

**Profile of  
McNair Scholars Program  
Academic Success Center, UW-River Falls  
2010 Regents Academic Staff Excellence Award Recipient**

**Department Facts, Activities, and Resources**

- The McNair Scholars Program motto is “Developing leaders through graduate education”
- Since its inception on the UW-River Falls campus 10 years ago, the program’s mission has been to prepare first-generation, low-income, and underrepresented students for PhD programs; the program objective is to enroll 80% of each cohort in a graduate program immediately after graduation
- Over the course of three competitive grant cycles, the success of the McNair Scholars Program has brought in nearly \$3 million to the university for a total of three grants awarded by the U.S. Department of Education under federal TRIO funding
- The program has been successful at retaining and graduating its students, but it also has recently implemented an aggressive and innovative strategy to increase the number and quality of the admission offers that its students receive; as a result, more UW-River Falls students are being admitted to graduate programs at institutions such as Princeton University, University of Michigan, Michigan State, Pennsylvania State University, Vanderbilt, Clemson, the University of California, and others
- 85-100% of each year’s McNair scholars admitted to graduate programs are fully supported through the completion of their graduate degrees; on average, only 16% of graduate students nationally are funded through fellowships and assistantships
- The impact of the program involves faculty, staff, and students across disciplines and across all campus colleges; the program has been recognized by faculty and staff in each college for the outstanding work it does to enhance and expand undergraduate research experiences and to strategically prepare students for competitive admission to graduate programs in their fields of interest
- Activities such as monthly seminars, academic conferences, presentations, and membership in professional organizations develop McNair scholars as leaders among their peers, and expose them to the three tenets of academic life: scholarship, teaching, and service
- The activities of the program significantly impact the campus culture by
  1. promoting the growth of undergraduate research and scholarly endeavors in multiple disciplines,
  2. increasing the number of enrolled students who develop the aspiration of earning a doctoral degree, and
  3. raising the national visibility and positive reputation of the quality of the program’s graduates
- Since 2001, nine McNair scholars have received the UW-River Falls Chancellor’s Award
- The program is coordinated by three staff members: a 25% director, one full-time assistant director, and a part-time support person, as well as student assistants
- The McNair Scholars Program is a Department of Education TRIO program, funded in 1989 by the U.S. Congress, to honor the memory of Dr. Ronald E. McNair, an African-American laser physicist and astronaut killed in the Challenger explosion, and his dedicated pursuit of scientific knowledge and personal excellence

**Additional Impact of the McNair Scholars Program**

- The success of McNair scholars continues to alert other students from similar backgrounds that they too can achieve the height of academic success.
- The program fosters inclusiveness because it creates phenomenal success for students from low-income and first-generation backgrounds and groups historically underrepresented in post-secondary and

graduate education (African American, Hispanic/Latino, and American Indian/Alaskan Native); because of the strategic support of the program, these students are receiving fully funded admission to prestigious graduate programs and universities.

- The McNair program continues to implement innovative ways to serve the students and the campus. Recruitment efforts have been a collaborative effort with faculty and staff across disciplines and departments to identify potential scholars early. One of these creative strategies has been to require the scholars to pursue summer research opportunities at major research institutions across the country, in addition to early involvement in research on campus within their departments. Students attend workshops, identify areas of potential research and graduate study, and systematically pursue research opportunities with foremost experts in their fields. As a result, 11 of the 15 McNair scholars in 2009 conducted paid summer internships at universities such as Duke, Purdue, Vanderbilt, and Michigan State. These opportunities served to elevate the profile of McNair students and in turn lead to more competitive applications to graduate programs.

#### **In the Department's Own Words:**

- “Efforts at continuous improvement have been ongoing and significant in the past four years of the program. By national McNair Program standards, we produced our first five completed PhD’s in five to six years as opposed to the national average of eight to 10 years. Our stated objective is to have over 50% of each graduating cohort earn a PhD within eight years. The first cohort has achieved this goal ahead of schedule. We have successfully implemented earlier exposure to graduate school options, identification and recruitment of *Emerging Scholars* from the freshman and sophomore ranks and increased the numbers of applicants from chemistry, physics, biology, agricultural economics and animal science.”

Njia Lawrence-Porter, Assistant Director, McNair Scholars Program

- “As far as impact on the campus, community and the institution, I believe the most significant contribution of the program is in the way it involves faculty in one-to-one mentoring of the McNair Scholars. Every scholar must have a UW-River Falls faculty mentor to guide them through the process of understanding research in their discipline and through the process of applying for graduate programs. The McNair Program is one of the only sources for faculty to be recognized and financially rewarded for their direct involvement with students in undergraduate research and continuation into graduate programs. Over the past four to five years, the program has involved faculty in the sciences, agriculture, environmental sciences, humanities and social sciences. In collaboration with departments, the program is impacting more students to go directly into funded PhD programs.”

Jill Moe, Director, Academic Success Center