Recognition Reception: Achievements and Awards

On Friday, April 24, the McNair Scholars Recognition Reception was held at the Lied Center. In addition to celebrating scholar accomplishments, faculty and graduate student mentors were recognized for their support of the program. Over 80 faculty and graduate student mentors, friends, and family members attended the dinner reception.

Honored guests for the evening were the May 2009 graduates, including: Joshua Alvarez, anthropology; Rebecca Beals, sociology; Acacia Caraballo, chemical engineering; Juan Cangas, psychology; Martin Diaz, electrical engineering; Kyle Jackson, environmental studies; Willie Novotny, biochemistry; Chelsea Rivera, child, youth and family studies; Maegan Stevens-Liska, history; and Mo Wax, business administration. The graduating seniors shared their post-graduation plans, and were awarded a dictionary embossed with their name and McNair Scholars Program. The graduates also received a sky blue honor cord, in memory of Dr. Ronald McNair’s flight suit, to wear for the commencement ceremony in May.

The featured speaker for the event was Heather Flores. A recipient of the prestigious IGERT Fellowship and the National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship, she is a co-author of at least five publications. The research conducted by her lab entitled, Drosophila Hybrid Incompatibilities, was recognized as number 7 in Science Magazine’s “Top Ten Breakthroughs of the Year in 2006.”

Ms. Flores spoke about her McNair experience and how it helped her reach her academic and career goals of obtaining a Ph.D. Dr. Gordon Woodword, Department of Mathematics, initially encouraged her to get involved in research. During the summers of 2002 and 2003, she worked with Dr. Ricardo Cortez at Tulane University. As a UNL McNair Scholar (2003-2005), she conducted research under the guidance of Dr. John Osterman and Dr. Patricia Herman of the School of Biological Sciences. In the Summer of 2004, she participated in the Leadership Alliance program at Cornell University under Dr. Charles Aquadro, with whom she works now as an advanced doctoral student in genetics and development.

Detailing her academic progression, she explained how she went from feeling unprepared as an incoming college freshman, to feeling confident and prepared not only to apply to graduate school, but succeed once she got there. Some of the changes were credited to learning and maturity, but she concluded, “most were due to the help and guidance from McNair and my faculty mentors.”

Another highlight of the evening was the presentation of two awards to acknowledge a faculty mentor and a graduate student who’ve made significant contributions to the McNair Scholars Program and to our scholars.

For his mentoring and support of our scholars and for his commitment to the program, Dr. Cody Hollist received the 2009 McNair Faculty Appreciation Award. Dr. Hollist has served as a McNair faculty mentor for three years working with Corey Minchow, Chelsea Rivera, and Brittany Sznaider-Murray. As a first-generation college student, Dr. Hollist has a deep understanding of McNair scholars. He knows from his own experience the challenges they face and serves as proof positive that with a lot of hard work and some great mentoring, you can compete with the best. Last fall, Dr. Hollist shared his experiences as a first-generation college student with the incoming scholars and described his journey to becoming a faculty member at UNL. In presenting his award, Dr. Laurie Bellows quoted Sir Isaac Newton, “If our scholars are able to ‘see further,’ it is because they’re able to stand on the shoulders of giants, like Cody Hollist.”

The Graduate Student Appreciation Award recipient was Tony Kelly II, a doctoral student in physics and a former McNair scholar from California State University-Bakersfield. Tony has served as a panelist at the annual New Scholar Orientation, promoting the benefits of being a McNair Scholar, and speaking about the joys of being a graduate student. He is a talented and engaged graduate student, a promising scholar of high-energy physics, and a recognized outstanding teacher of physics. In 2007, he received his department award for outstanding graduate teaching assistant. Dr. Bellows noted, “Tony represents what the McNair Program is all about.”

Funded by the Department of Education and housed in UNL’s Office of Graduate Studies, the McNair Program prepares undergraduate students for doctoral studies through involvement in research and other scholarly activities. Participants demonstrate strong academic potential and are first generation college students who meet maximum financial guidelines or are members of groups underrepresented in graduate education.
In this technology-driven generation, we're continually looking for new ways to reach students and faculty who aren't familiar with the McNair Scholars Program. One of the goals for 2008-09 was to develop a McNair recruitment video, which would highlight the benefits and purpose of the program. Through the creativity of University Communications, this goal was achieved. MJ Bruce and Dave Fitzgibbons filmed the scenarios, spent hours editing, and then transformed it into a video that captured the spirit of the McNair Program. The video features several scholars and mentors, in various disciplines, talking about the benefits of the McNair Program, as well as the impact the program has made on their lives.

Watch the video by going to the McNair Website: [http://www.unl.edu/mcnair/index.shtml](http://www.unl.edu/mcnair/index.shtml)

“Once you start being a part of a research community, you can actually see yourself doing that.” – Emily Haferbier Trotter

“It was well worth it, because in the end, you had that feeling of accomplishment.” – Willie Novotny

“McNair opened my eyes to what graduate school is all about and what the possibilities could be for me.” – Mo Wax

“We have the passion and the drive, but we don’t have the information, so the McNair program prepares students (for graduate school). They are basically setting you up for success in graduate school.” – Juan Cangas

Dr. Rick Lombardo and Senior Scholars – McNair offers classes and sessions to help students navigate the path to graduate school.

“This is a really good opportunity for students who are serious about doing research.” – Jeff Belmont
McNair Scholars continue to make an impact on the University of Nebraska-Lincoln campus and in the community through their volunteerism and leadership roles.

On Saturday, April 24, a group of 14 Scholars and McNair Staff participated in the UNL Big Event, Community Service Day. Their project was a spring clean-up in Lincoln’s Malone Neighborhood. Participating Scholars included: Rebecca Beals, Khoa Chu, Tara Cossel, Martin Diaz, Mike Gubbels, Michael Harpster, Beth Ridling, Brian Shreck, Sherri Sklenar, Brittany Sznajder-Murray, Maegan Stevens-Liska, and Morrel Wax, along with McNair Staff members Dr. Laurie Bellows and Leslie Martinez.

In addition to their participation in the Big Event, UNL McNair Scholars are involved in numerous outreach and leadership activities throughout the year. This is just a partial listing of their campus and community involvement:

- **Joshua Alvarez** – University Honors Program, Latino Achievement Mentoring Program; Chancellor’s Leadership Award; LeaderShape; and Chancellor’s Innocents Society

- **Rebecca Beals** – Heartland Big Brothers Big Sisters mentor; Lighthouse Organization tutor and role model for middle school and high school students

- **Jeff Belmont** – CASNR Ambassador; UNL Department of Entomology Open House volunteer; and an undergraduate teaching assistant for Entomology 116, Insect Identification Lab at UNL for the Fall 2008 and Spring 2009 terms

- **Juan Cangas** – started the Goodrich Latino Club, an after-school Latino Mentoring program at Goodrich Middle School in Lincoln. Juan started the club as a place where Latino and non-Latino students can come together to discuss matters about their culture, school, and community. The group meets weekly, and they focus the sessions on certain principles like family, cultural awareness, and stereotypes.

- **Tara Cossel** – Heartland Big Brothers Big Sisters; UCARE ambassador; Project SAFE translator; volunteer tutor for psychology, Spanish, biology, and research methods; UNL International Affairs Conversation Partner; note-taker for the Office of Services for Students with Disabilities; and project coordinator for Dr. Dennis McChargue’s Health and Addiction Vulnerability Lab.

- **Martin Diaz** – University Honors Program, and president of Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers

- **Michael Gubbels** – Volunteer participant in promotional video for need-based scholarship awareness for Nebraska Alumni Association Foundation, Computer Science and Engineering (CSE) Student Advisory Panel, CSE Day volunteer; and an undergraduate teaching assistant for Introduction to Computer Science II course at UNL, Spring 2009.

- **Drew Nelson** – Along with four other veterans, started a UNL Student Veterans Organization to provide advocacy for student veterans and help them learn about available resources. At their inaugural meeting on April 22, Drew was elected treasurer of the group.

- **Maegan Stevens-Liska** – President of the Undergraduate Sociology Association for 2008-09; Nebraska Undergraduate Sociological Symposium (NUSS) Guest Panelist on Illegal Immigration; and UNL Distinguished Scholars Panelist

- **Brittany Sznajder-Murray** – Treasurer for the Family Science Organization (FSO) for 2008-09.; Big Brothers Big Sisters; and a Husker Choices Peer Educator, an alcohol education organization at UNL

- **Chelsea Rivera** - University Honors Program

- **Morrel Wax** – UNL Diversity Committee Member; Parliamentarian of African Peoples Union; Delegate for Big XII Conference on Black Student Government (2005-2007); Susan Buffett Learning Community mentor; College of Business Administration mentor; and President of Alpha Phi Alpha

UNL McNair on Facebook

The UNL McNair program created a Facebook presence to facilitate communication between current McNair scholars and alumni. Current scholars can use Facebook to connect with one another and develop a stronger sense of community. Alumni can provide valuable insights for our current scholars and keep us up-to-date on their successes. **Look for UNL McNair next time you log into Facebook!**
McNair Scholars have had a very busy year. While Senior Scholars were completing their graduate school applications and finalizing their poster presentations for the April Undergraduate Research Conference, Junior Scholars were turning in their summer research proposals and Undergraduate Creative Activities and Research Experiences (UCARE) applications.

Sponsored by the Pepsi Endowment, the UCARE program provides research funding opportunities for undergraduates to work directly with UNL faculty mentors. Between 300-400 students, in over 70 departments on the UNL campus, receive UCARE funding each year. All undergraduates are eligible to apply for up to two years of funding through UCARE.

Through the UCARE program, McNair Scholars receive additional support, allowing students to remain engaged in a research project with their faculty mentors and continue their McNair summer research project. In the past three years, over 30 McNair Scholars have received research funding from UCARE.

According to Maegan Stevens-Liska, a Master Scholar, she gained basic research skills during the McNair summer research experience, which were crucial while carrying out the more independent and in-depth research for her senior thesis. With the addition of UCARE funding, faculty mentors continue teaching scholars to learn how to attack a problem, to understand how to research it, and to evaluate and summarize the findings. As Maegan recalled, "With previous research experience already under my belt, I found it much easier to think about how to take an already existing project and logically expand it to a thesis-worthy topic."

In addition to directing the UCARE Program, Dr. Laura Damuth serves as Undergraduate Fellowship Advisor. Recently, Dr. Damuth presented a workshop for the McNair Junior Scholars entitled, Graduate Fellowships: What They Are and How to Apply. She stressed that the fellowship application process can be complicated and the criteria are very specific. She advised Scholars to allow themselves sufficient time to search for the appropriate fellowships, but Dr. Damuth suggests to "always start by contacting the graduate program itself."

Dr. Damuth offered this advice for students looking for funding:

1. Contact the graduate program itself to ask about available financial support. Some universities will have a fellowship office that can help you identify opportunities for financial support. For example, the UNL Office of Graduate Studies Set has an extensive list of available external fellowships. Check out this list at [http://www.unl.edu/gradstudies/current/funding-external.shtml](http://www.unl.edu/gradstudies/current/funding-external.shtml)

2. When searching for external fellowship funding, use online search engines and databases (i.e., FastWeb or the Princeton Review) and books (i.e., Petersen's Scholarships, Grants & Prizes) to find more general listings.

3. Consider applying for national fellowships, such as the National Science Foundation Graduate Fellowship. Dr. Damuth notes that it takes a great amount of “planning, thought, and preparation” to apply for the more competitive fellowships so “start early.” Plan well ahead of the deadline. According to Dr. Damuth, you’ll want to spend considerable time over the summer writing your fellowship proposal. If you’re interested in applying for competitive fellowships, make an appointment with Dr. Damuth.

4. Think global! Consider applying for a Fulbright or a Rotary Fellowship. These programs allow fellowship recipients to study, teach, and conduct research in other countries.
## McNair Research Projects Funded by UCARE for 2008-09

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<td>Juan Cangas</td>
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<td>Khoa Chu</td>
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<td>What Influences Minority Students to Attend Predominantly White Institutions?</td>
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<td>Father Absence and Adolescent Risk Behavior</td>
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<td>Sherri Sklenar</td>
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<td>Brittany Sznajder-Murray</td>
<td>Impact of Immigration Raids on Children and Adolescents</td>
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How to Be a Successful Graduate Student Panel

This spring, McNair Senior Scholars met with a panel comprised of both new and experienced graduate students who offered their advice on how to be a successful graduate student.

Malcolm Tassi, a first-year physics graduate student, told the scholars that “there is no way to prepare for the intensity of graduate school, but the rewards are profound.” Asked how graduate school is different from undergraduate studies, Tassi said, “Graduate school changes your perspective. It makes you look at things in a different way.” He encouraged scholars to draw from the passions and excitement of fellow graduate students.

Emily Haferbier, a first-year sociology student—and former McNair scholar—said she was most surprised at the amount of work in graduate studies. She advised scholars to “expect much more work than you have as an undergraduate.” She also described how she often felt like an imposter, like she didn’t belong, but she assured scholars that “everyone feels this way at the beginning.” (Her fellow panelists all agreed.) Emily found a network within the department to support her. She offered one final word of advice, “Don’t get caught up in department politics.”

Jenny Green, a fifth-year doctoral student in statistics, encouraged scholars to look to the advanced graduate students for mentoring. “Experienced graduate students,” she said, “are there to support you. They know the unwritten rules and can be extremely helpful as you navigate your first year.” She also advised scholars to “take breaks from studies and enjoy time away from school. Don’t be afraid to ask for help. Remain open-minded and seek opportunities that interest you.”

Bill Bauer, an advanced doctoral student in philosophy, advised scholars to keep and maintain a goals matrix, and update it each semester. He also noted that successful graduate students keep a “research and ideas” journal to keep track of ideas that you’d like to further explore. On the following page, Bill offers his tips for graduate school success.
How to Be a Successful Graduate Student

by William Bauer

Success in graduate school isn’t something that occurs naturally. You have to work at it. Here are some recommendations and strategies that have worked for me:

1. Be a careful observer
   • Keenly observe department norms and how people interact and work together for daily activities, departmental functions, as well as seminars you participate in.
   • In your seminars, observe the types of questions asked and how senior graduate students (and other faculty that may be attending the seminar) approach issues.
   • In your readings, attend to the overall argument or idea and relevant details, maintaining reading notes. Outline the main points and questions you have to prepare for the seminar. Note items of special interest that may be good research topics for that seminar or for later research projects.

2. Be disciplined
   • Have a schedule and stick to it, completing all work on time. Much of your time will be flexible, and you’ll be expected to be self-sufficient, but it can be very useful to form study or discussion groups with peers in order to structure your time.
   • Know the department and graduate studies milestones and make them your milestones. Meeting these milestones on time means that at each stage of your program you’ll be able to focus your energy on that stage.
   • Don’t take incompletes in your seminars, unless absolutely necessary.

3. Be proactive
   • Talk frequently to your professors and peers about ideas that interest you. Follow-up on comments that your professors give about your work.
   • Be creative in the content of your work and how you approach your work.
   • Actively reflect upon discussions and projects. Ask: How could this have gone better? How can I apply this in the future?
   • Besides these examples of being proactive, there are three things you can start doing right away to make your graduate experience successful…

Recommended actions:
1. Keep a research/ideas journal
   • Keep this focused on topics of most interest to you from seminars, discussions, and readings; the seeds of your dissertation and further research might be in here; keep your journal with you wherever you go.

2. Make and update a goals matrix
   • Create a cell in the matrix for each semester of your program; for example, if you’re in a 5-year program, you’ll have 10 semester cells, plus summers. In these cells, enter the classes you plan on taking, courses you want to teach/TA, program milestones, and planned dates for submitting papers to conferences and/or journals.

3. Seek a mentor
   • You may not need to establish a faculty mentor in the first year, but you should keep an eye out for who might be a good mentor (be observant.) Talk to senior graduate students about how they sought a mentor.
   • It’s likely that your eventual mentor will be a professor you did work for or wrote a paper for that really sparked your passion. Consider revising your project and/or pursing further questions pertinent to it, and seek more feedback from that professor. It’s possible that such projects may be the beginnings of your dissertation.

McNair by the Numbers

The UNL McNair Scholars Program has served 196 students since 1995. With the May 2008 graduates, 174 – or 88.7 percent – have earned bachelor's degrees. Sixty-five have gone on to earn master's degrees; 10 have already achieved doctoral degrees and an additional 8 have earned professional and other degrees.

As of Spring 2009, 22 UNL McNair Alumni were enrolled in Ph.D. programs, 21 McNair Scholars were actively pursuing master’s degrees, and 3 were pursuing professional doctorates.

McNair Alumni, please keep us informed about your progress in graduate school. You may update your information at anytime: http://www.unl.edu/mcnair/scholarupdate.shtml
Kudos to McNair Scholars


Rebecca Beals successfully defended her honors thesis in March, and graduated With Distinction. She won the Alan P. Bates Outstanding Undergraduate Award and the Vanetta A. Aaron 2009 Undergraduate Student Paper competition in Race, Class, or Gender for her paper entitled, *English Language Learners in the United States and the Re-Valuation of Culture: Latent Racism within Public Education.*

Juan Cangas graduated With High Distinction.

Martin Diaz submitted an honors thesis, *Analysis of Thin-Film Photovoltaic Materials.*


McNair Scholars Headed for Graduate School

Joshua Alvarez has accepted a graduate assistantship from the University of Maryland higher education leadership master’s program. Joshua chose the University of Maryland because of program offerings, faculty, and support offered. He will begin his graduate coursework in July 2009.

Rebecca Beals was accepted to the Ph.D. program in sociology at the University of New Mexico, and will begin her studies in Fall 2009. Rebecca is very excited about the diverse population on the campus, located in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Martin Diaz was accepted to the Ph.D. program in electrical engineering at the University of Delaware. He was awarded a research assistantship for Fall 2009. Martin chose University of Delaware because of their strong solar energy research program, which aligns to his research interests.

Willie Novotny was accepted to the University of Southern California Keck School of Medicine, and will begin an M.D. program in August 2009.

Maegan Stevens-Liska will begin a master’s program in history at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in Fall 2009. Maegan chose UNL because it allowed her to continue her ongoing research with her undergraduate faculty mentor, along with her ties to the Lincoln community.

Mo Wax was accepted into the student affairs master’s program at Central Missouri University in Warrensburg, and will begin his program in Fall 2009.
Congratulations to these McNair Scholars who were on the Dean’s List for Fall 2008:

**College of Arts & Sciences:** Rebecca Beals, Juan Cangas, Morgan Conley, Tara Cossel, Michael Harpster, Willie Novotny, Beth Ridling, Brian Shreck, and Sherri Sklenar

**College of Education and Human Sciences:** Chelsea Rivera and Brittany Sznajder-Murray

**College of Engineering:** Adrian Soltero

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**Once a McNair Scholar - Always a McNair Scholar**

by Carol Boehler

“Once a McNair Scholar, always a McNair Scholar,” is something students hear quite often during their participation in the UNL McNair Program. When scholars were asked directly what the saying means to them, some scholars thought that it referred to the fact that they’re required to report their academic progress until they earn a Ph.D. Others pointed to the benefit that scholars are eligible for graduate application fee waivers at participating universities around the country, even if they take a break for a few years to conquer the world. When scholars realize that they want to go to graduate school, they’ll revise their personal statement and update their curriculum vita, but one thing will remain constant, *McNair Scholar, University of Nebraska-Lincoln.*

Mo Wax offers his interpretation: “McNair is like a fraternity for academics. Once you make the commitment to be a part of this selective community, you join scholars from across the country who have similar interests in research and academics.”

From the impression he got at the California McNair Conference at Berkeley and on his campus visits, Mo felt that as a McNair scholar, he could go to any college campus with a McNair Program and be welcomed with open arms. That’s a common thread, because throughout the country, the McNair Program is referred to as a community of scholars. There is a sense of community within the cohorts and between the cohorts at UNL, as well as across the nation. You may be hundreds of miles away from Nebraska, and discover you have an immediate connection with someone you just met, because they participated in McNair. It’s with pride that you tell them that you are a McNair Scholar too.

Nathan Palmer, McNair alumnus and current graduate assistant, affirms that being a McNair Scholar is a lifelong commitment to the McNair family. He notes, “The day you become a McNair Scholar you join a family. Unlike anything else on your CV, the title of McNair Scholar will always signal that you are a worthwhile investment, a well-trained scholar and a community leader.”

Although all of the interpretations are correct, Dr. Bellows sums it up by noting, “being a McNair Scholar is part of your identity; it becomes part of who you are.”

It’s as simple, and as complicated as that.

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**McNair Recommendations**

Do you know an undergraduate who might be a good candidate for the McNair Scholars Program?

We appreciate and welcome recommendations from faculty and advisers.

To recommend a student, email or call Carol Boehler, cboehler2@unl.edu, 402-472-5062.