

# UCSB MCNAIR SCHOLARS PROGRAM NEWSLETTER

SPRING/SUMMER 2023, VOL. 21



## McNAIR



### SCHOLARS PROGRAM UCSB

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# NOTE FROM THE Faculty Director

## Greetings everyone!

This fall we're recognizing the growth and achievements of our scholars. As you may know, the McNair Scholars Program prepares first-generation/income-eligible and underrepresented students for graduate study, ideally doctoral programs. As such, many of our students come highly motivated to learn about what it takes to be a successful applicant to the graduate school of their choice. Yet, as we have seen, the majority of our students also bring with them limited experience with the process of research, some of it the result of the on-going effects of the pandemic and much of it the inability to access resources or opportunities for research. In addition, many of our students battle the imposter phenomenon, believing that they are not 'good enough' or don't have the credentials or skills necessary to succeed in

graduate school. Indeed, many of our most accomplished students doubt themselves, saying they 'are not ready' to attend graduate school to pursue their dreams. Despite these beliefs and experiences of being told by detractors that they have a "slim" chance of success, the scholars persevere and follow through with their goals and objectives. More than that, they have superseded expectations, often blooming into researchers with the confidence of knowing that what they've created, discovered, and/or observed will bring significance to their larger research project.

At McNair, we have seen this process of transformation take place through the course of several weeks, mainly during our Summer Research Program. During the eight-week

program, students have the opportunity to present their work in public forums where they often shine as first-rate researchers and investigators. Indeed, we have seen their confidence grow as they become increasingly comfortable speaking about their work, fielding questions about the particularities of their projects, and thinking through how to improve, strengthen, or modify their research methodologies and/or analyses. These improvements don't stop at the end of the summer, however. They continue through the academic year, as we continue to work with them in enhancing their skills and confidence as they prepare to apply to and enter the graduate school of their choice. I invite you to continue to read on to learn more about these amazing young scholars, where they've come from and where they're going.



**Faculty Director**  
Miroslava Chávez-García, Ph.D.

## Note from the Program Director



**Program Director**  
Veronica L. Fematt, Ph.D.

Summer 2023 passed by in the blink of an eye, and it's been an exciting one for our McNair Scholars! As part of our revamped summer curriculum, our scholars enthusiastically engaged in a variety of workshops. Some of the highlights included the "R Studio-Quarto Workshop Series," a crash course in "Introduction to Survey Design," and an enlightening "Navigating Qualtrics Workshop."

Our scholars not only expanded their skill sets through these workshops but also dedicated themselves to their research, which they presented at several on-campus events. It wasn't all about work, however. We took the time to foster meaningful connections with

other like-minded programs. Collaborating with UC-HBCU, ARC, and UC-LEADS summer research programs, we enjoyed moments of leisure, including friendly bowling competitions, thrilling kayaking adventures, and relaxed beach social events.

For the first time in a long while, the sense of community within McNair has been reignited. Camaraderie and mutual support are at an all-time high, reminding us that we are indeed a close-knit and resilient community. As we transition into the fall quarter, our seniors are busy preparing their graduate program applications, and we remain committed to the spirit of "McNairing."

# New Scholars



**Mayra Canseco**  
Sociology & Chicana/o Studies  
Faculty Mentor: Dr. Jennifer Kam



**Odinakachukwu "Naka" Eleele**  
History of Public Policy & Law  
Faculty Mentor: Dr. Alice O'Connor



**Andrea Gomez**  
Pre-Biology, B.A.  
Faculty Mentor: Dr. Hillary Young



**Angeline Higby**  
Earth Science  
Faculty Mentor: Dr. Gen Li



**Ixel Medrano**  
Pre-Biology, B.S.  
Faculty Mentor: Dr. Hillary Young



**Melissa Romero**  
Sociology and Linguistics  
Faculty Mentor: Dr. Mayra Puente



**Isabel Ruacho**  
Biopsychology  
Faculty Mentor: Dr. Barry Giesbrecht

# Class of 2023 Graduate Programs

Fourteen Graduating Seniors Launched their Careers in S'23



**Natalia Almanza**  
Applying to PhD Programs



**Ezequiel Contreras Martinez**  
Las Cumbres Observatory  
Science Center  
Naval Aviation



**Jo Fobbs**  
UCLA  
African American Studies MA  
Program



**Martha Garcia**  
Psychology Research  
Applying to PhD Programs



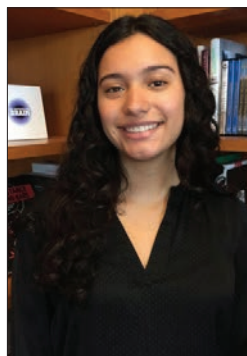
**Fatima Gonzalez**  
UCSF Clinical Research  
Coordinator  
Applying to PhD Programs



**Arsalan Hashmi**  
UC San Diego  
Bioengineering MS Program,  
2024



**Collin Lejano**  
Northwestern University  
Education PhD Program



**Madeleine Pacheco**  
UCLA  
Biology PhD Program



**Nataly Rincon Garcia**  
UCLA  
Teacher Education MA  
Program



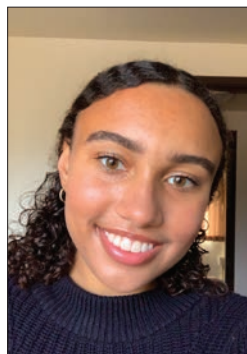
**Carla Suarez Soto**  
UC Santa Cruz  
Education PhD Program



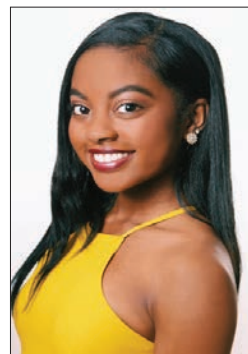
**Mackenzie Taradalsky**  
Georgetown University  
Government PhD Program



**Angie Torrico**  
Miami University  
Biology MS Program



**Marian Walker**  
Environmental Studies  
Applying to PhD Programs



**Britney Walton**  
Tri-Counties Regional Center  
Early Intervention Program  
Coordinator



Santa Barbara Harbor

# McNair Summer Research Program Highlights

This summer, the McNair students worked diligently on a wide array of research activities, spanning lab work, fieldwork, library research, and interviews. They collaborated closely with faculty mentors and also pursued independent investigations, with incredible support from Graduate Mentors Jason Fly, Mary Michael, and Courtney Durdle. The students' efforts led to remarkable findings, ranging from projects centered on the mental health of Latine populations to the impact of legal documents, specifically consent decrees on policing practices, as well as the interplay between human presence along the California coast and its effects on local wildlife.

To bolster their research prowess with state-of-the-art techniques, students attended an Introductory Data Analysis and Visualization workshop in R Studio, graciously hosted by the UCSB DREAM Lab. They also engaged in an intensive GRE workshop meticulously organized and led by writing specialist Courtney Durdle. This session not only offered a comprehensive overview of GRE content but also provided strategies for conquering this rigorous test, which certain graduate programs still require. In addition to refining their research skills, students participated in weekly professional develop-

Summer Research continues on page 6



pment workshops. These sessions provided them with essential insights into navigating the graduate school application process, deciphering the hidden curriculum, and fostering relationships with potential faculty mentors.

The McNair students also took time over the summer to develop their social networks by engaging with peers involved in research programs at UCSB. They met with students from the UC-HBCU “Afro-Latinidades” program, guided by Professor Ben Olguin in the English Department. Gathered at Bowlero Lanes, they bowled, shared food, and enjoyed a chance to unwind and connect away from campus. Additionally, they ventured out for a memorable kayaking excursion at the Santa Barbara Harbor.

Reflecting on this experience, student Jacky Lopez remarked, “I have never been kayaking before and didn’t know what to expect, but really loved it, and I think it is a pastime I would continue to do. I feel like I am more open now to try new things! Thanks, McNair!”

The students’ immersive summer experience culminated in a rewarding research symposium where they presented their findings before an audience of their peers and faculty mentors.

Initially daunting, the students quickly came to appreciate the opportunity. “This symposium helped me to build my confidence, and I feel super prepared to present at conferences now!” Genesis Hernandez stated. “The symposium challenged me and gave me useful insight into the wide range of research being conducted on campus! It was also great to support my friends!” added Ixel Medrano. Evelyn Isais, who researched racial identity in Mormonism, commented, “It was so interesting to hear cross-disciplinary perspectives on my research! The feedback was invaluable!” All in all, the students came away with the satisfaction of having worked hard and played hard.

# McNair Summer Program Highlights



**Abby Welch**

## Tell us about the program.

The program was the University of Wisconsin - Madison Summer Education Research Program, a ten-week experience. The goal of this program is to provide educational research and networking opportunities to undergraduates from underrepresented backgrounds to conduct cutting edge research alongside faculty.

## What did you learn?

This program was designed to show us what life would look like

as a graduate student. Each week, I would have seminars with my cohort, individualized meetings with my faculty mentor and graduate students, and workshops designed around providing graduate school information. Through this program, I completed a research project titled "Teaching the Complexity of Latinidad in Rural Wisconsin: White Teachers' Perceptions of Latinx Identity(es)" under my faculty mentor, Dr. Diego Roman. My final project was presented in a symposium to the graduate school and local community. My project is currently being reviewed by the American Educational Research Association (AERA), and if accepted, I will be attending the national conference in Philadelphia, PA next spring!

## What were the highlights?

Some of the biggest highlights of my program were the connections and friendships I was able to build during my time at UW-Madison. Every week, I was able to meet with faculty scholars from different departments, graduate

students from a wide range of research interests, and fellow undergraduates interested in pursuing the same path as myself. I intend to have lifelong friendships with many of my fellow cohort mates. My research team - consisting of Dr. Roman and his graduate student, Kaycee Rogers - were some of the most supportive, encouraging individuals I have ever met. Finally, I could not speak higher of our program coordinator, Janella Benson! She continues to check in with me about my progress toward graduate school and has been a pillar of emotional support throughout this past summer and beyond.

## How did the McNair Scholars Program help you prepare?

I would like to give a special shout-out to Courtney Durdle, McNair writing specialist, for working tirelessly with me throughout my entire application process. Additionally, I would like to thank Mary Michael for listening to all my concerns each week and providing me with honest advice. The Mc-

Nair Scholars Program definitely prepared me for this opportunity through my previous summer research experience and providing me with the necessary skill sets (how to design a research question, survey design, working with R, etc.) to work on a wide range of projects.

## What advice would you give younger scholars about applying to summer research programs?

My advice is to not be afraid of potentially traveling out of state! I had never been to the Midwest before this experience, and went in with a particular perception of what the culture would be like. The School of Education provided me with an atmosphere that was so inclusive, encouraging, and uplifting that a lot of my initial anxieties were calmed from the get-go. Definitely take full advantage of what the area you're living in has to offer. I not only got the chance to explore the whole Madison area, but I was also able to travel to Milwaukee and Chicago during the summer!



**Fátima Aguilar**

## Tell us about the program.

The program is the iSchool Inclusion Institute (i3). It is an undergraduate research and leadership development program that prepares students from underrepresented populations for graduate study and careers in the information sciences. Only 25 students from across the country are selected each year to become i3 Scholars. Those students undertake a yearlong experience that includes two summer institutes hosted by the University of Texas at Austin's iSchool and a research project spanning the year.

## What did you learn?

During the program, I spent a

month in Austin, Texas, where I had the opportunity to focus on strengthening my leadership and professional skills. This was achieved through a variety of activities, including resume and cover letter building, participating in mock interviews, attending workshops, engaging with graduate student panels, and selecting our year long research team and advisor, along with our research topic. In addition to the academic and professional development aspects of the program, weekends were a time for us to unwind and bond with each other. We had Texas Barbeque, arcade games, kayaking, and more social events throughout our weeks!

## What were the highlights of your program?

I had the opportunity to learn more about graduate school, receiving mentorship on gathering my application materials. This experience allowed me to better understand the expectations and challenges of graduate studies, which was both eye-opening and motivating. I really enjoyed meeting and working with my research team as we were able to complete our research proposal. Then being

able to present our research proposal in front of the program was very valuable. Overall, the opportunity to build community with people from unique backgrounds and perspectives, was both enriching and inspiring. The bonds I formed during the program are something I truly treasure, and they continue to be a source of support!

## How did the McNair Scholars Program help you prepare for the program?

The McNair Scholars Program prepared me for this program in several ways. It provided me with valuable research experience prior to my participation. This prior research experience gave me confidence and a clear understanding of the research process, methodologies, and the significance of the work I was engaged in. This especially came into play when selecting a research advisor and team. McNairs helped me make informed choices when it came to choosing the right advisor and research focus for the program. It allowed me to make the most of my research opportunity and maximize my growth and learning during the program.

## What advice would you give younger scholars about applying to summer research programs?

I would encourage them to embrace the opportunity and simply go for it! Apply to as many programs as you are interested in and believe align with your academic and research goals. Don't let your concerns about being out of state or away from your familiar environment prevent you from attending the program, talk to a mentor about it ;). It's important to remember that when you join an out-of-state program, you'll find a welcoming and supportive community of fellow students who are also participating in the program. These shared experiences and common goals help create strong bonds and create a sense of belonging, even in a new and unfamiliar setting. I would also emphasize the importance of having fun and fully immersing oneself in the experience. Summer research programs offer a unique chance for personal and academic growth, and it's an opportunity to learn, explore, and make lasting memories.

# Graduate Mentors



## Jason Fly

I am a doctoral candidate in clinical psychology here at UCSB. My research includes developing clinical tools to prevent and treat stress disorders related to traumatic events, specifically using narrative strategies. Currently, I am working on my dissertation to create a measurement for narrative engagement that will benefit treatment planning and more culturally relevant interventions. My broader focus addresses socio-cultural differences that factor in prevention and treatment of at-risk and underserved populations, especially African Americans.

I was born in Brooklyn, New York, and raised in Baltimore, Maryland, in segregated communities disproportionately affected by over-policing and violence. These experiences taught me the impacts of these factors on my community, and how intergenerational trauma interacts with racism, economic disparity, and stigma around mental health. Despite these negative

impacts, I also learned the power of community in building resilience and the ways in which healing practices are also handed down intergenerationally. I count these formative years as the foundation of what drives my research, my motivation for building equitable health practices, and my mentorship.

Prior to attending UCSB I received my BA degree in Psychology from the University of Northern Iowa in 2018. While there, I was a student in the McNair Scholars Program and had the opportunity to work in two labs and develop my own research projects. One, a psychoneuroendocrinology lab studying the effects of stress hormones on health outcomes, and the other, a cross-cultural emotions lab where I developed an interest in differential expressions of empathy. Thanks to McNair, I was able to see research as a way to apply my experiences to ask questions that may lead to meaningful change.

I learned of the effects of chronic stress on aging at the cellular level beginning at much younger ages that had been previously studied. This was the beginning of a shift towards my desire to become a trauma researcher and learn of the vulnerabilities that may exist prior to development of things like PTSD. I went on to develop an interest in measurement, and developed a scale to rate individual levels of cognitive empathy for African Americans. This scale produced evidence of a link between a lack of empathy for African Americans and racism and establishes a difference between general empathy and empathy for specific groups. These two research experiences have led me to where I am now, as a trauma researcher seeking to develop better ways to prevent, treat, and heal underserved and underrepresented groups.



## Mary Michael

I'm a PhD candidate in the Film and Media Studies program at UCSB. My research examines smart city and e-governance technologies in Dubai (UAE) and how migrants experience and engage with those technologies. In addition to being a McNair Scholars Graduate Mentor, I'm also the Graduate Diversity and Outreach Peer.

While I was born in Los Angeles, I grew up all around Southern California. My family eventually settled in Palm Springs, where I went to high school surrounded by predominantly white or wealthy students and families. Throughout high school and into the first two years of my undergraduate education, I didn't understand what college was or why I had to attend. No one at my high school demystified college for me. As Egyptian immigrants, my parents couldn't explain college or the application process to me, either.

Fortunately, I was admitted into UC Riverside as a Sociology major. During my time at UCR, I found immense joy in computer programming and playing video games made by or for queer gamers. I wanted to pursue programming to create my own queer video games, but was discouraged by academic advisors who presumed my incompetence with such a technical skill. I eventually found my way back to queer gaming through critical games studies research and digital projects. While I did ultimately graduate in 2016 with a B.S. in Sociology/Law and Society, I pursued graduate education in media studies to further my interests.

I then entered the Cinema and Media Studies program at the University of Southern California as a fully funded Master's student. It was there that I regained connection with my digital production

skills and learned the introductory elements of game design, interactive media, and worldbuilding. While in Los Angeles, I also had the opportunity to participate in workshops held by Color Coded, a collective that aims to empower people of color to create and design their own technologies in an effort to protect their homes and livelihoods. That work inspired me to pursue my PhD.

I ultimately hope to use my graduate degrees to make education and technology more accessible to people from marginalized backgrounds. My aim is to open a media research lab that aims to provide local communities with education and research experience in digital and urban design. My lab would serve those who are marginalized within technologically-oriented academic and career spaces, and would empower community collaborators to craft their own stories.



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# Publications and Awards

**Jada Alexander**, a senior, was awarded a Worster Fellowship (\$5,000) & Association for the Sciences of Limnology and Oceanography Multicultural Program, which provides full funding for the national conference.

**Ezequiel Contreras Martínez**, a recent graduate, received a SACNAS Career Pathways Grant (\$1000) and published "Surveying Nearby Brown Dwarfs with HGCA: Direct Imaging Discovery of a Faint, High-Mass Brown Dwarf Orbiting HD 176535 A" in January 2023. He was also selected to present at the 2022 SACNAS NDISTEM National Conference in Puerto Rico and later served for the UCSB MRL CAMP as a Research Intern.

**Naka Elelleh**, a senior, was selected for the 2023 Consider Cornell: Experience, a two-day, all-expenses-paid program providing in-depth introduction to the grad school application process.

**Genesis Hernandez**, a senior, was awarded the Waterman Scholarship (\$2,500) from the Kern Community Foundation.

**Madeleine Pacheco**, a recent graduate, earned the Schmidt Family Award for Environmental Solutions (\$9000), Gene and Susan Lucas Research Grant (\$1000), SACNAS Career Pathways Grant (\$1000), and Wenger Scholarship for Environmental Studies (\$2000). For all her hard work she earned Distinction in the Major in the Ecology, Evolution, and Marine Biology (EEMB) Department in 2023.

**Alex Reed**, a senior, received a 2023 SACNAS Travel Scholarship Award to attend the conference in Portland, Oregon, in 2023.

**Carla Suarez Soto**, a recent graduate, received an URCA Grant (\$730) for her research.

**Lucero Torres Ojeda**, a senior, received the Promise Scholar Scholarship, a four-year funding package.

**Marian Walker**, a recent graduate, received the Gene & Susan Lucas Research Scholarship (\$1000); UCSB Environmental Studies Department Mini-Grant for Undergraduate Research (\$500); and, an URCA Conference Mini-Grant (\$350). She was named among the "Class of 2023: High Honors, Distinction in the Environmental Studies Major" and was awarded a University for Peace (Universidad para la Paz) & Earth Charter International: Leadership, Sustainability, & Ethics Certificate. Finally, she received the United States Congressional Public Service Award for Excellence in Research (awarded by Congressman Salud Carbajal). Excellent work!

**Abby Welch**, currently a senior, received a UCSB Shoreliners Scholarship (\$2000) for the 2022-2023 academic year and was chosen to give a presentation at the Georgia Undergraduate Research Symposium in November 2022. In summer 2023, Abby was selected to attend the University of Wisconsin - Madison Summer Research Program (\$4500 stipend, plus travel & housing) where she carried out research under the guidance of a faculty member.

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