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Portland State University

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The Ronald E. McNair Scholars Program at Portland State University (PSU) works with motivated and talented undergraduates who want to pursue PhDs. It introduces juniors and seniors who are first-generation and low-income, and/or members of under-represented groups to academic research and to effective strategies for getting into and graduating from PhD programs.

The McNair Scholars Program has academic-year activities and a full-time summer research internship. Scholars take academic and skills-building seminars and workshops during the year, and each scholar works closely with a faculty mentor on original research in the summer. Scholars present their research findings at the McNair Summer Symposium and at other conferences, and are encouraged to publish their papers in the McNair Journal and other scholarly publications.

The Ronald E. McNair Post-baccalaureate Achievement Program was established in 1986 by the U.S. Department of Education and named in honor of Challenger Space Shuttle astronaut Dr. Ronald E. McNair. The program, which is in its seventh year on campus, is funded by a $924,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Education and institutional cost-share funds.

The McNair Scholars Program’s student-centered approach relies heavily on faculty and university commitment. Activities and opportunities provided by the program focus on building a positive academic community for the scholars while they are undergraduates at PSU.
## Table of Contents

Ronald E. McNair 3
Terrel L. Rhodes, Principal Investigator 4
2004-2005 McNair Program Staff 5
Editorial Board 6
The 2004 Portland State Scholars 7
The 2005 Portland State Scholars 9

Comparative Colonialsims: Variations in Japanese Colonial Policy in Taiwan and Korea, 1895 - 1945
by Gunnar Abramson
Faculty Mentor : Linda Walter 11

Automated Test Pattern Generation for Quantum Circuits
by Jacob D. Biamonte 1,2
Faculty Mentor : Marek A. Perkowski 1,3 38

Not Quite Formal: Theorizing the Informal Labor Market Experiences of “Documented” Immigrant Workers
by Carrie Cobb
Faculty Mentor : Leopoldo Rodreiguez 48

Another Visit to Red and Blue States
Jason G. Damron
Faculty Mentors: Marcia Klotz & Cherry Muhanji 74

Gene Flow in an Invasive Species of Grass, Brachypodium Sylvaticum
Trieste Dobberstein
Faculty Mentors: Mitchell Cruzan 95

Women Writing War and Peace in Post Vietnam Era
Amy Driscoll
Faculty Mentors: Barbara Guetti 110

Racial Hegemony in America: The Struggle for identity Among the Black Indians of the Five Civilized Tribes of the Southern United States
Natasha Hartsfield
Faculty Mentors: Pedro Ferbel-Azcarate 150
Examining Differences in Student Achievements in Differential Equations
Erin Horst
Faculty Mentors: Karen Marrongelle 165

The Clerical Wife: Medieval Perceptions of Women During the Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Church Reforms
Cara Kaser
Faculty Mentors: Caroline Lizenberger & John Ott 180

Constructs of Freedom and Identity: The Ethnogenesis of the Jamaican Maroons and the Treaties of 1739
Jessica Krug
Faculty Mentors: John Ott 213

Performance and Application of an Inexpensive Method for Measurement of Nitrogen Dioxide
Jeremy Para
Faculty Mentor: Linda George 278
Ronald Erwin McNair was born October 21, 1950 in Lake City, South Carolina. While in junior high school, Dr. McNair was inspired to work hard and persevere in his studies by his family and by a teacher who recognized his scientific potential and believed in him. Dr. McNair graduated as valedictorian from Carver High School in 1967. In 1971, he graduated magna cum laude and received a bachelor of science degree in Physics from North Carolina A&T State University (Greensboro). Dr. McNair then enrolled in the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In 1976, at the age of 26, he earned his Ph.D. in laser physics. His dissertation was titled, “Energy Absorption and Vibrational Heating in Molecules Following Intense Laser Excitation.” Dr. McNair was presented an honorary doctorate of Laws from North Carolina A&T State University in 1978, an honorary doctorate of Science from Morris College in 1980, and an honorary doctorate of science from the University of South Carolina in 1984.

While working as a staff physicist with Hughes Research Laboratory, Dr. McNair soon became a recognized expert in laser physics. His many distinctions include being a Presidential Scholar (1971-74), a Ford Foundation Fellow (1971-74), a National Fellowship Fund Fellow (1974-75), and a NATO Fellow (1975). He was also a sixth degree black belt in karate and an accomplished saxophonist. Because of his many accomplishments, he was selected by NASA for the space shuttle program in 1978. His first space shuttle mission launched successfully from Kennedy Space Center on February 3, 1984. Dr. Ronald E. McNair was the second African American to fly in space. Two years later he was selected to serve as mission specialist aboard the ill-fated U.S. Challenger space shuttle. He was killed instantly when the Challenger exploded one minute, thirteen seconds after it was launched. Dr. McNair was posthumously awarded the Congressional Space Medal of Honor. After his death in the Challenger Space Shuttle accident on January 28, 1986, members of Congress provided funding for the Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program. Their goal was to encourage low-income and first-generation college students, and students from historically underrepresented ethnic groups to expand their educational opportunities by enrolling in a Ph.D. program and ultimately pursue an academic career. This program is dedicated to the high standards of achievement inspired by Dr. McNair’s life.

Source: mcnairscholars.com
Terrel L. Rhodes, Principal Investigator

Dr. Rhodes is the Vice Provost for Curriculum and Dean of Undergraduate Studies at Portland State University. As such, he acts as dean of general education, oversees the undergraduate curriculum process, serves as the institutional liaison for accreditation, chairs the Advisory Committee on Academic Information Technology, oversees the community college relations initiative, alignment of student learning expectations with high schools through the Oregon University System Proficiency-based Admissions Standards System, the undergraduate research program, and the faculty vitality and course redesign initiative, including the Pew Charitable Trust funded Course Redesign project in Spanish at PSU.

He is the author of three books, numerous articles, book chapters and grant proposals. He received his B.A. in Political Science, History and Spanish at Indiana University in Bloomington, and his M.A. and Ph.D. in Political Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
2004-2005 McNair Program Staff

Toeutu Faaleava

Director

Toeutu Faaleava specializes in community mobilization and capacity building. His research interests are in reclaiming indigenous voices, spaces, scholarship and resistance. He teaches in University Studies and works with Pacific Islander communities in Portland. He holds a Ph.D. in Ethnic Studies, JD, MA, and BA from the University of California, Berkeley, an MPA from Harvard University and a BS from SIU.

Jeffrey L. Smith

2004 Coordinator

I was born and raised in Dayton, Ohio. After high school, I attended the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. While visiting a high school friend living in Portland Oregon, I became enamored with the ocean, mountains, and deserts of Oregon. I packed up my belongings and made the cross country trek to Portland. I received a BA in Applied Linguistics and TESOL Certification in 1997 and am currently finishing an MA in Conflict Resolution.

Jolina Kwong Caputo

2005 Program Coordinator

I am in the Post-Secondary Adult Education (PACE) Graduate Program in the Portland State University School of Education. My research interests include student experiences at large metropolitan universities, as well as student development and leadership. Outside of the office and the classroom, I enjoy jogging around my SE Portland neighborhood, watching TV and designing greeting cards.

Amrina Sugaipova

Graduate Student Assistant

I received my BA in Business and English from Lithuania College in Klaipeda, Lithuania. Currently, I am working on an MA in international Conflict Resolution at Portland State University. I enjoy studying languages, learning about other cultures and care a lot about human rights around the world.
Editorial Board

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The 2005 Portland State Scholars

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