

2021

Introduction

Heather Neff

Eastern Michigan University, hneff@emich.edu

Dara Walker

duw482@psu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.emich.edu/mcnair>

Recommended Citation

Neff, Heather and Walker, Dara (2021) "Introduction," *McNair Scholars Research Journal*: Vol. 14 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://commons.emich.edu/mcnair/vol14/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the McNair Scholars Program at DigitalCommons@EMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in McNair Scholars Research Journal by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@EMU. For more information, please contact lib-ir@emich.edu.

INTRODUCTION



Dr. Heather Neff, Ph.D.
Director, Eastern Michigan University
McNair Scholars Program
Professor of English
EMU Distinguished Professor
Michigan Distinguished Professor

*I am because We are. Without We, I am not.
I am because We are. Because of We, I am.*

Ashanti proverb

Thirty-one years ago I had the privilege of teaching 11th grade English at St. Joseph High School on the island of St. Croix in the United States Virgin Islands. My husband and I moved to St. Croix to assist with its recovery after 89% of the standing structures were damaged or destroyed by Hurricane Hugo. Many homes were lost, with the majority of families experiencing overwhelming financial, physical, and emotional challenges. The school buildings having been destroyed, classes at St. Joseph were conducted in outdoor, tent-like pods accessed by rough wooden stairs. When I entered my classroom on the first day of the school year I wondered exactly how I would teach 16- and 17-year-olds who had been through so much — and I was right: it was those young survivors of the worst hurricane in recent memory who were destined to teach me.

Most of my students had lost all of their possessions and were now living in crowded conditions with extended family members, yet they came to class every day, bright and hopeful and eager to learn. Some had lost family members in the storm and resulting flooding, yet their mourning only seemed to renew their determination to succeed. Despite our limited resources, they read their assignments, wrote excellent essays, and demonstrated great kindness toward one another. Our discussions were open, lively, honest. Often we laughed together, and when it rained too hard to leave the classrooms, we sometimes lifted our voices in song. All of my stu-

dents could articulate their educational and professional goals with great clarity: they had already identified their future universities, career paths, and life purposes. Unbowed and unbroken, they chose to succeed.

For the past 28 years I have shared the lessons of St. Croix with thousands of students at Eastern Michigan University. I have spoken of the need to adapt when circumstances change, the importance of seeking knowledge about every aspect of life, and the critical necessity of having goals, dreams, and a sense of purpose. There is no greater purpose than advancing oneself through service to others.

These ideas have been profoundly tested during the COVID-19 pandemic. By the spring of 2020, hospital admissions showed that the elderly, members of marginalized ethnic and racial groups, people of lower socioeconomic status, and the undocumented were statistically more likely to perish from COVID-19 infections, revealing the harsh inequities in living conditions, food resources, and access to medical care experienced by many in our nation. Preventative lockdowns and mass unemployment led to devastating losses of income; the move to online instruction resulted in educational deficits for millions of children in low-income and rural areas. Sequestered in living spaces, rates of intimate partner violence, divorce, and substance use soared. When vaccines were approved for public distribution, fallacies about their safety and efficacy discouraged many of the most at-risk individuals from being inoculated.

The past year was also deeply troubled by civil unrest, due both to the police-related killings of Black men, women, and children across the country, and the turmoil and subsequent insurrection resulting from the contested presidential election. The growing distrust of traditional media sources encouraged some people to embrace theories that echo their greatest fears and most prejudiced beliefs. I can say, without hesitation, that our nation is now more divided than it has been at any time since the tumultuous decade between 1964 and 1974 — the decade of the Civil Rights Movement, Black Power Movement, American Indian Movement, Stop the War Movement, Gay Rights Movement, and Women's Liberation Movement. That decade was characterized by extreme violence, political assassinations, unreliable authority figures, and a sense of unabated rage felt across the spectra of age, race, gender, and political association. For many young people today, American life is similarly overshadowed by random and deadly violence, the very real threats of unemployment and homelessness, the lack of health insurance and access to healthy food, and an education system that leaves them underprepared for the rigors of post-secondary studies.

While the challenges faced by the McNair target population — undergraduate students from first-generation, low-income, and under-represented families — could not have been greater, the students at Eastern Michigan University nonetheless found the courage to fight for excellence. Some returned to the nearly-empty campus and carried on with full loads of remote classes while working in on-campus settings or in less-secure, off-campus positions. Others experienced lockdowns at home with their families, undertook online coursework, and held jobs in businesses deemed “essential.” Many faced daily exposure to COVID-19, and some experienced infection one or more times over the course of the year.

And yet, true to the spirit of Dr. Ronald McNair, they adapted. They remained flexible. They fought for knowledge, and they grew. Thanks to the selfless generosity of the EMU faculty, each of our 36 students worked with one or more professors on research projects. These projects ranged from in-depth literature reviews to complex laboratory procedures; some early scholars wrote research proposals for future funding, while others joined teams of graduate students involved in advanced research. A number of our scholars were selected to participate in highly-selective summer research programs and internships hosted by universities and corporations across the country. Our 15 graduating seniors were admitted to a total of 26 different master’s or doctoral programs at institutions including the University of Washington, University of Wisconsin-Madison, the Ohio State University, Syracuse University’s Newhouse School of Public Communication, Michigan State University, Emory University, Wayne State University, the University of Michigan, and Eastern Michigan University. The most “popular” fields of study were health-related, including Public Health, Clinical Mental Health, Developmental Psychology, and Social Work. Our seniors’ research interests aligned with the greatest challenges faced by our communities today: mental and sexual health, treatments geared toward marginalized groups, and shaping a better world through policy studies.

This does not mean that our scholars did not struggle. Indeed, these students stayed the course through the loss of beloved family members and friends, crushing periods of isolation, uncertainty about the long-term purpose of their studies... and, of course, whether the pandemic would ever end. The papers published in this volume of the *McNair Scholars Research Journal* represent the labor of eight McNair Interns who spent their junior year meeting with their faculty mentors, either remotely or in person, expending many hours in reading, writing, lab work, and, above all, holding onto their faith in the future.

The future is captured in the papers' subjects: an environmental study of the effects of flooding due to climate change; a comparison of methods used to address debilitating phobias; the effects of COVID-19-enforced isolation on elderly patients in residential care facilities; advancements in the development of automated vehicles. The projects undertaken by our McNair Interns reflect their distinct commitments to others through their personal academic growth and professional success. Choosing optimism over pessimism and industriousness over lassitude, they devised, planned, and completed papers of outstanding quality. These early scholars write from their hearts, investing sincere effort into papers meant for the good of the many.

Over my 11-year tenure as Director of the EMU McNair Program, and my 30-year career as a university professor, I have enjoyed the privilege of working with thousands of students and many wonderful faculty members. My appreciation of those who share my joy in assisting students cannot be overstated. I am therefore proud to thank, from the bottom of my heart, the EMU professors who mentored our students during this incredibly challenging period: Dr. Yvette Colón, Dr. Charles Graham, Dr. Qin Hu, Dr. Ellen Koch, Dr. Eric Portenga, Dr. Nick Romerhausen, Dr. T. Daniel Seely, and Dr. Cara Shillington.

It is also critically important to thank those who stood by us as we transitioned from an intensive face-to-face model of advising and instruction to a highly-successful remote structure employing Zoom conferencing, digital record-keeping, and accommodating our students' personal needs. The triumphs of this past year were heavily supported by Caryn Charter, Brian Moynihan, Susan Campbell, and Cynthia Monzon from the EMU Office of Research Development and Administration; Emily Tefft in EMU Grants Accounting; and Dr. Rhonda Kinney Longworth, Provost and Executive Vice President, whose leadership has steadied me through uncountable storms.

Additional thanks go out to the members of our Advisory Board: Dr. Rhonda Kinney Longworth; Professor Julia Nims, Head of the McNair Advisory Board and Editor of the electronic version of the *EMU McNair Scholars Research Journal* (commons.emich.edu/mcnair/); Ms. Elise Buggs Sturdivant, Director of EMU Academic Success Partnerships; Dr. Ellene Contis, Professor of Chemistry; Col. Wayne Doyle, Director of EMU Veterans Student Support Services; Dr. Ann Eisenberg, Dean of the EMU Honors College; Dr. Celeste Hawkins, Professor of Social Work; Dr. LaMarcus Howard, Director of the EMU Disability Resource Center; Dr. Ellen Koch, Associate Dean, College of Arts and Sciences and Professor

of Psychology; Dr. Harriet Lindsay, Head of Undergraduate Research and Professor of Chemistry; Dr. Calvin McFarland, Assistant Vice President of Academic Service; Dr. Janet Okagbue-Reaves, Director of the EMU Bachelor of Social Work Program; Ms. Michelle Peet, Assistant Principal of the EMU Early College Alliance; Mr. Josiah Pankiewicz, Assistant Director, EMU Student Support Services; Dr. MacArthur Stewart, Professor of Engineering; Ms. Temii Tellis, Senior Corporate Relations Manager, EMU College of Business; Mr. Roderick Wallace, Director of EMU Upward Bound; and Mr. Anthony Webster, Director of EMU Student Support Services. I have deeply appreciated your willingness to provide us with assistance whenever it was needed!

This past year we greatly benefitted from the dedication of our three graduate assistants. Mr. Tangeni Shikomba, M.S., a Computer Science student, arrived at EMU from Namibia, southern Africa only weeks before the start of the pandemic. Mr. Shikomba completely overhauled our website and took charge of our social media presence, two vitally important areas of communication with the larger community. Just before the pandemic began, I had the good fortune of hiring Cassidy Creech and Alexa Druckmiller, graduate students from Linguistics, to assist me with editing Volume 13 (2020) of the *McNair Journal*. Over the ensuing months, their talents as rigorous researchers, detailed proofreaders, patient instructors, and, above all, reliable professionals both guided our young scholars through the difficulties of research-writing, and made the preparation of Volume 14 the pleasantest of my career. Both Cassidy and Alexa are richly deserving of the title “Assistant Editor” of this project, and I wish them unmitigated success in the future.

We have greatly benefitted from the dedication of Dr. Kimberly Brown, Assistant Director of the McNair Program, whose hard work and cheerful demeanor have been an anchor to both our staff and students for over fourteen years.

I especially want to thank Ms. Carmen Gordon, Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Program Specialist, Management and Program Analyst, U.S. Department of Education. Ms. Gordon’s kindness, patience, and unwavering support of McNair have helped us in countless ways. I am deeply grateful for everything you do for us all.

I end this introduction with the proverb that has guided my life as a mother, professor, advisor, and member of many communities: “*I am because We are. Because of We, I am.*” Though often difficult, I have been with McNair long enough to see nearly 100 of “my” scholars go on to graduate school. Seventeen are currently undertaking doctoral studies.

Six of the students who completed a bachelor's degree during my McNair tenure are now administrators or tenure-track professors at Research-1 institutions.

McNair Scholars are at the vanguard of change in our nation. They embody hope, courage, perseverance, and promise. As I begin my retirement, I am deeply proud of them and profoundly grateful for having had the opportunity to pass on the lessons of my first students: lessons that have guided and brought meaning to my life.

Please be safe. Please be well. *The future is McNair!*



Dr. Dara R. Walker, Ph.D.

The Pennsylvania State University
Eastern Michigan University McNair Scholar
Class of 2009

These pages are filled with the ideas and the intellectual curiosity of scholars who are currently trying to navigate a global pandemic *amidst* one of the largest national movements for racial justice the United States has ever seen. This context matters because the ideas in this journal have been nurtured and developed within a set of constraints: cancelled trips to the archives, interviews conducted over Zoom, limited access to labs and collaborators, perhaps new roles as caregivers, and, likely, some loss of life among family and friends. And so, as a historian, I encourage readers to honor the context of the pandemic because the ability to publish anything during such a tumultuous period is no small feat. It is within these moments that the importance of community becomes much more pronounced. Over time, those of you who participate in the McNair Scholars Program will better understand the program's significance as a critical source of support as you began your academic career against this backdrop.

I write as someone who joined EMU McNair in its infancy. While the context in which I came to publish my research in the first issue was radically different, I believe the program's core principles and commitments remain unchanged. The lessons I learned from my McNair peers

and advisors have helped me sustain my commitment to scholarship for more than a decade. When I graduated from EMU in 2009, I realized that the benefits of being a McNair Scholar extended far beyond GRE preparation and professional development workshops. The experience actually raised my expectations for the kind of intellectual communities I wanted to join or create. Our cohort included students from Social Work, History, and Biology, and our research interests ranged from information literacy, corporate social responsibility, and childhood trauma, to mentoring practices, and the origins of historical reenactments. Where else could a junior in African American Studies learn about the embryonic development of frogs? I did not have the language for it then, but McNair cultivated intellectual curiosity in my cohort. We cared about the development of each person's project as well as their identity as a scholar. As an assistant professor of African American Studies, Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, and History at Penn State University, I approach my scholarship, teaching, and service with a deep sense of intellectual curiosity, an ethic of collaboration, and a commitment to community care, in large part because of the culture created by my McNair community.

When deciding where to undertake master's studies, I searched for programs that had a history of training scholars who would maintain a commitment to mentoring and making the academy more welcoming to historically marginalized communities. The core belief that academic programs have a responsibility to marginalized people led me to Syracuse University, where I earned a Master of Arts in Pan-African Studies. That experience changed me. Completing a required externship brought me to Detroit, MI, where I interviewed adults in their 60s who as teenagers had organized school building takeovers and marches to demand courses on Black history and literature. Those interviews taught me the significance of oral histories in the development of historical knowledge, and introduced me to the long tradition of justice-oriented scholars. Thanks to Wayne State University's Albert Shanker Fellowship, I was able to spend quite a bit of time at the Walter Reuther Library and Archives. There I met community archivists who taught me the significance of building relationships with people who happened to be historical actors. I also learned just how important it is to have mentors across generations who would listen to my stories about archival findings at the dinner table. This is the beloved community that nurtured me as I finished writing my master's thesis, *Navigating Untold Stories: An Oral History Approach to Understanding the Life Experiences of Black Detroit High School Student Activists of the Black Power Movement*.

I didn't think any other experience could equal my time at Syracuse, but the intellectual community I found in the Department of History at Rutgers University was astounding in every way. EMU introduced me to the idea of an intellectual community and Syracuse expanded my view of that community to include archivists and former activists, but Rutgers demonstrated the pure joy that is possible when that community supports you through the unique journey of earning a doctoral degree. Between 2011 and 2018, I learned to take risks, how to care for myself while reading thousands of pages a week, and how to trust the support offered by my friends and mentors.

As a doctoral student, I applied for at least a dozen research grants and fellowships. By the time I graduated, I had received honorable mentions, semi-finalist status, and then, just before entering my seventh year of graduate school, I received the Ford Foundation's Dissertation Fellowship. I had presented my research on Black high school activists at national conferences hosted by the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, the American Historical Association, North American Labor History, and the National Council of Black Studies.

The intellectual community I found at Rutgers supported me through the development of every application and every paper presentation. My dissertation, *Black Power, Education, and Youth Politics in Detroit, 1966-1973*, bears the marks of their investment in me as a scholar. From weekly writing groups to writing retreats, and late-night discussions of feedback sent via "track changes," I was always reminded that my professional development was grounded in an ethic of community care.

I write this introduction a month from the end of my second year as an assistant professor at Penn State. This is also three semesters into teaching, working on my own book, *High School Rebels: Black Power, Education, and Youth Politics in the Motor City, 1966-1973*, and writing a number of journal articles, all during the COVID-19 pandemic and a national social movement. Through the loss, instability, and social change, my students and colleagues continue to show up for one another, regardless of whether our meetings are academic or purely social. Although I will be on leave next year with a postdoctoral fellowship from the National Academy of Education and Spencer Foundation, I will remain committed to supporting the communities that have sustained me because my communities are the heart of my intellectual biography.

The EMU McNair Scholars Program sent me out into the world with very high expectations. I am so very fortunate to share my journey as proof of what happens when you challenge yourself to be your best. To

be sure, my own intellectual curiosity and my commitment to telling the story of those young activists have guided me. My mentors never let me forget this when I thank them for their support. But it's the curiosity *in tandem* with the community that has made my academic journey both possible and meaningful.

To the authors who have contributed to this journal, thank you for investing in the production of new knowledge within a context that is ever changing. And thank you for offering us just a bit of your intellectual curiosity and journey. I am so very excited to see where it takes you!