One of my greatest delights is staying in touch with Westminster McNair alums as they pursue their PhDs and enter academia. I have the good fortune to count a number of these inspiring, insightful (and fun!) young people among my treasured relationships, and I have learned so much from them. The last several summers, we’ve had the pleasure of listening to one of our own offer words of wisdom about their graduate school journeys at our summer banquet. In 2018, that speaker was Nichole Margarita García, PhD. Nichole is now a tenure-track faculty member at Rutgers University, and a regular online columnist for *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*. ~ Jo Hinsdale, PhD, Director

Was it worth it?: A Two-sided Tale to the PhD

It is an honor to stand here before you and deliver this speech to the next generation of McNair Scholars— or McNerds as I like to call us. McNair for me has always served as a home away from home, especially when I moved out of state. I have yet to return, and I am not sure I ever will. You must remember that once you are McNair, you will always be McNair. If there is one thing I learned from this program, it is to always pay it forward.

The title of my talk today is “Was it worth it?: A Two-sided Tale to the PhD.” In reality, I should have titled this talk a “twisted two-sided tale,” as we will go through various interpretations of the acronym PhD. I will start with the early stages of graduate school, move to graduating with the PhD in hand, and finally, securing that first tenure-track position. As I do this I will simultaneously interweave the word “worth” to mean different things, so please watch out for those instances. And yes, at the end I will answer my own question of “Was it worth it?” We begin with the twisted tale of the PhD which I consider to be one of the most important.
Congratulations to our Spring 2018 Graduates!

Andrea Cancino Sáenz
Andrea began the PhD program in Political Science at the University of Washington.

Amarina Chavez
Amarina is currently working as a dental assistant and interviewing for nursing positions.

Chaise Edebiri
Chaise began the M.Ed. program in Educational Policy, Organization and Leadership at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Elizabeth Garcia
Elizabeth began the PhD program in Counseling Psychology at the University of Northern Colorado.

Mariela Vazquez Gordo
Mariela began the MS in Mexican American Studies at the University of Arizona.

Catherine Konold
Catherine is a statistician at Pentara.

Danielle Martinez
Danielle began the M.Ed. in Educational Leadership and Policy at the University of Utah.

Jamil McPherson
Jamil is a lab technician at PRA Health.

Yajaira Peralta
Yajaira is a medical lab assistant at ARUP.

Julie Schaufler
Julie is currently seeking employment in a neuroscience lab.

Deanna Waldron
Deanna began the MACL (community leadership) program at Westminster College.

Brisa Sánchez Zavala
Brisa began the MA in Anthropology at Washington State University.
Parents have Doubts

We are often the first in our families to attend and graduate from higher education. Pursuing a PhD will inevitably bring with it challenges regarding our families. It could often mean that our families may not know what we are pursuing, the worth it will have, or why we are doing it at all. One thing to keep in mind is how “brief” the PhD is in the overall scheme of things—five to seven years at the most, unless you are in Anthropology, and if you are best of luck! Just kidding. No seriously, if your parents have doubts, look to each others’ vulnerabilities: that is, get to the root of the problem. Is it that you will be away from home? Or they do not understand the process? Or they do not think it is worth the sacrifice? Do not underestimate the power of allowing someone else to see the vulnerability, trust, care or validation in you for the bad or the good, because that is where we find love.

Psychologically Deficient

I have and continue to experience imposter syndrome, a phenomenon that occurs when an individual internalizes the belief that they do not belong, despite having the qualifications and success. There are so many things about graduate school and academia that are frustrating, but they are the same (or similar) no matter where you go. That is hard to know when you are first encountering it, or when you have been stuck in your head for months and months trying to perfect that paper or that experiment or that chapter. It’s a good reminder that a lot of the dysfunction and issues have very little to do with you. Find that one person that can speak to your worth.

Professors have Doubts

You may encounter that one faculty member that is more of a tormentor rather than mentor. They may want to challenge and question your abilities in the department or overall field. You’re going to want to quit. The desire to quit will vary in severity from, “I think I might want to leave grad school sometime soon perhaps,” to, “I’ve looked up jobs. I’ve sent out applications. I’ll be out by the end of the month.” As underrepresented students, graduate school is very difficult, and you will feel lost a majority of the time. However, there will be a day in which everything falls into place and you know your worth and your contributions, and you will sit at the same table as that tormentor.
Words of Wisdom from the Summer 2018 Research Cohort

What advice would you give to McNair Scholars on selecting a research topic?

Estefanie Aguilar Padilla

Choose a topic you’re comfortable with spending 50 hours a week thinking about and don’t hesitate to change the topic if it’s not for you.

Abigail Angell

Remember to stay focused and do not become overwhelmed by wanting to do more during the 8-week summer research program.

Destina Bermejo

Keep in mind what demographics the program entails and use that as a drive in order to research material that furthers thoughts and extends conversations.

Kara Hall

Think about how you can organize a large goal into smaller ones. Set realistic goals.

Aubry Lines

Think of a topic you are passionate about and what questions you have about that topic that have not been addressed.

Jessica Taghvaiee

What advice would you give to McNair Scholars on making the most of the Summer Research Intensive?

Maria Alvarez Zavala

We get the most out of our research when we realize how much we will benefit from it. Our research might not change the world, but it can change the way we see it.

Amanda Carrasco

Find people who you can talk to about your different needs such has your research, finding graduate schools, or navigating college as a first-generation and/or student of color.

Kara Kornhauser

Allow enough time to do field work and lab work but make time for self-care as well. It is important to have passion for what you are studying so that it feels like exploration.

Josie Stoker

Make sure to spend plenty of time with your cohort because it helps keep you on task and makes the summer a lot more rewarding.

Ashley Covarrubias

8 weeks fly by fast when you’re working hard so you must keep up with all your research and McNair tasks. Be willing to reach out to your cohort because you all will be on the same journey.

Latifa Yaqoobi

Keep persisting! It will get hard and hectic, there may even be times when you don’t have enough hours to complete all that needs to be completed but do not give in to the thought of quitting.

What advice would you give to McNair Scholars who will be part of the group project next year?

Melissa Swedin

Take time for yourself. Make deadlines. Working with colleagues is incredibly hard but you will learn to keep a good face and unwavering professionalism.

Vazmin Chavez Marin

Work on things early.

Hector Robles

Be open-minded when working with other people. You can learn a lot from your colleagues and they can learn from you as well.
Pour him or her a Drink

You will at one time or another go out and have drinks. Or if you do not drink you will eat of whole bag of chocolate or binge on fries. Bad coping mechanisms are real. Is it worth jeopardizing your physical or mental health? It is something to think about routinely as you go through course work, dissertation proposal, and the dissertation.

OK, NOW CONGRATULATIONS YOU HAVE MADE IT. Your dissertation defense will be an opportunity to have all the brilliant minds you created for your committee in one room, use that to your advantage as you cross over from no longer being a graduate student to now a Doctor of Philosophy, the actual meaning of the initials PhD. One of the perks of finishing is that now people can address you as Dr. So and So. So-- at this stage, was it worth it? I am not going to answer that question for you all quite yet.

Piled higher and Deeper

The dissertation at one point was the most significant thing in your life. Unfortunately, not many people will read it besides your committee and other graduate students who are looking for a model. To have the dissertation in hand is one thing, but to be marketable is another. It is worth keeping in mind that a good dissertation is A DONE DISSERTATION.

Please hire. Desperate

My first attempt on the academic job market, I was rejected 22 times from various fellowships, adjunct and tenure-track positions. With each rejection, I asked myself, “Am I not good enough?” “What could I have done better?” “Was it worth getting the PhD?” After taking the spring and summer to rebuild and recover and seek reassurance from those who knew my worth and what I had to offer, I began to rethink rejection. Rejection in academia is the one thing we all have in common. What would it mean to find commonalities in our rejections? It could potentially serve as a collective space to cope.

Professorship? Hah! Dream on!

Know the reality you are stepping into: at this point in academia there are more PhDs than there are positions. That being said, if a professorship is not secured it is not a reflection on your intellectual abilities or worth. However, I say this not to discourage you from pursuing your dream of a tenure-track position, but rather to know our system is seriously flawed and as underrepresented and first-generation PhDs we are at a vulnerable stage. People may say to me, a Chicana/Puerto Rican PhD, “You did it, so everyone else can.” Yes, but with respect, I represent less than one percent of Chicana and Puerto Rican women, and only two percent of full-time faculty are Latina/o/x, regardless of rank. By contrast, white men and women comprise 77 percent of full-time faculty. Latinas make up one percent or less of full-time professors in the U.S.

McNair exists for a reason do not take your opportunity in the program for granted.
So let us revisit: “Was it worth it?”

The Merriam-Webster dictionary has three definitions of worth:

1: monetary value

2: the value of something measured by its qualities or by the esteem in which it is held

3: moral or personal value - trying to teach human worth

I think as underrepresented students we often contemplate our pure existence in higher education with variations of “worth.” Will the worth of our PhDs reveal itself in our economic advancement and stability in the future— not only for us, but for our families? Is the research we are engaged in of any worth to our respective fields or the communities we wish to serve? Is our presence in institutions of higher education of worth to the department, graduate school, or overall university? Define your own worth, what is worthy of your time, and the tale you want to tell.

Here is my tale, what I understand worth to mean...

I wish to leave with the words of Michelle Tellez, a Latina scholar in Mexican American Studies at the University of Arizona: “For me, it means that we have to ask ourselves in what ways we want to contribute to our world. I am even more convinced that we must do work that we are politically, spiritually, and emotionally connected to, work that is accountable to the communities that we represent and are tied to. When we lose this, there is also a loss of joy, creative freedom, and the ability to self-determine and shape our lives.”

I look forward to one day hearing your tales of worth.
A MESSAGE FROM DR. LARA CHATMAN

Congratulations McNair Scholars! As you move forward in the next stages of your educational career please remember the importance of self-care, healthy choices, and being your unapologetic authentic self. Trust the process and in doing so believe that the world has better plans for you; however, you must contribute by aligning yourself with things you are passionate about and want.

~ Lara Chatman, Ph.D.

You can find our Facebook page by searching “Westminster McNair.” “Like” our page to stay updated on current news within our program.

The Westminster College McNair Scholars Program prepares low income, first generation and underrepresented college students for doctoral study. This nationwide program was created in memory of Ronald E. McNair, Ph.D., an African American physicist who died in the space shuttle Challenger mission in 1986.

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