

The Dream of a PhD: A McNair Scholar's Journey

By Erin Long-Kytonen



I'm still waiting for somebody to teach me the secret handshake.

Two years ago, I had no clue what a "curriculum vitae" was. I couldn't have begun to explain the difference between a terminal master's degree and an entry-level doctoral program. "Matriculation" sounded like an undesirable medical condition, and I knew nothing of teaching assistantships or portable fellowships. To me, the post-graduate world simply did not exist.

After all, I was an unlikely candidate for college in the first place. My mother, being a single parent, had unlimited love to give my little sister and me, but very little money. Any chance I had of going to college as a traditional student was extinguished by a combination of personal crisis, abuse, depression and burnt-out teachers in the public high school system. I finally earned my GED after attending four different high schools and promptly moved across the country, unsure if I would ever attend school again.

When I finally did decide to go to college, it wasn't because I had lofty professional goals and aspirations. I didn't plan to be a doctor, or a social worker, or even an interior designer. No, I chose college as an alternative to the mind-numbing jobs I had been working – from conveyor belt, to assembly line, to video store. With each 12-hour day, I physically began to feel "dumber." I suppose, then, you could say that I went to college to keep from losing my mind. I never would have guessed that five years and three colleges later I would be here, not only preparing to receive the bachelor's degree I've worked so hard for, but also preparing for the next chapter of my scholarly career.

Quite frankly, a good portion of my undergraduate life was spent learning *how* to go to college. For the first two years, I had nobody to guide me except for whomever I happened to find on the other end of the telephone line. No member of my family had earned a degree, and none of my friends were college students, either. I navigated the murky waters of applications, assessment, registration and financial aid with uncertain footing, but quiet determination. Surprisingly, I found that I absolutely loved being a student – but always felt like I was fighting to get ahead of the game.

I suddenly became more involved in activities on campus and started thinking seriously about my goals and how to achieve them.

Eventually I became reacquainted with close family friend and retired EWU professor Dr. Jay Moynahan, who encouraged me to apply to Eastern. His influence on my decision making was crucial, and he became for me what I was in dire need of: a mentor. But even with his support and guidance, I was still missing a certain sense of scholarly companionship. I lived alone, off campus, and felt fundamentally disconnected from my classmates and the university in general.

Which is when I became interested in the McNair Scholars Program. The Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program is designed to encourage low-income, first-generation and underrepresented students to pursue graduate studies. Funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, the program is named for Ronald E. McNair, an astronaut on the USS *Challenger* space shuttle. The first programs were funded in 1989; the program has been at Eastern since 1995.

My mother remarked to me later that the change in my attitude toward college after being accepted into the McNair Program was almost immediate. I suddenly became more involved in activities on campus and started thinking seriously about my goals and how to achieve them. I looked around at the

other students who had been accepted into the program with me and realized that I now had over a dozen mentors instead of one.

Some of those students have stories that are at once humbling and inspirational. Although it is not exclusively a minority program, 80% of McNair Scholars are minority students. "It is really a program rooted in diversity," says McNair Scholar and Eastern alum Winona Beck. One scholar, Martin Meraz, was born in Mexico and went to work shining shoes at the

age of 10 to help support his family. The family of 14 brothers and sisters finally came to the U.S. in search of a better life, only to find that life as an immigrant wasn't much easier. "I came home angry, frustrated, crying and begging my mother not to send me back to school," says Martin, who at that time did not understand English. Fortunately, he did go back to school. Moreover, he decided to go to college, even though he knew nothing about the application process. He credits the McNair Program with giving him the necessary support to help him achieve his full academic potential.



Dr. McKinney works with Yuett Beltran (left) and Erin Long-Kytanen. Yuett, a McNair Scholar, earned an undergraduate and master's degree at EWU and is working on the McNair staff while she awaits entrance to a Ph.D. program.

"Without the McNair Scholars Program," Martin says, "people like me would be falling through the cracks of the system and not continuing with their education." He now pursues a Ph.D. at WSU.

McNair director Dr. Karen McKinney admits that she still gets emotional when listening to some scholars' stories of triumph over adversity. She hopes that many scholars will return to EWU as



Dr. Karen McKinney

faculty or staff, joking that "then I could finally feel like my work here is done - and retire!" In fact, most scholars, including myself, have a desire to return to their communities as professionals who can make a difference.

But first we have to get our Ph.Ds., and before that we have to get to graduate school. This, of course, requires a considerable amount of preparation. As such, the program offers abundant services to guide each scholar through the process. I received help with writing my statement of purpose and curriculum vitae, as well as assistance in finding potential graduate school programs and

financial aid resources. I have attended research conferences, campus visits and cultural events — with expenses paid by the program. Tutoring and counseling services are available at no cost, not to mention the program's outstanding new facilities in Monroe Hall. In all honesty, the program offers so many tools, resources and opportunities that it would be impractical to attempt to list them all.

However, the most crucial component of the program is, inarguably, the opportunity to complete undergraduate research. I was one of 16 scholars to complete a research internship this past summer. I worked under the direction of my faculty mentor, associate professor of English Dr. Anthony Flinn, and researched the presence of culture in the writings of three modern American poets. I received a stipend totaling \$2,800 for this project and signed a contract agreeing not to work or take classes during the summer session.

In addition to our respective projects, scholars were required to attend day-long seminars once a week. The seminars, which one scholar referred to as "academic boot camp," were sweltering marathons of workshops that covered such areas as GRE preparation, presentation skills, guest speakers, financial planning and graduate school applications. Balancing research with the strain that emerged in these seminars seemed, at times, impossible. I was not the only one who achieved full-blown meltdown status on more than one occasion. Some nights I would lie awake,

The McNair Program at a glance

The McNair Scholars Program is one of six federal TRIO programs that motivate and support students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Other TRIO programs include Upward Bound and Upward Bound Mathematics/Science, Educational Talent Search, Educational Opportunity Centers, and Student Support Services.

As of 1999, 155 McNair Programs have worked with over 3,000 students nationwide. There are four McNair Programs in Washington state.

Eastern's McNair Scholars Program has served 110 students since 1995. Of that total, 18 have earned master's degrees, 57 have earned bachelor's degrees, 16 are enrolled in graduate school and 31 are currently enrolled undergraduates. One student, Louise Wold, earned her Ph.D. in biology from WSU in 2001.

McNair Scholars are chosen based on academic excellence, a personal statement, letters of recommendation and motivation to pursue graduate study.

To learn more about the McNair Scholars Program at Eastern, call (509) 359-2465 or stop by the office in Monroe Hall 107. Visit the Web site at <http://www.ewu.edu/studenterv/mcnair>

feeling both overwhelmed and inadequate, wondering if I should abandon my silly dream of a Ph.D.

Luckily, the McNair staff's sole purpose (even though we sometimes accused them of it) was not to torture us poor, frail, defenseless scholars. In fact, I believe it is the exceptional staff that sets Eastern's McNair Program apart from others. Dr. McKinney is not only the program's director, but is also its counselor, cheerleader and den mother. Two of the current staff members are McNair Scholars themselves, who have

Continued on page 19

their master's degrees and will soon be entering doctoral programs. Each staff member brings to the table a genuine understanding of what I personally need to do to be successful, even – and especially - when it may be unpleasant.

Although scholars remain the central focus, the strength of the program is felt by other members of the university, including faculty. Dr. Flinn points out that as a faculty mentor, “you get a chance to work with the brightest, most engaged students. Who wouldn't want to do that?”

Also, each scholar is required to present his or her research at the EWU Creative Works & Research Symposium, held on campus each spring. The program helps its scholars, who in turn contribute to the university community as a whole.

There are still moments when I'm tempted to sign my soul away to corporate America and call it a day. Fortunately, there are people available to help me pick up the pieces and remember why I want to be involved in higher education in the first place. In essence, the McNair Program is what has allowed me to take ownership of my education, rather than merely surviving it. I've also come to realize that obstacles are largely a matter of perception and that fear of the unknown is no excuse for giving up. I am excited about raising the bar for myself and for my loved ones, who may have otherwise felt like education was for those “other” people who seem to know the elusive secret handshake that makes everything easier.

And when my 11-year-old sister begins sentences by saying, “when I go to college,” as if it were the most natural thing in the world, I know that I'm doing something right.

Erin Long-Kytonen is a senior at EWU, majoring in English literary studies. She plans to become a college professor after earning her Ph.D.

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