The McNair Scholars Program at Virginia Tech: A Unique Model of Librarian Mentoring

by Allison J. Scripa, Edward F. Lener, Cheryl B. Gittens, and Connie Stovall

Librarians are involved in many aspects of the McNair Scholars Summer Research Experience at Virginia Tech—a unique component of the federal program that allows low-income, first-generation college students and those from underrepresented ethnic groups to prepare for future doctoral study through involvement in research and other scholarly activities. McNair Scholars who are accepted into the summer research program attend seminars, network with colleagues during special-focus luncheons, participate in an annual research conference, prepare for the GRE, conduct research and prepare presentations, and receive significant library instruction and individualized research assistance from the university's librarians.

The librarians at Virginia Tech serve as mentors to the scholars and provide multiple instruction sessions to the scholars as a group. Rather than receiving the "one-shot" library instruction session that many undergraduate students encounter while enrolled in college, the McNair Scholars are treated to a comprehensive *set* of instruction sessions over a six-week period. The sessions are tailored to match the unique research interests of the new summer scholars, whose areas of interest can range from physics and chemistry to biology and psychology. Typically, the resources covered include PsycInfo, PubMed, Google Scholar, Web of Science, and EBSCO's Academic Search Complete, among others. Scholars also attend a dedicated class on reference software programs such as EndNote, a program provided free to Virginia Tech students and faculty, and Zotero, a free reference management tool available on the internet. Advantages and disadvantages of these programs are covered so that scholars can select the tool that is best fitted to their immediate and projected research needs.

Typically, two librarians serve as mentors during the Summer Research Experience. Students are assigned a library mentor whose subject specialties most closely match their research interests.

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Cheryl Gittens is an experienced student leader who has planned, implemented and managed academic enrichment programs designed to increase college enrollment and retention. Prior to serving in an interim administrative role at the University of Virginia Curry School of Education, she was the director of the McNair Scholars Program at Virginia Tech. Cheryl is a doctoral candidate in the George Washington University Higher Education Administration Program.

Connie Stovall serves as Assistant Director of Collection Management, University Libraries, Virginia Tech—a position she acquired one year ago after having worked as College Librarian for Humanities at Virginia Tech for five years. Connie holds an MLIS and an MA in American Literature, both from The University of Alabama, and BBA in Accounting with a Management minor from The University of North Alabama. She has been working in libraries since 1998, when she took her first position as a student circulation assistant.

McNair Scholars meet individually with their librarian mentor after the initial library instruction session. During this meeting, the scholar's research project is discussed in detail. The librarian suggests specific resources and databases to consult, recommends keywords and subject terms, and assists the student in constructing a thorough search strategy to use during literature searches. Librarians also provide assistance with narrowing or broadening topics and applying appropriate citation methods. A second meeting occurs later in the summer, during which the scholars and librarians discuss any roadblocks the students may have encountered in their research and how to overcome them. Again, the librarians provide advice on resources and search strategies that may help the scholars overcome any difficulties they might be having. The scholars are also encouraged to set up additional meetings with their librarian mentor any time they wish.

Because of the time spent together in library instruction sessions and in one-on-one meetings, McNair Scholars and their librarian mentors are able get to know each other and to forge relationships. They also spend time together during non-academic events. Librarian mentors participate in the social aspects of the McNair Scholars program that take place

The Nuts and Bolts of the McNair Scholars Program

The Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program (commonly known as the McNair Scholars Program) aims to prepare undergraduate students for future doctoral study through involvement in research and other scholarly activities. Participants are low-income, first-generation college students, or from historically underrepresented ethnic groups in academia. The program is named for Dr. Ronald E. McNair, the African-American astronaut killed in the U.S. Challenger space shuttle disaster, and was established shortly after his death in 1986 by members of Congress. It is one of eight Federal TRIO programs designed to "serve and assist low-income individuals, first-generation college students, and individuals with disabilities to progress through the academic pipeline from middle school to postbaccalaureate programs."

There are 201 McNair Scholars programs active at universities across the country; however, the only one currently operating in Virginia is at Virginia Tech. Encouraging students to continue their studies and obtain advanced degrees fits in well with Virginia Tech's mission as a land-grant university to create and disseminate knowledge throughout the state, nation, and world. Virginia Tech's program began in 1999 with a cohort of 16 students; it now supports a cohort of approximately 25 students annually.

McNair Scholars at Virginia Tech participate in programs throughout the academic year that expose the students to graduate education and inform them about the process of applying to graduate school and obtaining financial assistance. Scholars also research and visit universities with graduate programs in their field of study to determine which schools they might be interested in applying to and attending.

The educational aspects of the program—GRE preparation classes, informational sessions about applying to graduate school and obtaining financial assistance—give students the knowledge they need to approach the process of applying to and selecting a graduate school—knowledge that may not be available to them through their family or social network.

McNair Scholars that want to participate in the Summer Research Experience program at Virginia Tech over the summer apply to the program in the spring semester. Acceptance into the program is based on a variety of factors including demonstrated academic potential. Those selected are paired with a faculty mentor in their subject area who then helps them design their research project. Participants are given housing for the summer in one of Virginia Tech's dormitories and receive a stipend for their work. Most of the scholars are Virginia Tech students, but students from Hampton University also participate in the program. The Summer Research Experience lasts 10 weeks, culminating in a Summer Research Symposium.

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over the summer, including the ice cream socials and the pizza party icebreaker at the beginning of the summer. Librarians also join scholars during luncheons that focus on topics designed to help the Scholars with their current research, graduate studies, and profession. During the luncheons, campus leaders give talks on subjects such as ethics in research, diversity, and graduate education. One luncheon even focused on dining etiquette and included humorous examples from popular film and television shows. As a result, students are better prepared to make a favorable impression in a variety of public and professional settings that involve dining.

The librarian integration into the McNair Scholars Program helps the scholars develop a solid understanding of how to effectively use the library and its resources to gather the necessary materials they need to form the groundwork for their research projects. They also learn to manage the information they find (knowledge that will be critical to their success as future researchers). At the same time, however, the individuals who serve as librarian mentors are enriched by the relationships they form with these bright and talented students—relationships they rarely get to form in typical "one-shot" instruction sessions.

The Summer Research Experience specifically provides the cohort of participating students a set of skills that will enable them to be successful as graduate students. For example, the McNair Scholars write final reports based on the research they have conducted and also prepare poster and oral presentations on their research findings. As the end of the summer approaches, they refine their presentations and update them to

include the results of their research projects. In preparation to present at the Summer Research Symposium, they are given the opportunity to practice their presentations in front of small audiences that include only their peers, McNair Program staff, and faculty and librarian mentors. Feedback from these sessions (which take place in meeting rooms similar to the ones they will use at the Symposium) is then incorporated into the

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final presentations, which serve as a tangible demonstration of the things the scholars have learned over the summer.

While the McNair Scholars Program has been active at Virginia Tech since 1999, no formal relationship existed with the University Libraries until 2006. During that year, Connie Stovall (College Librarian for the Humanities at the time and a first-generation college student herself) began to investigate under-represented communities she could work with as a new member of the Virginia Tech library staff. During this initial process, she reached out to the McNair Scholars program and found herself on the phone with the incoming director, Cheryl Gittens. Their conversations about the students' research needs led to the partnership between the University Libraries and the McNair Scholars program.

Although the McNair Scholars Program is undergoing some transition after the recent departure of the director, Cheryl Gittens, the interim director, Mary Grace Campos, has worked with the librarians to ensure a smooth transition with no changes to the instructional format that has served the scholars so well in the past. In the future, Virginia Tech librarians hope to work more closely with other summer undergraduate research programs on campus using the model developed with the McNair Scholars program. Working with the next generation of academic researchers and helping them to gain the skills they need to conduct effective research is a goal of every academic librarian, and the methods used with the McNair Scholars Program have been proven to accomplish this goal.

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