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McNair Scholars Program
Portland State University

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UNDERSTANDING OUR COMPLEX WORLD:
CONTRIBUTIONS TO PHILOSOPHY, SOCIAL SCIENCE, AND SCIENCE
2012 McNair Scholars Online Journal
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 underrepresented 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.
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
Table of Contents

The Portland State Scholars

Editorial Board

Between Two Worlds: Identity and Community in Oaxaca
By Mandy Elder
Faculty mentor: Dr. Jack Corbett

Investigating some Correlates of Hegemonic Masculinity and Criminal Motives among Residents in Juvenile Correctional Facilities.
By Caitlin D. Jones
Faculty Mentor: Eric Mankowski

Spinoza and Virtue: The significance of habituation to a virtuous character to the ethics of the Ethics
By bobbie sue schindler
Faculty Mentor: Dr. Angela Coventry

Effects of Environmental Enrichment and Natural Substrates on Increasing Species-Specific Behavior of Captive Northern White-Cheeked Gibbons (Nomascus leucogenys leucogenys)
By Arina Woolery
Faculty Mentor: Dr. Deborah Duffield

The Synthesis and Characterization of SNAFR-5 Derivatives
By Jia Li Zhao
Faculty mentor: Dr. Robert M. Strongin
The Portland State Scholars 2011

AMANDA ALVARADO
MAJOR: PSYCHOLOGY
MENTOR: DR. KEITH KAUFMAN
PROJECT TITLE: “WOMEN’S STUDIES EDUCATION AND RAPE MYTH ACCEPTANCE”

CARMAN BROWN
MAJOR: BIOLOGY
MENTOR: DR. MICHAEL BARTLETT
PROJECT TITLE: “POSITION AND ROLE OF ARCHAEOAL TRANSCRIPTION FACTOR E.”

MARY CRONIN
MAJOR: INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
MENTOR: DR. TURGRUL KESKIN
PROJECT TITLE: “POST 9/11 FIRST GENERATION MUSLIM AMERICAN WOMEN AND THEIR DIFFICULTIES IN ATTENDING FOUR YEAR UNIVERSITIES IN PORTLAND, OREGON”
ADRIENNE CROSKEY
MAJOR: PSYCHOLOGY
MENTOR: DR. NANCY M. KOROLOFF
PROJECT TITLE: “THE PERCEPTIONS OF BIRACIAL WOMEN ON DATING PARTNER CHOICE: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE EFFECTS OF COMMUNITY OF ORIGIN”

JOAQUIN DELATORRE-MACNEIL
MAJOR: PHILOSOPHY
MENTOR: DR. TOM SEPPALAINEN
PROJECT TITLE: “NATIVE INTERCONNECTEDNESS VS. ECO-FEMINISM: A DIFFERENCE OF EXPERIENCE”

GABRIELA DOMINGUEZ-ESCUTIA
MAJOR: COMMUNITY HEALTH
MENTOR: DR. CARLOS CRESPO
PROJECT TITLE: “LEISURE TIME PHYSICAL ACTIVITY, SERUM 25(OH) D, AND ALL-CAUSE MORTALITY IN THE THIRD NATIONAL HEALTH AND NUTRITION EXAMINATION SURVEY”

AMANDA ELDER
MAJOR: CHILD AND FAMILY STUDIES, SPANISH
MENTOR: DR. JACK CORBETT
PROJECT TITLE: “QUE LE ECHEN GANAS: CHANGES IN THE FAMILY DYNAMICS OF FIRST-GENERATION WOMEN ATTENDING UNIVERSITY IN OAXACA, MEXICO”

CAMERON GEISE
MAJORS: HISTORY
MENTOR: DR. MICHAEL LUPRO
PROJECT TITLE: “EVIDENCE AND EPISTEMOLOGY IN AMERICAN HISTORY TEXTBOOKS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY”

ANDRES GUZMAN
MAJOR: INTERNATIONAL STUDIES AND ECONOMICS
MENTOR: DR. LEOPOLDO RODRIGUEZ
PROJECT TITLE: ”THE NATURE OF MODERN AGRICULTURE: SOYBEANS IN SOUTH AMERICA”

TRACY HANDRICH
MAJOR: GEOLOGY
MENTOR: DR. CAMERON SMITH AND DR. MARTIN STRECK
PROJECT TITLE: “COMPOSITIONAL ZONATION OF THE DINNER CREEK TUFF MAGMA BODY AS RECORDED BY ERUPTIVE COMPONENTS AT JOHN DAY, OR”

MICHAEL HIGGENBOTHAM
MAJOR: PSYCHOLOGY
MENTOR: DR. THOMAS KINDERMANN
PROJECT TITLE: ”SOCIAL NETWORKS OF AUTISTIC ADOLESCENTS”
NHUHYEN HOANG  
MAJOR: BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION, ACCOUNTING  
MENTOR: DR. JEANNE ENDERS  
PROJECT TITLE: “THE EFFECTS OF COLLEGE ROMANCE ON STUDENT ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE”

CAITLIN JONES  
MAJOR: PSYCHOLOGY AND ENGLISH  
MENTOR: DR. ERIC MANKOWSKI  
PROJECT TITLE: “HOW DO JUVENILE CORRECTIONS AFFECT HEGEMONIC MASCULINITIES AND CRIMINAL THINKING?”

DANE OLSEN  
MAJOR: HISTORY  
MENTOR: DR. FREDRICH E. SCHULER  

MARTIN RODRIGUEZ  
MAJOR: PHYSICS  
MENTOR: DR. MARK WEISLOGEL  
PROJECT TITLE: “THE UTILITY OF STK IN DETERMINING TECHCUBE CUBE Sat ORBITS”

RUSSELL SANCHEZ  
MAJOR: ENGLISH  
MENTOR: DR. MARCIA KLOTZ  
PROJECT TITLE: “THE HISTORYLESS ANONYMITY OF RAIN-FORESTS: NONHUMAN AGENCY AND THE REJECTIONS OF ROMANTICISM IN SALMON RUSHDIE’S MIDNIGHT’S CHILDREN”

BOBBIE SUE SCHINDLER  
MAJORS: PHILOSOPHY  
MENTOR: DR. ANGELA COVENTRY  
PROJECT TITLE: “SPINOZA AND VIRTUE: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF HABITUATION TO A VIRTUOUS CHARACTER TO THE ETHICS OF THE ETHICS”

HOPE SKELTON  
MAJOR: LIBERAL STUDIES AND POLITICAL SCIENCE  
MENTORS: DR. DAVID KINSELLA  
PROJECT TITLE: “ENDGAME, CIVIL LIBERTIES AND RACISM”

MICHELLE STONEBRAKER  
MAJOR: ENGLISH  
MENTOR: DR. GRACE DILLON  
PROJECT TITLE: “WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS’S GHOST OF CHANCE: MAPPING OUR WAY TO THE APOCALYPSE AND BEYOND”
Tasha Triplett
Major: History and Liberal Studies
Mentor: Dr. Patricia Schechter
Project Title: “From Self Defense to Self Determination: The Revolutionary Legacy of Oakland Black Panther Party (BPP) Community School”

Brain Vargo
Major: Psychology
Mentor: Dr. Ellen Skinner
Project Title: “Social Climate and Positive Youth Development in Juvenile Justice”

Mondell Wells
Major: Mechanical Engineering
Mentor: Dr. Raúl Bayoán Cal
Project Title: “Ultrasonic Methods for Object Detection and Threat Liquid Discrimination”

Zachary Wong
Major: Community Development
Mentor: Dr. Samuel Henry
Project Title: “E Mau Ana Ka Ha’aheo: A Case Study on Ke Kula Kaiapuni” O ‘Ānuenue”

Arina Woolery
Major: Biology
Mentor: Dr. Debbi Duffield
Project Title: “Effects of Environmental Enrichment and Natural Substrates on Increasing Species-Specific Behavior of Captive Northern White-Cheeked Gibbons (Nomascus leucogenys leucogenys)”

Jia Zhao
Major: Chemistry
Mentor: Dr. Robert M. Strongin
Project Title: “The Synthesis and Characterization of SNAFR-5 Derivatives”

Junior Scholars:
Dominic Paz
Major: Child and Family Studies
Mentor: Dr. Ben Anderson-Nathe

Rose Sorfa
Major: Applied Linguistics and Spanish
Mentor: Dr. Keith Walters
Editorial Board

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