

# Overachieving Undergrads

McNair Scholars prepare for advanced degrees through research projects

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**F**or Michele Gomez, graduate school is within reach. She will be the first in her family to earn a bachelor's degree and the first to pursue a doctoral degree, thanks to her experience as a McNair Scholar.

The business administration major, with minors in Spanish and anthropology, plans to earn a doctorate in medical anthropology.

"I'm interested in researching the effects of sickness and disease on the family, cultural perceptions of disease, medicine, death and dying, Eastern versus Western medicine and cultural healing practices," Gomez said.

Gomez, who will apply to graduate programs next fall at institutions such as Arizona State, Johns Hopkins and Harvard University, is quick to credit CSUF's Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program for giving her a shot at graduate school.

The federally-funded program, established by the U.S. Department of Education in 1986, is named for astronaut and

Challenger space shuttle crewmember Ronald E. McNair, the second African American to fly in space. Over the last five years, the U.S. Department of Education has awarded Cal State Fullerton about \$1 million in grants in support of the program, which provides low-income and first-generation college students opportunities to seek advanced degrees. Those selected as scholars come from a variety of disciplines and each is paired with a faculty member who mentors them through their research projects.



Gerald Bryant

"Being selected as a McNair Scholar has been such a blessing in my life. It has exposed me to so many different avenues of education," said Gomez, who expects to earn her bachelor's degree in spring 2009. "The McNair Program is helping me achieve my educational goals by giving me the necessary tools to become a great candidate for graduate school, as well as a successful graduate student."

Since 1999, Cal State Fullerton's McNair Program has given promising students like Gomez the resources and guidance necessary to prepare them for post-baccalaureate work.

"We give them a focus, along with support and nurturing,



Michele Gomez, left, and Melinda Blackman

PHOTO BY STEPHEN WEISSBART

to take their talents to the next level — to go on to graduate school and be successful," said Gerald Bryant, director of CSUF's McNair Program.

What sets the program apart from others is that it gives students the opportunity to conduct and hone academic research skills. Students get the opportunity to work side-by-side with faculty members, conducting research.

"The primary purpose is to get students to understand the research process," Bryant said. "We know when students get into graduate school, if they don't understand the research process, they get overwhelmed. I'm convinced that every student, starting

in their freshman year, should be exposed to research because the experience will give them a fluid entrée into graduate school."

As seniors graduate, new McNair Scholars are chosen with 22 students in the program each academic year. Students must have 59 units and at least a 3.0 grade point average to apply. Scholars receive a stipend, plus the program helps to build their GPA and boost research skills to help them be competitive in applying for graduate school, Bryant said. Scholars also get the opportunity to present research at professional conferences and some even get their work published in journals. In addition, Scholars have the chance to visit graduate schools in the summer, where they gain insight into applying for advanced degree programs and what will be expected of them.

To date, 107 students have completed the program and graduates have gone on to advanced studies at top-tier institutions across the country and abroad.

"It is a delight to mentor McNair scholars as they are so motivated and dedicated," said Melinda Blackman, associate professor of psychology who served as a mentor and "sounding board" for Gomez's research ideas and hypotheses. "The McNair scholar program has done an outstanding job of identifying future researchers and launching their careers."

The program is overseen by an advisory board, which is comprised of faculty members, assistant deans and business leaders.

"The one major benefit is when these students come back to campus in the fall, they are more focused and have a sense of urgency about doing what is needed to get accepted and be a solid candidate in the programs they apply to," Bryant said. *Inside*

**McNair Scholar Michele Gomez** joined the program last year and is in the process of finalizing her research paper. Here is what she says about the program:

**PROJECT** "My research is titled, 'Skin Color Perception and the Effects on Self-Esteem of Undergraduate Latino Students.' I chose this project because I wanted to find out how undergraduate students' self-esteem, specifically in Southern California, was affected, if at all, by their skin color perception."

**GOAL** "I wanted to prove that skin color no longer plays a role in determining a student's self-esteem, and my hypothesis proved to be correct. The research part (data collection) of my project is complete. I'm now working on writing the findings and hope to have this done soon."

**FACULTY MENTOR** "I worked with Dr. Melinda Blackman, associate professor of psychology, and it has been such a great learning experience. This is my first research project and my first time working with a faculty mentor. She is so approachable, friendly, knowledgeable, flexible and helpful—all the characteristics one could want in a mentor."

**MCAIR EXPERIENCES** "The McNair Program has been crucial in my academic career. It has allowed me to attend symposiums, see research being presented, tour universities and find out what's offered. It has provided valuable workshops, including programs on how to contact a potential faculty mentor, how to apply for graduate school, how to write a statement of purpose, how to obtain strong letters of recommendation, how to fund graduate education, how to manage time and so much

more. Our director, Gerald Bryant, believes in this program so much and his passion for our success is what makes our McNair Program standout. He sets high standards and pushes us to be better than the best."

**WHY UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH IS A BENEFIT** "The research project itself is a tool. To any student who is serious about pursuing higher education, I would say, 'Never give up.' The road to graduate school is full of hurdles and there are many opportunities to take the easy way out and simply quit. If I have learned one thing about being a McNair Scholar, it's what Gerald Bryant tells us: 'If you want the things you've never had before, you must do the things you've never done before.'" ■