program. Six themes emerged from discussion of the ways students felt prepared by their McNair experience: *applying for programs and resources, acquiring a background in research, working with faculty, making presentations, writing research papers, and learning what it means to be a graduate student.*

#### **Applying for Programs and Resources**

First generation college students are not exposed to information about applying to college in their homes and are not socialized to feel comfortable doing so "and so do not have a natural 'feel' for the college application and enrollment process" (Dumais, 2010). One of the ways that the McNair Program prepared students for graduate school was by requiring them to apply for acceptance into the program itself. This was often the first application experience that several of these students had in college.

## **GAINING EXPERIENCE APPLYING FOR GRADUATE PROGRAMS**

Students felt that the process of applying to the McNair Program was “training wheels for the application process”. One student describes the confidence she gained from that experience and how it helped her with future applications:

*“I mean the first thing that you do is you apply to the McNair program. You have to get your letters of recommendation you know, you have to get your stuff. And like that application is nowhere near as complicated as your grad school application but just like going through it, it’s just like this kind of safe spot to try.”*

This is the first task required by the program that demonstrates to students what it takes to be a graduate student and allows them to actually go through this process themselves.

## **FEELING WORTHY AND ENTITLED TO APPLY FOR RESOURCES**

Pierre Bourdieu uses the concept of *habitus* to describe a person’s subjective understanding of how the world is socially “put together” and what is possible for someone like her/him.”(Dumais, 2010). First-generation students are not socialized by their parents to feel comfortable completing tasks associated with graduate school, including completing applications. Bourdieu also referred to habitus as a person’s ‘feel for the game’ of life (Dumais, 2010). These students’ experiences in the McNair Program transformed their habitus. Specific McNair activities, such as applying for programs and resources, helped students feel they were worthy of attending graduate school. They began to feel entitled to the resources available to them through the program. Students discussed gaining confidence and increased motivation to apply for resources after successfully applying to and being accepted the program.

A student explained that her lack of experience completing applications made her feel that she was not qualified to do so:

*“Because I never thought ‘oh I could get into programs like this’ so I think just applying to McNair, just filling out the application process I think that was like the first academic thing that I had applied for or done.”*

This student felt that her experience applying to McNair made her feel that she could get into academic programs and went on to apply to and be accepted in a doctoral program. Another student described the same feelings when applying for McNair:

*I think it’s given me the confidence to just reach out and try for those things. And just realize that it’s okay if you don’t get it but you’re never going to get it if you don’t try to get it... I think there was a fear before like, ‘oh well I would never qualify for that sort of thing’ but how are you going to know that unless you try for it?”*

This student experienced a change in her habitus that allowed her to see herself as a candidate who may be deserving of the resources available to her.

## **DISCOVERING THAT THE EFFORT OF APPLYING FOR RESOURCES AND PROGRAMS IS WORTH THE BENEFITS**

Because their parents have never had experience applying for scholarships, first-generation students have likely never been told that the effort involved in the application process is worth the reward of getting that scholarship. One student described having attended college on student loans for three years until being accepted into the McNair Program and, after being accepted, applying for scholarships because her view of the effort and benefits involved had changed.

*"That was the first experience I'd had where it was like 'oh, if I just put in a little extra effort, and apply for this thing' then when I got accepted in it is was like 'oh that's pretty awesome, I want to try that again. I'm going to apply for scholarships now because I had this positive experience of you know trying to prove myself as a worthy student and being rewarded for it. And there are other people out in this world that think that I'm smart and think that I'm worth investing in or whatever.'"*

Before this student's McNair experience, her understanding of "what's possible for someone like me" did not include the view that she belonged at college. She did not see herself as worthy and therefore had not attempted to gain the resources that were always available. After McNair, she is actively seeking scholarships because she knows she's a worthy student.

### **Acquiring a Background in Research**

#### **EXPOSURE TO BOTH QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE METHODS**

Several of the students interviewed had not conducted research before their McNair projects. Part of the McNair seminar at PSU includes a brief overview of both qualitative and quantitative methods. Students felt that exposure to both methods, combined with learning more extensively about the method they chose in their project, was very helpful in preparing them for graduate school. Students described this exposure to different methodologies as "great" and "so, so helpful." One student felt that using quantitative methods in her project made her quantitative methods class in graduate school easier, *"I learned a lot about quantitative analysis so when I got to grad school the quantitative class was really easy for me."* Another student felt that using qualitative methods in her project gave her an advantage over her peers in her graduate qualitative methods class (see below).

#### **SEEING LITTLE VALUE IN THE RESEARCH PROJECT**

One student initially stated that she did not feel that the experience she gained from the project was useful to her because her research methods did not match those of her faculty mentor.

*"The research project that I did for McNair was frankly kind of a mess... My mentor was great. I love him for that. He's one of my favorite teachers but as far as like doing the kind of research that I wanted to be doing, it just wasn't the right fit. And, my project was just not.. it just wasn't well thought out, it wasn't well organized, like my data collection was just kind of shotty. And I just didn't really get the positive value from doing research that a lot of students do get."*

However later in the same interview, this student went on to describe feeling more prepared for a methods class in graduate school than her peers because she had been exposed to qualitative methods in her McNair project.

*"I think that because I had done kind of qualitative analysis in the McNair program before this class, I had a little bit of an edge on some of the other students that I was working with because I had just had a little bit of exposure at least with the terms."*

It is interesting that this student did not recognize that this exposure to research may be the reason that she now understands the quality of her methods was low in her project, and she does not connect her success in that methods class to 'getting the positive value from doing research' in the McNair program. She does not seem to have gained the ability to use negative experiences, or academic mistakes, as a way of adjusting her understanding of what it means to be a researcher.

## **Working With Faculty**

When asked if they felt that their experience in the McNair Program prepared them for working with faculty, all of the students interviewed responded that it had prepared them in different ways for the interactions they had with faculty in their graduate programs.

### **PREPARATION FOR WORKING WITH ACADEMICS**

One student felt that both the positive and negative interactions she had with her mentor helped to prepare her to work with academics in her graduate program. When asked if she felt McNair had prepared her for working with faculty, she responded:

*"Maybe not in the way that they thought, but it definitely prepared me for working with academics. I had a really rocky relationship with my advisor at first. It was a clash of personalities is what it was, but we got over it and it was a fruitful... research project after that. That was really good exposure to navigating working with your mentor."*

Interestingly, she seems to have assumed that the goal of the McNair Program in preparing her for working with academics was only geared toward positive interactions. However, she was able to use this experience as a way of understanding the different interactions she had with faculty in her graduate program and she felt she was able to navigate those relationships more successfully.

### **BECOMING COMPETITIVE APPLYING TO GRADUATE PROGRAMS**

The same student who felt the Program prepared her for working with academics felt that conducting her research project with a faculty mentor helped her to be more competitive in the graduate programs she applied to. She actually felt that this was the most valuable type of preparation she gained in the McNair Program:

*"The biggest part is that it allowed me to work with someone, an advisor, to conduct a project. And that's really what the people who interviewed me in all the graduate programs were looking for, for someone who was able to do that."*

It is possible that, not only were the interviewers looking for a student who had conducted research with a faculty member, they were also looking for a student who displayed confidence in working in that capacity—this student obviously felt that it made her a stronger candidate.

### **NETWORKING OPPORTUNITIES**

Students spoke of the networking opportunities they had in the McNair Program to work with their mentors, as well as learning how to communicate with faculty in the graduate programs they applied to. One student felt that the most important aspect of having a faculty mentor was building that relationship, something she had not done with faculty before participating in the McNair Program.

*"And you know, even though I'd talked to some instructors, I never had a mentor... I still talk to him and we go out to coffee and you know [the McNair Program encourages] really building those relationships and showing the importance of that mentorship and that encouragement. I thought that was a brilliant aspect of the program."*

Many of the first-generation and low-income students in the McNair Program have likely never had the opportunity to build these kinds of academic mentoring relationships with faculty in the past. Before participating in the McNair program these students may not have thought this type of mentoring relationship was even possible.

### **LEARNING THERE IS MORE THAN ONE PATH THROUGH ACADEMIA**

In addition to working closely with a mentor on an original research project, during the seminar students hear guest speakers, often first-generation or minority faculty members, discuss their individual careers in academia. Students felt that this exposure helped them to envision their own possible paths to becoming faculty. Again, the McNair Program was able to adjust the habitus of students who had not previously seen themselves as academics, as well as providing students with individual accounts of what being a graduate student and eventually a faculty member looks like, a perspective they have probably not seen before. This student found benefits in addition to her relationship with her mentor: *"Even the faculty talks were really helpful actually, when faculty members would come in and share their stories of how they navigated graduate school and after graduate school."*

### ***Making Presentations***

Presenting their projects in the McNair Program helped these students to understand one aspect of what being a graduate student looks like, since they witnessed each others' presentations, as well as what it feels like, as they presented their own research.

### **INITIAL, LASTING FEAR AND EVENTUAL IMPROVEMENT PRESENTING**

A theme discussed by several students was the ways that their McNair participation helped them to feel more comfortable making presentations. Students referred to their experiences presenting their research projects in the McNair Program as *"really helpful"* and *"really good, really great preparation"*. One student explained that she had very little presenting experience before participating in the program and that presenting multiple times was valuable to her. *"I didn't talk. I hate presenting. I had to give at least two, maybe three [presentations] in front of an audience.. no maybe four. And that was really helpful."* Not all of the students had completely overcome their fear of public speaking in graduate school, but still felt that presenting their McNair projects helped to prepare them. This student admitted, *"it still terrifies me, but it's like a manageable fear now."*

### **MORE PREPARED FOR PRESENTING OFTEN IN CURRENT GRADUATE PROGRAM**

Presenting is often a part of graduate programs. One student explained, *"We have to present multiple times for every single class, every single term."* Presenting is something that several students who were interviewed had never done as undergraduates. They explained that they often were required to present in their first year of graduate school and that the previous experience was helpful to them:

*"Yeah even just you know in front of small groups or conferences, the more presenting that I've done the easier it's become. And it was definitely the most terrifying thing while I was in the McNair program but it's nice to have gotten that out of the way so at least it's not as terrifying now that I'm in this [graduate] program."*

### **PRESENTING MATERIAL THE STUDENT IS INVESTED IN**



It was not just experience presenting any material that was helpful, this student explains that presenting her McNair project was more impactful than other presenting she had done as an undergraduate because it was material that she was really interested and invested in:

*"Doing the presentations for McNair was really, it was good because I feel like all of my other presentations for my undergrad, it was just like busy work and it wasn't really anything that meant anything to me. So it wasn't really that great of practice because, you know, part of the fear of going up and presenting is in real life, if you're presenting you're going to be talking about something that you really care about. Like that's the reason they're asking you to talk about it because they know you really care about it or you really know about it. So I think McNair was the first time I had the experience to go up there and like really talk about something I was really passionate about, which was terrifying but it was a great experience and it has definitely carried through to grad school."*

## **Writing Research Papers**

### **MCNAIR PAPER WAS THE ONLY OPPORTUNITY FOR WRITING RESEARCH AS AN UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT**

Students had often not had any other opportunities to write a research paper in their undergraduate study. One student noted, *"I feel like it was a positive experience. Definitely with some of the courses in my undergraduate degree... I didn't have a lot of opportunity to do those research papers."* Another student felt that writing a research paper helped her manage her expectations for writing in graduate school and said, *"And the writing process and the preparation for academia, you know what to expect, what not to expect."*

### **FORMATTING A PAPER**

Without being prompted, one student listed particular ways that writing the final paper for her McNair project helped to prepare her for writing in graduate school, particularly in comparison to her peers. She explained, that one way she felt prepared was "drilling in APA format," and explained, *"Because a lot of people who go to grad school take time off. So when they come back it's like 'APA, what?', 'I have to cite what?', 'I have to write a 30 page paper what?' So for me it was like, I just wrote a huge paper"*

### **BUILDING A LITERATURE REVIEW**

The same student who felt prepared formatting her papers explained that writing her McNair paper *"taught me how to just do a lit review with ease."* This student entered her graduate program immediately following her completion of the McNair project and felt the recent experience helped her to build literature reviews. She explained, *"I finished summer and then went right into grad school so it was easy I was like okay I can do this. I've done lit reviews all summer, I can do this."*

### **WRITING METHODS AND DISCUSSION SECTIONS**

This student explained that her graduate program demanded writing multiple papers and that having written methods and discussion sections in her McNair paper helped her to feel more prepared for writing those sections during her graduate study:

*"It taught me how to do my methods section and my discussion section, because in grad school you write a crazy amount of papers and you have to do a lot of like mock papers or fake study papers so it was like 'I've already done this' so it was awesome."*

## **TIME MANAGEMENT**

This student felt that having experienced the self-disciplined and time management required for writing a paper like her McNair paper prepared her to use those strategies writing papers in her graduate program:

*"Being able to waste my summer.. well not waste but sit in a house when its sunny outside really.. well it got me ready to sit in my house all year long writing papers. Like time management, that was huge."*

### **Learning What It Means To Be A Graduate Student**

A theme that emerged, one that students were not specifically prompted to discuss, was the ways that their McNair experiences showed them *"what it takes to be a grad student."* Students directly addressed the ways their McNair experiences taught them what the role of graduate student looks like and successful ways for enacting that role. Students felt that learning what it took to be a successful McNair Scholar directly translated to understanding what it took to be a graduate student in their first year. Specifically, they felt the experience showed them the type of student you must be to succeed, as well as what is expected of a graduate student.

This student explained that her current program is very competitive and that her experience in the McNair Program prepared her for the heightened standards:

*"Like I said my program is really, really competitive and I think that the preparation that the McNair gave to us and just that exposure of like this is what it takes to be a grad student. You have to work hard, you have to make it perfect, you have to do it right."*

At another point in the interview, the same student reiterated the ways that the program prepared her to understand the type of student it takes to succeed in graduate school:

*"You just need to yeah, learn how to follow directions, learn how to show up, learn how to be accountable and like be responsible for yourself and like, I feel like [the McNair Program] takes the semi-serious undergrad and turns them into a serious grad school candidate."*

As students discussed when they were asked about issues they had encountered in their graduate programs, a common challenge was understanding their current program. A part of this confusion stemmed from not knowing the expectations of the program. This student explained that McNair gave her some practice with what she called *"extracting vague expectations"* of her assignments in her graduate program:

*"I mean you really have to learn how to sit with the assignment and kinda go through it and pull out.. you know 'so this data point is going to be related to this section here, and this section down here, and kinda this section over here, but then this section is gonna be more dependent on this section and then these two data points, I'm gonna have to pull these together to meet this criteria.' Its just like, understanding and pulling all of those different pieces together..."*

She went on to explain the practice that she got doing this in the McNair program. One of the assignments in the seminar is for students to develop a personal education plan. The instructions for this assignment are somewhat open-ended, instructing students to simply map their potential path through graduate school. This student uses that assignment as an example of

the ways that assignments in the McNair Program are designed similarly to the assignments she completed in her graduate program:

*"I mean you're welcome to ask questions of course but it's one of those things, and I feel like the McNair Program was similar. You know, thinking about the education plan for instance: like there were not a lot of details about like 'here is how you come up with an education plan' you know it's just like 'okay we just want you to map this out—go do it'" and I think that's like a lot of, at least the assignments in my program, are like. [They say] 'Just figure it out, you're smart'."*

For the students interviewed in this study, participating in the McNair Program at PSU profoundly impacted their habitus. They came to see themselves as legitimate graduate students. These students also were able to recognize and articulate both the direct and indirect ways that the McNair Program prepared them for graduate study. They discussed how the Program worked to show participants what being a successful graduate student looks like in a variety of ways: by exposing them to faculty, through mentorship, research, and seminar talks and by allowing students to observe each other through the process of research and presentation. The McNair Program also provided participants with the chance to practice some of the key steps in becoming a successful graduate student, from the application process to conducting research, writing papers and then presenting that research.

### **Feelings and Advice About the McNair Program**

It is important to understand students' overall feelings about the program, in addition to how they understand specific issues, strategies for addressing those issues, and particular forms of preparation from the McNair Program. Therefore, this section is divided into four distinct narratives, representing each student's unique journey from how they thought of themselves as undergraduate students before participating in the program, to their feelings about the McNair program experience, and finally their feelings about their current graduate programs. Each student's narrative finishes with two important pieces of advice: recommendations for the McNair program, and advice for future McNair scholars.

Through the Program, McNair Scholars experienced changes in their habitus as well as gaining practical skills for navigating graduate school. Their feelings about their experiences in the Program can help us understand changes in the ways they viewed themselves as students and how that accumulation of skills occurred. This information also may be helpful to the McNair program by demonstrating the kinds of experiences that Scholars are taking away from their participation in the program.

The experiences of students are diverse; each student approached the program with different understandings of what a graduate student is and different ideas about where she or he belonged in academia. Each experienced the program differently, and went on to enroll in very different graduate programs. It is important to note that all students interviewed expressed gratitude to some aspect of the program. While some students had mixed feelings about participating in the program, none of them expressed entirely negative views. It is helpful to remember that the program is a journey for each student.

#### ***Interview 1: Collaborative Learning***

This student's experiences and opinions seemed to stem from her priorities of learning, specifically learning in collaborative environments. This had been a priority for her as a student prior to the program and continued to be important as she moved into her graduate experience. She didn't see

much of a difference between herself as an undergraduate before the program and herself as a graduate student in her current program. She explained that, even before joining the McNair program, she had always enjoyed research and had been looking for an opportunity to do her own project:

*"I started doing research in my first year at PSU through different programs where I worked and then I was always very interested in having research experience. And so even before the McNair program, I was in my second lab. And I thought that it would be great to join the McNair program to also do some research with someone at PSU, hopefully in my major. So I guess my whole student... undergraduate experience was focused on research and preparing me for graduate school but, I mean I hadn't really had the chance because I had always been a research assistant, to conduct my own project. So I guess not much has changed, I love doing my own projects."*

Overall, this student felt positively about her experience in the McNair Program. She felt grateful to the program for providing her a research opportunity she would not have had otherwise, but she did feel at times that the program did not meet her high expectations when it came to these collaborative learning opportunities and intimate learning communities. Even when she recalled this disappointment, she was adamant that her overall feelings of the program be portrayed in a positive way. This is what she had to say:

*"I mean I think it was a good experience. I felt disconnected a lot at the time in the program. I mean I think it was an excellent program. I think it was a wonderful opportunity that, because of how PSU is set up, I wouldn't have obtained otherwise... I guess the way that its set up conveys that there is intimacy within the group, between the students, between the graduate teachers who are also part of the program... so that was kind of the spirit.. it seems like that should have been there but I just never really felt it completely... And I still kind of feel it now. Just the fact that even though I've talked with people in the program about where I am now, they still don't have my correct program on the website. So it makes me think 'how important am I?' It just seems like there is a mismatch between what it seems to convey the program is doing and how intimate it is and actually how involved it really is with the students. It obviously set really high expectations and I can't imagine everything always meeting the mark but I did feel like it would have been nicer to have a more realistic outline or just at times it just felt fake sometimes.. somethings. Again, I don't want that to be my overarching feeling about McNair that just happened sometimes... I just want to make sure that you don't think it's all fake or something."*

This student went on to enroll in a doctoral program; she spent some time in one lab, and then moved to a different lab. Her experiences in these two labs, even within the same program, were very different. In one lab, she was disappointed that the experience did not live up to her expectations and said *"I felt like I wasn't really receiving a good training. It was just kind of an environment that I didn't like."* But, when she moved to the second lab, she was more pleased, *"I absolutely love it. It's a very different experience. It's much more collaborative and there's a lot more scientific vetting. Like it really seems like everyone wants to produce the best science."*

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE MCNAIR PROGRAM**

This student's recommendation for the McNair Program was to provide scholars with more information about collaborative research opportunities with other institutions (such as the collaborations between Portland State University and Oregon Health Sciences University). She explained that she had participated in this type of program and she felt this collaborative research

conducted in labs outside of the labs at PSU allowed her to be competitive when applying to graduate programs. However, she felt that many McNair Scholars had not been aware of these collaborative opportunities.

### **ADVICE FOR FUTURE MCNAIR SCHOLARS**

This student's advice to future scholars is to use the project to for their greatest advantage. There were multiple reasons for giving this particular advice. She explained that Scholars will have many opportunities to learn that they would not have otherwise, so they should embrace those opportunities. She also matter-of-factly explained that if these students are considering applying to graduate school, they should know whether they like to do research because, she proclaimed, "that's what grad school is". The final reason this student gave for this advice is that completing this project, and speaking confidently about it during graduate school interviews, will make future Scholars more competitive in graduate programs.

### ***Interview 2: Relationships***

This student discussed the drastic changes that occurred in herself as a student from the time before she began participating in the McNair program up until the time she began attending graduate school. She seemed to focus the most on the relationships she developed in the Program and the ways those relationships helped her in her journey. As an undergraduate, this student hadn't considered graduate school until just before applying to the McNair Program, when her views on her education shifted:

*"I think really the change happened right before when I was deciding to go into McNair. When I started out in college I really had no expectations. I was just like "oh I'm just going to have fun" So when I was.. around the time I was thinking of what program I was going to do[for my second major] the McNair program came up around the same time and I don't know if it was just because of that shift or because of the McNair program as well, but I really started to take school more seriously. I really saw that things like going to class everyday and that you know you are paying for these credits and this experience. And finding the pleasure and the joy in just studying something that you're passionate about, something you're serious about. It gave me a bit more direction and made me more serious about my studies. I had thought 'maybe [grad school] is something I'll do' but that's pretty much it. 'Maybe when I'm done having fun if it fits into my schedule'. But as far as like what I would do or where I would go or how I would go about doing this or what I need to apply, I knew nothing."*

As an undergraduate before joining McNair, even after she had decided to take her studies more seriously, this student did not feel that she had the practical knowledge about deciding on a graduate program or what would be required to apply to that program. She noted that this was one way that the McNair Program gave her the tools to be accepted into a program and to succeed there.

This student described participating in the McNair Program as "a very positive experience." She went on to explain that the most impactful part of the experience for her was developing and maintaining a relationship with her faculty mentor:

*"Even though I'd talked to some instructors, I never had a mentor and it was something that they ask you to do and my mentor today I still talk to him and we go out to coffee and you know really building those relationships and showing the*

*importance of that mentorship and that encouragement. I thought that was a brilliant aspect of the program."*

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE MCNAIR PROGRAM**

This student's advice to the program was that they provide more information about choosing a program that fits the individual Scholar's interests. She was in a one year graduate program and she doesn't feel that she's using her experiences from that program in her current job at all. She wishes she would have spent more time considering which program would work best for her.

### **ADVICE FOR FUTURE MCNAIR SCHOLARS**

Her advice to future McNair Scholars was to understand that the faculty connections are a valuable resource and to take advantage of them. She spoke fondly of the fact that she and her McNair mentor still meet for coffee and keep in close contact. She reflected that not all Scholars in her cohort seemed to focus much on their relationships with their mentors or on the guest lecturers who spoke throughout the seminar. She explained that these relationships are important for support as well as for networking opportunities.

### ***Interview 3: Practical Skills and Applications***

This student seemed to focus on the practical skills she acquired in the McNair Program and applications of those skills. She had mixed feelings about her experiences in the McNair Program and negative feelings about her current graduate program, a dual Masters and PhD program. Like the student in interview 1, this student felt that she had not changed much as a student from an undergraduate before joining the McNair program, through the McNair experience, and now in her current program. She explained, *"I was the same [as I am now]. Overachiever—doing too much, liked to look good on an application. McNair was another thing to add to the CV (curricular vita)."*

This student was very clear that she was grateful for the opportunity to complete a research project in the McNair Program. She explained, *"I think doing the actual project made grad school so much easier, I was so much more prepared."* She appreciated the exposure to research methods and working with her mentor. However, she said she had mixed feelings about the program because she had already been accepted to graduate school by the time the McNair Program started, so she felt that the graduate preparation, specifically during Spring term, when the program was 'a waste' of time for her:

*"Spring term was really boring because I already went through the graduate application process so I feel like I wasted a whole lot of my time going to classes. But summer I got a lot out of it because doing my final paper really set me up to excel in my grad program. Yeah so spring term sucked. But winter term was good because you're learning about qualitative and quantitative and figuring out your research question. And then summer was awesome. I worked a lot with my advisor and I learned a lot."*

It's interesting that this student didn't relate experiencing any of the cohort effect or sense of community that some of the other students mentioned. She also did not seem to find much value in the spring term classes that did not directly relate to conducting her individual project. While one of the stated goals of the McNair Program is to give students "a place" in academia and to expose them to research from many disciplines, this student did not seem to feel that some of these non-project related presentations were of much help to her in her graduate program.

The student noted that these feelings continued into her current graduate program. She mentioned that she did not feel challenged enough in the first year of her program, though the other students in her cohort don't agree:

*"For me it was really easy... I've always been kind of a smarty pants I guess you could say so I thought it would be a challenge, which is why I applied to do my masters and Ph.D at the same time, you know for a double load. And I'm bored. My personal life was more challenging than my academic life... I was just absolutely not challenged at all. According to my cohort it was very difficult so I'm just weird."*

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE MCNAIR PROGRAM**

This student's advice to the program was to spend less in-class time on guest speakers in spring term and more time to focus on research—this could be a call for that sense of community that it doesn't really seem like she gained in her time in the McNair Program. Specifically, she recommended allowing for time during each weekly seminar for reflections and updates regarding Scholars' projects, to check in with other students to discuss ideas and research strategies.

#### **ADVICE FOR FUTURE MCNAIR SCHOLARS**

This student's advice to future scholars was to treat the research project like it's a real Masters thesis. She emphasized, *"Don't treat the final paper as just any paper!"* She stressed multiple times throughout the interview the ways that taking the McNair research project seriously helped her with her work during her first year of graduate school.

#### **Interview 4: Academics**

This student's narrative focused on how the McNair Program helped in both finding her place in academia and working with academics. As an undergraduate, before participating in the McNair Program, this student, had not really considered graduate school, much like the student in interview 2. She also had mixed feelings about the program and about conducting research because of a negative experience with her project. Though she reported feeling intimidated and overwhelmed during her first year of graduate school, her overall feelings about her graduate program were positive.

*"I kind of always had gone about school thinking like 'I just need to go and get this done and the only person that's going to help me get it done is myself'...And I had never applied for any scholarships or any other special programs or like trying to do anything above and beyond getting my degree done because I think I just didn't realize that the stuff that was out there was for students like me. I kind of thought like 'I just need to go through the hoops and get it done and get out of school and get a job.'"*

This is another student who felt grateful to the program. She explained, *"I have mixed feelings about it. I know that if I had not gone through that experience um I would not have gotten into my grad program."* She explained that her mixed feelings had to do with her research project. She did not feel satisfied with her choice in mentor or in her finished project. She felt that this experience changed her perception of academia:

*"I think my idealized notion of what an academic does and who an academic is was just kind of a dream. Like, a romanticized version of ivory towers and corduroy jackets with elbow patches and you know pipes and libraries. So I think it was good that my project wasn't very successful because it made me realize actually 'no', what*

*I really want to be doing is I want to be out in the world and I want to have my feet on the ground and I want to be engaged with the community and have like on the ground.. I want to contribute to change on the ground. I don't want to contribute to change on the books or in the libraries. So in that way it was great because you know I mean if you learn that you don't want to do something, it's just as good as learning that you do want to do something. You narrow your path."*

This student has a very specific view of academia because of her experience in a single research project. Though conducting further research, possibly with a different faculty member, might possibly change her views of research, at the present time she has decided that she simply did not understand what conducting research "looked like," and has decided it is not the route she would like to take in her career.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE McNAIR PROGRAM**

This student's advice to the program is to have a mentor matching system or database. While she was aware that McNair staff and graduate students are helpful to students struggling to find a mentor, she felt that a more formal system would be helpful. She suggested that the Program maintain a list of previous mentors and the types of projects students had done with them.

### **ADVICE FOR FUTURE McNAIR SCHOLARS**

This student's advice to future McNair Scholars is that they choose their mentors wisely and take advantage of, as well as honor that relationship. Specifically, she advised choosing a mentor based on the type of research they do, both in methodology and subject matter (to be sure it aligns with the research design the student has in mind). She went on to list the specific benefits the Scholar stands to gain from a mentor such as getting recommendations into the programs best-suited for the student and gaining more network opportunities.

### **Summary**

By exploring the ways the students understood their feelings about the program and the advice they would give to the Program as well as to future Scholars, we can begin to understand the ways that participation in the program impacted their experiences in graduate school. Each student experienced the McNair Program and their graduate program very differently. It is clear from the different themes that emerged from each of the interviews conducted that students focused on different aspects of the McNair Program and spent their first year of graduate school in vastly different programs.

### **CONCLUSION**

Students faced a variety of challenges in their first year of graduate school. These issues included adjusting to new environments, developing relationships, understanding the graduate program, and making lifestyle changes. These issues all require understanding and making adjustments to be resolved. Even with the additional cultural capital students received from the McNair Program, strategies for resolution of these issues were often vague and unsuccessful. The McNair Program was able to prepare students for graduate study in practical ways, as well as helping them to change their habitus and view themselves as scholars and graduate students, providing them with a better understanding of the role of graduate student as well as the confidence and ability to enact that role successfully.

Self-selection of McNair alumni should be considered in these findings. It could be the case that students who chose not to respond to the email request for participation had a far different



experience in the McNair Program and in their graduate programs. Also, not all McNair Scholars go on to graduate school. It is likely that students who did not apply or who were not accepted to graduate programs would also have very different feelings about their experiences in the program.

Academic context should also be considered. PSU is a large urban campus, the students are generally older than traditional students and far more are transfer students. It is likely that a McNair Program participant from a more traditional campus would have a different experience than at PSU. McNair Programs also vary by funding and institution. The 2007-2011 funding cycle consisted of a three-term seminar and research project. Some Programs are one term long, while others are as long as two years. Because of differences in length and design of the program, it is possible that scholars will have vastly different experiences in different programs.

The limited sample size (four interviews) is also a challenge to understanding the ways that the McNair Program imports cultural capital to students. Because the McNair Program is interdisciplinary, it is important to understand the experiences of students from different fields. By interviewing more students, who are in a variety of different graduate programs, and who conducted their McNair Program research in many different fields, future study will provide a more complete picture of the effectiveness of the program in facilitating the completion of advanced degrees by first-generation, low-income and underrepresented group students.

It is clear from the interviews conducted that the McNair Program was successful in importing cultural capital to disadvantaged students in meaningful ways. Each of these students had a unique journey from undergraduate to graduate school. The McNair Program often helped to facilitate this transition, both by providing Scholars with the practical skills they need to navigate graduate school, and by providing students an avenue to change their habitus—to understand themselves as Scholars and as graduate students.

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## **Appendix 1: Introductory Email**

Cristina Restad Department of Sociology, PSU

1721 SW Broadway #217 Portland, OR 97207

Phone: 503-381-3058 Email: [cristina.restad@gmail.com](mailto:cristina.restad@gmail.com)

Dear McNair Scholar,

You are invited to participate in a McNair Research Project study examining your experiences in your graduate program. This study will be conducted by undergraduate student Cristina Restad, with Dr. Peter Collier as faculty mentor. The purpose of this study is to explore the impacts of McNair Program participation on students during their first year of graduate study. We are particularly interested in the ways that these students understand what a successful graduate student is and how to be successful in graduate school. Your participation will contribute to our understanding and reporting of the ways that the McNair Program prepares students for graduate study as well as ways the program can improve that preparation in the future. This project may be expanded into a Master's Thesis in the future and your input will provide a foundational understanding of the first-year graduate experience of McNair Scholars.

The interview should take approximately one hour. Please review the Informed Consent form attached to this email at your earliest convenience. You will be asked for your consent before the interview is conducted. As the Informed Consent Form explains, these interviews will be tape-recorded unless you decline.

If you are interested in participating and are *in or recently completed your first year of graduate study*, please contact Cristina Restad at 503-381-3058 or via email at [cristina.restad@gmail.com](mailto:cristina.restad@gmail.com) at your earliest convenience to set up an interview.

Best Regards,

Cristina Restad

## ***Appendix 2: Informed Consent and Authorization to Record Form***

### **INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

You are invited to participate in a McNair Research Project study examining your experiences in your graduate program. This study will be conducted by undergraduate student Cristina Restad, with Dr. Peter Collier as faculty mentor. The purpose of this study is to explore the impacts of McNair Program participation on students during their first year of graduate study. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you participated in the McNair Scholars Program at Portland State University.

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to participate in an interview about your current experience in graduate school as well as your past experience in the McNair Program. The interview takes about an hour to complete. You have the option of not responding to any question that you feel uncomfortable in answering.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be linked to you or identify you will be kept confidential. This information will be kept confidential by the use of a numerical identification coding scheme. Your name will only be used on the Consent forms. All other documentation will be coded with a numerical code. The only copy of the key will remain in the possession of the principal investigator. Any published or discussed data will be either presented in a group format or will utilize the numerical code system. Because the sample size is small and restricted to PSU, there is potential loss of confidentiality with some staff and McNair Scholars in your cohort due to your specific responses in the interview. Cohorts will not be requested or documented at any point during this study. The researcher will attempt to minimize any potential identification by generalizing accounts.

Participation in the research project is voluntary. If you do decide not to participate you can stop at any time. The primary purpose of this research is to increase knowledge that may help other students and McNair staff in the future.

If you have concerns or problems about your participation in this study or your rights as a research subject, please contact the Human Subjects Research Review Committee at Research and Strategic Partnerships, Market Center Building, 6<sup>th</sup> floor, 1600 SW 4<sup>th</sup> Ave, Portland OR 97201, 503-725-4288. If you have questions about the study itself, contact Cristina Restad, 503-381-3058 or Dr. Peter Collier, 217-O Cramer Hall, 503-725-3961.

*Informed Consent and Authorization to Record (Cont.)*

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Printed Name

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Signature

Date

By signing above, I consent to be interviewed as a participant in this study.

The researcher will use a recording device in order to tape record the full interview between the participant and the researcher. Your signature on the line below gives your consent to having this interview tape-recorded. Please note that you may still participate in the study without being tape-recorded.

---

Signature

If you would like to receive a final copy of the study, please list the email or postal mailing address below where you would like a copy of the final study sent.

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Email or Postal Mailing Address

My sincere thanks,

Cristina Restad

McNair Scholar's Program, 2012 Cohort

student interview #:

### **Appendix 3: Interview Guide**

Follow-up/probe questions will be used for clarification and elaboration.

1. What was your major at the time of your McNair experience?
2. What graduate program are you in now?
3. Tell me about why you enrolled in your graduate program.
4. How do you feel about your graduate experience so far?
5. What issues have you encountered in the first year of your program? (list)

probes: tell me a little bit more? What do you mean when you say...

- for each issue: How did you deal with this issues? how did you resolve this problem; what did you do? Is this still an issue? Would you have done things differently then knowing what you know now?

6. What are the expectations in your current program if you want to be viewed as a 'good graduate student'?

- make list (and for each point – ask for elaboration: tell me a little bit more about X; what do you mean when you say X, could you give me an example of X

7. Tell me a little bit about yourself as a college student before you were selected for the McNair Program.

Probe: Had you considered going to graduate school? (if so) what kind of program?

8. How do you feel about your McNair experience?
9. In what ways did the McNair Program prepared you for graduate study?

List: probe: Thinking back on your 1st year grad experiences, can you tell me a story about how this preparation helped in your current grad program?

(Uncued responses, followed by cued responses)

(probes if not specifically mentioned)

- getting in / filling out the forms
- conducting research
- working with faculty in grad student role / equal partner in research
- presenting at professional meetings
- is there anything else?

10. If you could give one piece of advice to a new McNair Scholar about how best to use the program to prepare for graduate study, what would you tell her?

Probe: you spoke a bit about X, could you tell me more about X

11. If you could make one recommendation to the McNair Program about how to better prepare students for graduate school, what would you tell them?

Probe: tell me more about X