Scholar Spotlight

By Nickecia Alder, Doctoral Student Counseling Psychology and McNair Graduate Assistant

Cassandra Osei is a senior at Loyola University with a double major in International Studies and Political Science and a double minor in African Studies and Anthropology. She described herself as very ambitious and always striving for the best in life. Her passion is and has always been healthcare, with a specific focus on how race and migration impact the healthcare system and vise versa. She took some time to share some of her experiences as a scholar.

Nickecia A: Why did you join the McNair Program?

Cassandra O: I wanted to take advantage of an opportunity that catered to students who are underrepresented at Loyola.

NA: What has your experience been as a McNair Scholar?

CO: My experience as a McNair scholar has been nothing but positive. I have taken every bit of advice with a grain of salt and am utilizing it now as I complete my senior year.

NA: What have you researched this summer?

CO: I am investigating how the rapid growth and presence of African immigrants in Chicago point out the limitations of the existing, dominant public healthcare models.

NA: What has been your favorite part of being a McNair Scholar?

CO: The camaraderie between the cohort, the graduate school visits, and speakers that present tips and advice on the graduate school process.

NA: Can you tell us what else you are involved with on campus?

CO: Alpha Epsilon Delta, the Pre-health Honor Society at Loyola, Gospel Choir, and Loyola Women’s Rugby.

NA: What are your post-graduation plans?

CO: My plans after graduation are to work through the summer and to attend graduate school for a masters in public health in the fall. My future goals include obtaining a Ph.D. within public health and ultimately having a career doing research in the discipline, while working for either the World Health Organization, the United Nations, or the U.S. Federal Government in D.C. impacting healthcare policy.

NA: Why should sophomores and juniors consider joining McNair?

CO: The program is a great foundation for educating students on how important it is to pursue higher education and receive a PhD. Not many students of color or first generation students are taught that you can go further and be successful after college, but McNair aids in providing that realization for many students.

NA: Do you have anything else you would like to share with our readers?

CO: The philosophy and opportunities provided by the McNair Scholars program has impacted my education so much. I have had the opportunity to engage and enjoy research and also realize that there are opportunities that exist for individuals of underrepresented status'.
The decision to attend graduate school is not one to be taken lightly. A 2014 article in the Princeton Review stated “Graduate study is not for slackers. It takes focus and determination to pursue an advanced degree.” Graduate school is challenging, stressful, and very costly. These factors create prohibitive barriers to graduate education for many first-generation, minority, and financially challenged students.

The McNair Scholars Program is designed to increase the numbers of prepared students from this demographic population for the pursuit of a PhD, by demystifying the graduate school process. Loyola’s McNair Scholars attend seminars and workshops on preparing for graduate school, are exposed to graduate programs through graduate school visits, attend teaching sessions for the GRE exam, work very closely with McNair staff and a faculty mentor to successfully complete a research project, and much more to assure they are knowledgeable about and prepared for graduate education.

Many students from our first cohort were unsure of what they would do beyond graduation and their ability to achieve their dream of attending graduate school. As a result of applying themselves as McNair Scholars, eight received admission and funding to attend Stanford University, Yale University, University of Wisconsin-Madison, University of Michigan, Northwestern University, University of Chicago, Loyola University Chicago, and Widener University. One McNair Scholar earned an NIH fellowship and is conducting research in Washington, D.C.; two Scholars are working with Teach for America; one is teaching at a community college; another joined the Jesuit Volunteer Corps; two are preparing for the MCAT and applying to medical school; and others are working in research laboratories, community organizations and other venues while preparing to apply for graduate school. We are proud of the accomplishments of our McNair Scholars and will track them throughout their graduate school careers and onto the completion of their PhD.

The McNair Scholars Program is currently recruiting sophomores and juniors for our 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 cohorts. For more information and to complete an application, please visit our website at http://www.luc.edu/mcnair/.

We hope that you, too, will consider becoming a McNair Scholar!

Eileen Rollerson, Ph.D.
Director, McNair Scholars Program
Congratulations Graduates of 2014!

The McNair staff would like to recognize our scholars from our first cohort who graduated with Bachelor’s degrees from Loyola University Chicago in 2014. We are proud of this great accomplishment and wish you many more successes in the future! The names of our 2014 graduates can be found on our website.

Graduate School Bound Scholars

Yvonne Cardenas - University of Chicago, MSW, Social Work
Vivian Frutos - Loyola University, M.S., Criminal Justice
Antoinette Isama - Northwestern University, M.S., Journalism
Madelaine L'Esperance - University of Wisconsin-Madison, Ph.D., Family Economics and Consumer behavior
Jorge Meraz - Stanford, M.S., Environmental Science
Pedro Regalado - Yale University, Ph.D., American History
Carlos Robles - University of Michigan, MPP, Public Policy
Grace Trujillo - Widener University, M.A., Human Sexuality

Awards & Recognition

Maroon & Gold Society Induction: Lauren Adams, Karina Sanchez
Diversity Awards: Social Justice in Action Award: Jefferson Uriarte, Grace Trujillo
Lifelong Commitment to Social Justice Award: Dr. Eileen Rollerson nominated
ACE Scholars Awards: Edgar Cruz, Grace Trujillo
Outstanding Loyola Undergraduate Researcher Award for Social Science: Monica Kulach
Outstanding Loyola Undergraduate Researcher Award for Economics: Madelaine L’Esperance

Scholarly Contributions

After reviewing literature on mental illness and violence for an undergraduate course I had taken last semester, I decided to investigate callous-unemotional (CU) traits and its relationship to early onset violence and the likelihood of behaving violently in the future. McNair mentor and Loyola University Chicago professor, Dr. Ira Sommer’s prior lessons about psychopathy and violence in his Spring 2014 Mental Illness and Crime course inspired me to pursue this study after learning about the heterogeneity of CU traits that may be present in both psychopathy as well as other externalizing disorders among youth, such as conduct disorder (CD). This fascinated me because of my passion toward identifying risk factors of and treatment interventions for violence. If we are to help parents, teachers, clinicians, and forensic professionals find ways to prevent violence by providing interventions early on, it is important to understand core risk factors for violence among youth, including CU traits.

In fact, the new Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) conveys the importance of identifying both callous (i.e., lack of empathy) and unemotional (i.e., shallow affect) specifiers within the conduct disorder diagnosis, an externalizing disorder often identified in youth who have committed violent acts. According to DSM-5, of the 2 to 10% of individuals with CD, those with CU traits are more likely to present with early onset CD and commit violent acts.

Recently, my mentor and I analyzed secondary data from a prior longitudinal study and confirmed our hypotheses that adolescent males with CU traits are more likely to (1) have first committed at least one violent act before the age of 13 (which is operationally defined as “early onset violence”), and (2) behave violently in the future.

Gayle Lillian Blakely
Senior, Psychology, Human Services
Psychology of Crime and Justice minor
Meet Our Scholars

Lauren Adams  
Women Studies & Gender Studies; Educational Policy  
Senior

Karen Aguirre  
Health Management Systems  
Senior

Esteban Barajas  
Biology; Chemistry  
Senior

Juan Barriga  
Psychology; Women Studies and Gender Studies  
Senior

Gayle Blakely  
Psychology; Psychology of Crime  
Senior

Ayaz Gen  
Biology  
Senior

Rebecca Hite  
Psychology; Sports Management  
Senior

Jade Kinney  
Psychology  
Senior

Kaitlyn Lovato  
Chemistry; Math  
Junior

The Loyola University Chicago McNair Program provides academic support, research opportunities, and involvement in scholarly activities to qualifying students who have the desire and potential to earn an advanced degree. Program participants are either first generation college students and need eligible, or are members of a group underrepresented in graduate education. Loyola’s McNair Scholars Program selects fifteen students each year and works closely with them to ensure their successful completion of the baccalaureate degree and application and admission to graduate school. Find further info at our website: LUC.edu/mcnair
Meet Our Scholars

Mirinda Morency
Psychology; Math
Senior

Michaela Mozley
Psychology; Black World Studies
Senior

Aisosa Omorogbe
Biology; Anthropology; Chemistry
Senior

Cassandra Osei
Political Science; International Studies
Senior

Miguel Ramirez
Psychology; Neuroscience
Senior

Karina Sanchez
Psychology; Latin American Studies
Senior

Angela Serwin
Psychology; Latin American Studies
Senior

Cindy Tran
Psychology; Biology
Senior

Scholars not shown:
Sandra Slowik · Senior · Chemistry
Abigail Stone · Senior · Anthropology
MEET MY MENTOR:
DR. BRIDGET KELLY

By Lauren Adams
Women Studies &
Gender Studies;
Educational Policy,
McNair Scholar

Dr. Kelly is faculty member in the School of Education specializing in Higher Education. She has taught graduate students in courses on diversity, leadership, student affairs, and recently taught a course on women in higher education. Dr. Kelly went to the University of Tennessee for her undergraduate degree and she attended the University of Maryland earning her Master’s and PhD in Social Foundations of Education. Her research has included the racial identity development of undergraduate students, the implications of diversity courses in graduate preparation programs, and women faculty.

LA: How do your research interests relate to your career or personal goals?

BK: So, there’s certainly... “Me Search.” I definitely research things that are closely, personally tied to my identity because to me I am so passionate about it. I think it rubs off on my teaching evaluations and my student’s experiences being in the classroom. They like when teachers are excited or passionate about what they’re doing. Part of my career goal is helping students find what they are passionate about and how that passion can also address some of the world’s greatest needs. So, the research I do on students of color at predominantly White universities is a passion of mine and I believe it addresses an equity issue. It’s just appalling in terms of the number of students of color who still are not going to college, who still are not graduating, and even if they are graduating, still not having the best experiences they can have. I love my job, primarily because I believe I’m doing what God put me on this earth to do. I want other people to find that for themselves. I think it benefits all of society if people are able to do something that brings them joy and at the same time do something that also meets some of the world’s needs.

LA: What was the biggest obstacle to obtaining your PhD?

BK: Well, my dissertation...it is 600 pages which is about three times what a dissertation should be. So, that was a huge obstacle. I finally had to call her [dissertation chair] at one point during my post-doc. I said, “I think I’m done. I really don’t have much more so we just need to schedule my defense.” Thankfully I had one really strong woman support me and she was the only person of color on my committee. She was an untenured professor at the time, and she basically stood up to what was going on—she was kind of like “Bridget’s done a great job. We need to just move this forward.” And that was a really, really trying experience. And then after that experience my chair nominated my dissertation for “Outstanding Doctoral Research Award” and I got that award from my department for my dissertation.

LA: What strategies did you use to overcome challenges?

BK: One was God. I just got like all of the spiritual CDs I could and I would just pray all the time and listen to them in my car. I’d joined this church when I was going through this and I really got into my faith and just was like, “This is the only thing that’s going to get me through.” I really relied on this Black woman, who was untenured, and I just started writing and getting published with her. While I was still working on my dissertation I was able to do research with her and get mentored and supported by her and then I had a great group of friends. We started this group called, “Sankofa” which was like a group of Black PhD students. We’d all get together like once a month to do potlucks, just talk and affirm each other and that’s when I met Rob, my partner—so I just kind of tried to focus on other things.

LA: Any words of advice for Scholars or those pursuing a PhD?

BK: Definitely get your support networks in line. This isn’t the time to isolate. I would even go to the library with friends. I was kind of like depressed at Virginia Tech because I was like by myself. Just writing like eight hours a day and I was like in a pretty racist environment. I would not recommend doing a PhD in an environment like that. Some people would maybe think that Maryland had too many distractions, but I really thrived in that kind of outside environment. Finding good mentors and people who are going to inspire you and then you know doing good work. I work hard so I’m not saying like just be social. But you just can’t be all about academics.
Flashbacks: Celebrations, Retreats

We have had a fantastic second year. These are just a few of the trips and events in which our scholars have participated. For more photos, please visit our website at LUC.edu/mcnair.

Junior and Senior McNair Scholars at our End of the Year Celebration

Scholars at the LUREC Leadership Retreat

Scholars in a group hug

Scholars at the John Hancock Building “Signature Room” celebrating the end of the Summer Research Program
About Dr. Ronald E. McNair

Ronald McNair was born in 1950 in a small town of Lake City, South Carolina, in a family of an auto repairman and an elementary school teacher. He graduated with honors from Carver High School in his hometown and enrolled into North Carolina A&T University, from which he graduated magna cum laude with a B.S. in Physics. In 1976, he accomplished a Ph.D. in Physics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), during which he studied laser physics with many authorities in the field, and performed some breakthrough developments in that area. In 1978, he was selected by NASA as an astronaut candidate, completed a 1-year training program and qualified for an assignment as a mission specialist astronaut on Space Shuttle flight crews. He logged a total of 191 hours in space before the 1986 explosion of Space Shuttle Challenger that took his life and the lives of five other astronauts.

Becoming an astronaut in the United States space program is a major accomplishment for anyone, let alone an African-American born in mid-20th century in a small poor rural town, but setting high standards and overcoming obstacles was part of life’s journey for Ronald McNair.

Dr. McNair recognized the importance of a good education and the impact it could have on an individual’s life. He encouraged young people to prepare for the future and get their education. He spent many hours encouraging individuals from minority and low-income backgrounds to set the highest standards for themselves.

“Whether or not you reach your goals in life depends entirely on how well you prepare for them and how badly you want them. You’re eagles! Stretch your wings and fly to the sky!”

Ronald Ervin McNair, Ph.D.
October 21, 1950 – January 28, 1986

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