Reimagining the Ronald E. McNair Scholars Program Through the Lens of Intellectual Entrepreneurship

by Ignacio Cruz

Given a certain amount of flexibility, institutions can use programs and partnerships like the IE Consortium as models for expanding the boundaries of the McNair program.

ALTHOUGH CREATED WITH THE INTENTION OF AIDING disadvantaged and underrepresented students in achieving academic success, many U.S. federal TRIO program initiatives fall short of their mission. This article will examine the processes and initiatives of the Ronald E. McNair Scholars Program (one of the eight TRIO programs) at the University of Texas at Austin (UT-Austin), where it is housed in the Office of the Vice President's Division of Diversity and Community Engagement (DDCE). The McNair Scholars Program is designed to serve undergraduate students who identify as first-generation college students and either have high financial need or form part of a group that is traditionally underrepresented in graduate study (U.S. Department of Education 2014). The program achieves its mission of increasing diversity in graduate education by helping underrepresented students gain the tools and skills necessary to apply and enroll in graduate study, specifically at the doctoral level.

The national McNair program is housed in several universities across the United States that allow their respective colleges to tailor programming to meet their students' needs; however, there are several factors that inhibit the potential of students to achieve a well-rounded perspective on graduate school. Four semi-structured interviews with current and past McNair scholars at UT-Austin uncovered three major themes regarding the challenges and areas for improvement through strategic planning for the national- and university-level program: (1) a

lack of tailored attention to students, (2) an unrealistic time frame for program completion, and (3) inadequate guidance in developing academic and networking opportunities within a student's discipline. This article describes the challenges that McNair scholars face and provides recommendations for developing a coordinated planning system similar to the one that currently exists in UT-Austin's DDCE, which integrates the university's Intellectual Entrepreneurship Consortium and the McNair program—a collaboration that is beginning to address these challenges, thus offering insights for other universities.

PAST EXAMINATION OF TRIO PROGRAMS

Federal TRIO programs have been put under the microscope to evaluate their effectiveness in serving students from underprivileged backgrounds (Balz and Esten 1998; Lam et al. 2003; Pitre and Pitre 2009; Swail 2000). Lam et al. (2003) found that students who were selected as McNair scholars successfully matriculated into the program and received adequate support and academic guidance from their peers and program directors. Studies have demonstrated that students who participate in TRIO programs, including McNair, are given the attention needed to perform successfully in a rigorous academic setting (Swail 2000). Pitre and Pitre (2009) examined TRIO initiatives at the high school level and found that programs designed to provide specialized

academic attention and response to students resulted in increased test scores and reported academic achievement.

Yet, this research also showed the challenges in bridging the achievement gap for underrepresented students (Balz and Esten 1998; Swail 2000). Since these programs cater to hundreds of students, developing more individual approaches that offer students personalized attention (Swail 2000) can be difficult. Furthermore, a general lack of understanding of an underrepresented population's background and little effort in fostering academic relationships can stall a program's mission of academic achievement (Balz and Esten 1998). It is important to examine both salient perspectives, a student's background juxtaposed with a program's mission, when studying a specific program, like McNair, within an academic achievement context. The purpose of this article is to understand the effect of current program development from a student perspective and offer areas for improvement at the national and university level for the McNair Scholars Program through planning and integration with other programs with similar initiatives.

INTELLECTUAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP PERSPECTIVE

Founded by Dr. Richard Cherwitz at UT-Austin in 1997, the Intellectual Entrepreneurship (IE) Consortium is also housed in the Office of the Vice President's Division of Diversity and Community Engagement. The program aims to increase educational diversity by empowering students to innovate academically and act as agents of change using skills and experiences gained during the program (Intellectual Entrepreneurship 2014). Undergraduate students who enroll in the IE program participate in an internship in which they are paired with a graduate student or faculty member in their discipline in a semester-long mentorship relationship. During their internship, IE scholars conduct research with faculty or graduate students, attend seminars in their discipline, serve as teaching or research assistants, and prepare for academic

or professional careers (Intellectual Entrepreneurship 2014). IE scholars document their internship experiences through monthly reflections and discussions with other interns in the program. IE allows students to craft a hands-on experience that reflects their intellectual and academic interests through opportunities to explore and innovate in their field of study. The IE program takes an entrepreneurial approach to student development that supplements and resonates with the McNair Scholars Program's mission to develop a targeted pipeline of potential graduate students. As both programs are housed in the UT-Austin DDCE, there has been some cross-collaboration; yet, there remains a need for continued emphasis on integrating programming and expanding the growing partnership within UT-Austin, a partnership that can serve as a model for other institutions.

METHOD FOR GAINING A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON MCNAIR

To assess perceptions of the effectiveness of a college-level TRIO program, four interviews were conducted as part of a pilot study of four students—three who are currently McNair scholars and one who completed an undergraduate degree within the last year. The four were interviewed to understand perceptions and gain insights (Lindlof and Taylor 2002) related to their roles as McNair scholars. Interviewees were selected through a snowball sample (Patton 1990) and given a pseudonym to allow for anonymity and confidentiality. Interviews were analyzed and coded into thematic categories.

Three main themes emerged from the interviews regarding the effectiveness of the program in achieving academic success: (1) a lack of specialized attention for students who need it, (2) not enough time to complete the requirements set by the program, and (3) an inability to forge networks and develop adequate academic experience within each student's specialized discipline. Furthermore, a common difficulty that these challenges created for students involved their ability to develop their own intellectual entrepreneurship—the

opportunity to foster connections between their knowledge and its application to academic and professional settings through interdisciplinary innovation (Hartelius 2012; Jones 2014). The UT-Austin McNair Scholars Program and Intellectual Entrepreneurship Consortium have begun to develop an integrated, sequenced program for McNair scholars; recommendations gleaned from this process and presented later in the article can inform future planning for other institutions of higher education.

PERSONALIZED ATTENTION

For many students at large state universities, attending college leads to interactions with people from a variety of backgrounds. The students interviewed identified as minorities with Black, Latino, and Southeast Asian backgrounds; they were all first-generation college students. Their decision to join the McNair Scholars Program resulted from their interest in pursuing a Ph.D. in the future. The students were asked about their familiarity with conducting undergraduate research, and the findings indicated that each student had a different level of knowledge. The McNair program aims to provide students with the resources they need to engage in research through group seminars and activities; however, the interviewees indicated that these programming tools created challenges in the academic development of many of the current McNair scholars. Robert, a senior who has worked with several faculty conducting research in the humanities, articulated his frustrations with group programming designed to enhance the undergraduate research experience:

> When I applied to McNair, I was under the impression that everyone would have the same understanding of research as me. I sat in a research methods class for a semester, relearning things that I already knew. It was a waste of my time—while others were barely learning how to write a literature review, I could have been

working on learning how to get a paper published. It just didn't seem fair to be held back.

The McNair Scholars Program at Robert's institution failed to realize that students from underrepresented backgrounds are on an academic spectrum, and this calls for specialized attention to be paid to each individual student in the program. In this specific case, Robert was placed in a class to learn about research methods he already had expertise in. Although other students in the class benefitted from the material, Robert was denied the ability to gain additional knowledge to help him grow academically. By placing a hold on knowledge creation and experience, students like Robert are hindered in their ability to innovate academically and create windows of opportunity for new intellectual experiences.

TIME FRAME FOR COMPLETION OF THE PROGRAM

Given the current push for graduation within four years, students must approach their course work, network building, and post-undergraduate planning more strategically. Students involved with TRIO programs like McNair have the added pressure of needing to complete program requirements in an unrealistically short amount of time. The McNair scholars who were interviewed reported that they have certain program requirements to adhere to within the academic year and summer session; if they do not complete each of the requirements, they run the risk of having their McNair scholarship withheld and may possibly jeopardize their enrollment. The initiatives outlined by the program are tailored to prepare students to be competitive in the doctoral application pool. However, all the scholars interviewed stated that programming should be tailored to accommodate an individual student's academic progress. Jeff, a senior McNair scholar studying sociology, shared his perspective on not being able to complete McNair core requirements on time:

It was hard entering this program and not really knowing how to do research. The people who run it expect you to produce, but when you have to learn how to even outline a study, you fall behind. Yeah, sometimes I feel like I'm not on the same level with other McNair classmates, but I'm trying. I'm staying an extra semester (graduating in four and a half years) so I can finish my project, apply to graduate schools, and just make sure I'm caught up, like the other people.

Prolonging time to graduation is probably one of the only alternatives students like Jeff have in order to complete their McNair requirements and ensure enrollment in graduate school. Jeff noted that he was not prepared to enter the program and thus had to devote more time to learning the fundamentals of research compared to his peers. The McNair Scholars Program at Jeff's institution placed students on the same program completion track without regard for their preparedness. Jeff felt that he was not on the same academic level as his peers, and having to take the time to catch up and then hurry to begin his project deprived him of the opportunity to think more critically about his work and innovate within his own discipline.

DISCIPLINE-SPECIFIC WORK

McNair program directors look for students who aspire to earn a doctoral degree. Attaining a Ph.D. requires undergraduate students to select a discipline they want to specialize in. In addition to selecting their discipline, McNair scholars are paired with a faculty mentor who helps them gain a deeper perspective on their chosen field. However, faculty mentorships are time limited in order to accommodate the program requirements scholars must complete to remain in good standing with the McNair program. Aisha, a senior humanities major, feels that the McNair Scholars Program does not provide adequate support in her discipline. She described her difficulty in fostering a relationship with a faculty mentor because of time and program constraints,

which held her back from networking and gaining a better perspective on her field of study:

> I think that a lot of opportunities McNair offers are more for STEM [science, technology, engineering, and math] students. I get help from my professor, but there is only so much that he can do. As a humanities student, no one in the McNair office knows what I'm researching and they just don't get me. I think the hard sciences people have more of an advantage over the humanities students like me.

According to Aisha, finding additional opportunities for academic and professional support can be challenging. The McNair Scholars Program at Aisha's institution enrolls approximately 20 to 30 students per academic year. Although the program has a staff of five people with a thorough understanding of the graduate school process, they can only be of limited benefit to students who are not part of their disciplines. Aisha's frustration lies in the inability to access staff who understand the nuances of her specialized discipline of study. McNair scholars like Aisha predominately rely on their faculty mentors to aid them in gaining a deeper understanding of their field through research and networking opportunities that accommodate both the professor and student. Not having adequate support and attention may keep scholars from being able to meet program requirements or even fulfill the program's mission of applying to graduate school.

Alicia, a McNair scholar who recently graduated from college and did not apply to graduate school, explained that her decision to enter the workforce resulted from a lack of certainty about graduate study. Although she fulfilled all program requirements, Alicia felt she was not adequately equipped with sufficient research experience to be able to identify potential interests in her discipline. Alicia described how she arrived at her decision and the limited support she received from program staff:

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I knew that I was not ready to apply to a Ph.D. program in public policy. I had barely begun my first research project six months before and felt like I needed some real-world exposure for my work. I know I will go back and get the Ph.D., but I'm not ready yet.... When I told McNair that I was taking a job after graduation, I think I shocked them. I know going this route may not make them happy, but this is what I needed to do. This is how my path goes.

In Alicia's case, the McNair Scholars Program fell short of its mission of having students seek a graduate degree, resulting in some pushback from program staff. However, Alicia explained that the influence of McNair in her life is not over; she will enter a Ph.D. program in the near future once she gains a better understanding of her research interests in her discipline. Students like Alicia showcase a path less traveled for McNair scholars: taking time off before applying to graduate programs.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

Federal TRIO programs like the Ronald E. McNair Scholars Program help provide access to graduate education for underrepresented students. An analysis of interviews conducted with four McNair scholars found that they faced several challenges during their time in the program, including lack of access to specialized academic attention, difficulty negotiating the time required to complete program requirements, and inadequate resources in discipline-specific areas of study. Since the McNair program is housed at both the national and local university level, it can be difficult to implement certain programming recommendations. However, most universities can tailor their programs to meet the specific needs of their group of scholars. Given a certain amount of flexibility, institutions can use programs and partnerships like the IE Consortium as models for expanding the boundaries of the McNair program to aid scholars. The following are recommendations that can be implemented at

the university level and considered for national application; these recommendations incorporate facets of the UT-Austin IE Consortium's pre-graduate internship program as an example of how the identified challenges might be addressed.

CREATE SUBSETS OF SCHOLARS WITH TAILORED PROGRAMMING

Creating separate groups of scholars allows programming to be tailored to meet the needs of students at different research levels. Subsets can allow students to take ownership of their academic progress and establish an effective pace in which to complete current and future projects.

EXTEND PROGRAM DURATION

An extension of the average McNair Scholars Program time from two to three years can allow students to gain a deeper perspective on their discipline. Although this could be challenging in terms of recruitment, it would allow program officials to evaluate students more effectively since sophomores are more likely to have a stronger interest in conducting undergraduate research than the juniors who currently enroll in the program.

The IE program aims to partner undergraduates with faculty or graduate students within the same discipline to gain research, academic, and career experience. The McNair Scholars Program could consider using the IE internship as part of a sequenced program in which sophomores considering admission to McNair can gain the research and academic tools needed to enhance their scholarly experience before entering the program.

In a reflection essay, Stephanie, a senior first-generation college student who took part in the IE pre-graduate internship, described how her ability to build a relationship with a faculty mentor helped prepare her for the next step in her academic journey:

Participating in this internship has given me confidence that I will be able to succeed in a graduate program and that it will be a truly rewarding and enriching experience, allowing me to pursue my passion for nutrition and disease prevention in a highly focused setting. The thought of having to design my own research project used to be daunting, but helping my IE mentor with her research has given me more clarity on the type of work involved and what to expect from such an experience. The IE pre-graduate school internship has left me with a sense of accomplishment and given me confidence in my future academic endeavors.

Developing a sequenced IE and McNair program would allow potential McNair scholars to identify a faculty mentor before enrolling in the program, thus giving them the opportunity to gain early access to resources for research. Potential McNair scholars could follow Stephanie's example by enrolling in the IE program to gain a more cohesive view of research in their discipline before entering the McNair program, where they are expected to carry out a project with the help of their faculty mentor.

PARTNER WITH INTERNAL DEPARTMENTS AND FACULTY

Creating partnerships between the McNair Scholars Program and in-house university departments can allow program officials to forge relationships with faculty and staff who can then act as resources for scholars within both academia and industry-related fields.

The IE program's mission fosters the ability to create a student-driven perspective on academic innovation and social-community engagement. Students who participate in the IE pre-graduate internship are given the opportunity to connect with the faculty and graduate student communities in order to foster discovery within a specific field of study. Many interns use their time to travel to conferences in their field, conduct research with faculty and colleagues, and gain exposure to graduate education. Irnela, a senior conducting immunology research with faculty at her university, reflected on how the IE pre-graduate internship experience helped her create a network of researchers and scholars to work with:

> When I joined the IE program, Dr. Croyle saw that I was devoted to doing research and attending graduate school. She has taken me under her wing and introduced me to countless opportunities as well as helped me prepare for graduate school in various ways. When she asked me if I would be willing to prepare urine and stool samples for DNA analysis, I welcomed the new responsibility. When she followed that request with an invitation to be included on what is one of the last Ebola papers coming out of our lab, I was floored. The IE program has helped me outline specific research goals and accomplish them by giving my ideas structure and direction.

Irnela used her connections with faculty and other researchers within her discipline to showcase her skills and participate in new experiences that are helping her pave the way to graduate school. By incorporating elements of the IE experience into the McNair academic pipeline, students can create an academic network of undergraduate research resources and program directors can identify potentially successful McNair scholars. The goal of the McNair program is to foster the academic experience needed to help mold a diverse group of Ph.Ds.—the IE program offers a perfected formula to help create the stepping stones needed to achieve this goal.

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FUTURE DIRECTIONS

By fostering an environment in which academic innovation can lead students to uncover their passions and realize their potential, the IE program allows McNair scholars to become intellectual entrepreneurs, paving the way to success in the McNair program. Continued collaboration between—and integration of—the McNair and IE programs will assist students who envision attaining a graduate degree by helping them uncover their academic aptitude and achieve their goals; further, this effort will help bridge gaps of access for underrepresented populations. By fostering a shared integration of both pipelines, the UT-Austin DDCE can continue to strengthen its commitment to providing equal access to education for underserved students within the challenging realm of academia. This is a model other universities might wish to emulate.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

IGNACIO CRUZ is an undergraduate student in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. He is a Ronald E. McNair Scholar and the president of the Intellectual Entrepreneurship Citizen Scholars, the student and alumni organization of the IE Consortium.

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