

# UCSB MCNAIR SCHOLARS PROGRAM NEWSLETTER

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## McNAIR



### SCHOLARS PROGRAM UCSB

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NOTE FROM THE

# Faculty Director

Greetings everyone! I am excited to share the latest news about our amazing students at the UCSB McNair Scholars Program. Our scholars continue to thrive despite juggling many responsibilities as undergraduates, prospective graduate students, and, often, income earners to support themselves and their families. They do so with persistence and in community, especially as the weight of it all can seem overwhelming. McNair staff, too, labor diligently year-round to provide the scholars with holistic support in their graduate school preparation. The staff do so by bringing students together as often as possible, particularly during stressful times (e.g., finals) or significant holidays (e.g., winter break) to share a meal and provide comfort in each other's company and to celebrate milestones.

To that end, we are thrilled to report that many of our seniors have received acceptances to graduate school programs such as UCLA, UCSD, UC Davis, UCSB, Rutgers University, Drexel University, and Stanford University, among others. Congratulations to them! Others have been put on waitlists and remain hopeful. Even those who have not been accepted and/or prefer to enhance their research experience, they have made plans to make the most of their 'gap year' in preparation for next year's application cycle. Read on to find out more about their personal stories and educational journeys.

We remain vigilant, too, in not only keeping McNair strong today but also ensuring its longevity. The White House Administration's chilling calls to shutter programs premised on diversity, equity, and inclusion



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

reminds us that the struggle for educational access and social justice continues. As part of the TRIO program, the umbrella organization that oversees educational opportunities for first-generation, low-income and underrepresented students, such as those in McNair, we are working with the Council for Opportunity in Education (COE) to navigate these challenging waters. We remain committed to following Dr. Ronald E. McNair's legacy as an African American who had to navigate systemic racial and class exclusion to achieve his dreams. He did so and more. Let us follow in his footsteps.

Finally, we would like to dedicate this issue to the memory of Dr. Courtney Durdle, our beloved former Writing Specialist, who passed away too soon. May her spirit shine brightly among our students.



## McNair Holiday Celebration

Scholars and staff came together to share a meal, mark the end of fall quarter, and celebrate upcoming winter holidays. The mood was festive early on but then got boisterous and darn-right competitive during the "White Elephant" exchange. Gifts

were chosen, exchanged, and snatched out of each other's hands. We're happy to report that, in the end, everyone got what they wanted and went home merrily! We look forward to the '2026 McNair White Elephant Showdown.'

# Introducing our New Program Director

Yasmine Hachimi is a first-generation, woman of color scholar, teacher, and advocate. She is excited to join UCSB's McNair Scholars Program as Director and is passionate about supporting students as they explore different avenues of research, gain professional skills, and prepare for graduate school. Yasmine's commitment to the McNair Program stems from her own experience as a McNair scholar at the University of San Diego. The mentorship and guidance Yasmine received while in the McNair Program prepared her for the graduate school application process, campus visits, strategically negotiating program offers, and so much more.

Yasmine completed her PhD in English Literature at UC Davis in September 2022. While at Davis, Yasmine collaborated with faculty and students in the English Department to create inclusive spaces and host events that demystified graduate coursework, funding, and teaching. From 2016-2017, Yasmine was Program Assistant for the University of California Office of the President-funded UC-HBCU SPLASH Program, which provided intensive teaching and mentorship to students from HBCU's to pursue graduate education. She brought these skills to the Undergraduate Research Center, where she served as an Academic Advisor and Program Manager of MMP-HArCSS (Mentor-Mentee Program in Humanities, Arts, Cultural Studies and Social Sciences) from 2018-2021. In this role, she facilitated mentorship opportunities between graduate and undergraduate students by organizing workshops and creating resources for undergraduate mentors across the university.

Prior to joining UCSB, Yasmine was the Public Humanities Postdoctoral Fellow with the Center for Renaissance Studies at the Newberry Library in Chicago (2022-2024). She co-curated the Newberry's See-

ing Race Before Race exhibition (Fall 2023) alongside Lia Markey, Rebecca Fall, Christopher Fletcher, and Noémie Ndiaye. The exhibition and programming series explored the roots of race from the Middle Ages to 1800 and highlighted histories of race-making, racial profiling, settler colonialism, and resistance. In addition to her curatorial work, Yasmine co-created dynamic programs, workshops, talks, and conferences that contribute to the vibrant fields of medieval and early modern studies in order to cultivate new ways of seeing the world and ignite conversations that change how we relate to the past. Whether at a cultural institution or a university, Yasmine's commitment to diversity and inclusion manifests through her mentorship, scholarship, and program building so that all individuals feel like they belong.

Yasmine's areas of expertise include Early Modern Literature and Culture; Queenship; Gender and Sexualities; Premodern Critical Race Studies; and Media and Fan Studies. Her book project, *Tudorotica*, traces the eroticization and racialization of Tudor queens across centuries and genres, from sixteenth-century letters and plays, to tv shows and fanfiction today. Yasmine is interested in how popular media and images of the premodern period challenge or affirm public understandings of the past, particularly with regards to sexuality and race. She has shared her work and expertise in several venues, including public-facing talks and publications, podcasts, and social media outlets. When she's not working, you can find Yasmine immersing herself in acts of joy centered around rest, reading, and community.

Program Director  
**Dr. Yasmine Hachimi**





## In Memoriam

# Courtney Durdle, PhD

### McNair Writing Specialist, 2022-'24

With the heaviest of hearts, we dedicate this newsletter in loving memory of Dr. Courtney Durdle, McNair Scholars Program former Writing Specialist, who was, in her last position, an Associate Research Scholar at the Justice Collaboratory at Yale Law School. Courtney was an incredible mentor, colleague, and friend. Students often talk about our program as a safe space where they can seek support and guidance, but Courtney made the program feel like a tight-knit, chosen family for those whose lives she touched. She regularly surpassed her job responsibilities of providing writing support to our students by planning events that inevitably brought students and staff closer together. She always went above and beyond for McNair, often sharing a significant amount of her personal time and resources to help everyone in the program achieve their goals. She was, above all, devoted to helping everyone in the program regain control over their trajectories. Whether that happe-

ned through frequent meetings with students or constantly communicating and following through on creative solutions to improve and expand the program's curriculum, she consistently made herself available to help with whatever challenges students and staff were facing. She never wanted anyone to feel stuck in whatever they were trying to accomplish. She was a constant voice motivating and celebrating everyone at McNair. She was a precious, cherished member of our community.

The warmth of her genuine love and the brightness of her energy will be missed among many of our current students, alumni, and staff. Yet, her presence and influence will not be lost. At McNair, we will continue to remember her fondly through the work that has had a lasting impact on our students' growth. We will keep her infectious optimism with us as we share stories of her incredible ability to make us crack a smile and recollect our hope, even in the face of the darkest and most tense mo-

ments that we faced individually and collectively. We will continue to enthusiastically and passionately cheer each other on through both our difficult and triumphant moments, just as she would have. And, of course, we will all forever keep her favorite piece of advice with us: "Follow your heart." - Mary Michael

"Courtney gave the most touching speech when I won the Dr. Clyde Woods award (in 2024), and I can truly say I wouldn't have understood or gotten through the PhD application process without her support. I have a photo of Courtney and me (featured) from that event, which also happens to be one of my favorite photos from graduation time. She had the kindest heart of anyone I've ever met, and she was truly a joy to be around. Courtney made my McNair experience what it was, and I feel so lucky to have known her." Mackenzie Taradalsky, Class of 2024.



## A Warm Welcome to **Our New** Graduate Mentor Rubysela Rodriguez, PhD

Rubysela Rodriguez, a PhD student in the Gevirtz School of Education, is a southern California native who was raised in a close-knit, working-class immigrant family. Her commitment to higher education and social justice is deeply rooted in her lived experiences and the resilience of her family. As a first-generation, non-traditional college student, Rubysela's academic journey has been shaped by perseverance and a profound dedication to equity in education.

After years of full-time employment, and with the encouragement

of her husband, she made the decision to return to school. She began her studies at a community college, where she excelled, and later transferred to California State University, Northridge (CSUN). At CSUN, she was introduced to a transformative program dedicated to supporting historically minoritized students in their pursuit of graduate education. The mentorship she received through this initiative was pivotal, inspiring her to pursue a doctoral degree at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB). Her research focuses on issues of access to higher

education and the academic experiences of minoritized communities.

Rubysela is honored to serve as a McNair Graduate Mentor at UCSB, where she has the opportunity to pay forward the invaluable mentorship she once received. Her role allows her to actively contribute to diversifying higher education by supporting students from underrepresented backgrounds. This work not only aligns with her academic interests but also reflects her unwavering commitment to social justice and educational equity.



# McNair Profile

## Senior Scholar



**Isabel “Isa” Ruacho** is graduating in spring of 2025 with a Bachelor of Science degree in Biopsychology.

### **What are your research interests?**

My research interest is in cognitive neuroscience. I want to use my research to bridge psychology and neuroscience. I did research on cognitive functioning and people’s ability to sustain attention in the Attention Lab at UCSB. I want to take that research experience into a clinical setting in the future to examine how people sustain attention and how they progress through disorders such as Alzheimer’s or through brain injuries. I also want to do research on changes in cognition that happen with disorders and aging.

### **Why did you apply to the McNair Scholars program, and how has the program helped you achieve your goals?**

As a sophomore, I knew that I wanted to pursue clinical neuropsychology. Once I realized that this path would require obtaining a PhD, I started looking for resources on getting into graduate school. My RA at the time, who was a McNair scholar herself, recommended that I apply to McNair as well. She told me that the program gave her plenty of useful resources and mentorship. She really loved the support that she got from the graduate mentors, who helped her find research opportunities off campus and encouraged her to pursue any other opportunities that she wanted to try. She talked about how the program helped her improve her research skills and gain confidence in her abilities. That was exactly the kind of support and encouragement I was looking for, and she convinced me to apply!

### **What are your plans for after graduation from UCSB?**

Right now, I’m applying for different research coordinator and assistant roles. I want to spend some time after graduation to get some experience in a clinical setting. After I get some experience under my belt, I plan to apply for clinical psychology PhD programs.

### **What advice would you give to McNair scholars planning to apply to graduate programs?**

Use your resources! The resources and people at McNair are there to help you succeed! Also, I highly recommend starting early. It can be hard to start working on your applications because it seems very intimidating at first. But, once you start working on applications, you’ll be on a roll and the whole process will feel less scary. I also suggest that you start applying for research opportunities as soon as you can, just because it can help you get used to writing your statements. That will also help make grad applications feel less intimidating.

### **What is your favorite memory from your time at McNair?**

The summer research program! It was so great living with some of the other scholars. We got to form relationships with each other, and learn about everyone’s research projects. Doing all of the work and the fun activities together was so nice. You could talk about your stress together, and you could also bond over that stress. It was a really supportive environment that made the work feel doable, and helped us become friends.

# McNair Profile

## Senior Scholar



**Melissa Romero** is graduating in spring of 2025 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Linguistics and Sociology.

### **Why did you apply to the McNair Scholars program, and how has the program helped you achieve your goals?**

I applied to McNair because I wanted to be in a community with like-minded people. It's meaningful to be part of a community of students who are first-generation, come from a working-class background, or are part of an underrepresented background. Being on campus and not seeing people who look like you or who can relate to you can make you feel excluded. This program gave me a chance to not only feel included in something communal but also gave me the opportunity to have social justice conversations with other students. I got to learn new things from other students who were interested in advocacy, which made the McNair community more welcoming and lived in. I love that people in McNair are similarly driven by social justice, and are motivated to use their research to make meaningful changes in their worlds. I appreciated the space that McNair gave us to make us feel at home on campus. I liked being able

to get advice from people who are more experienced in academia, like the graduate mentors, the writing specialist, and the rest of the McNair team. I like that the advice I get from everyone at McNair comes from the perspective of an underrepresented scholar. The McNair program has felt like a family to me! It's a place where I can get help from mentors who feel like older siblings, and where I can get personalized attention and support that matches my experience.

### **What are your research interests?**

My research interest is the experiences of Latiné students in higher education, specifically in Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs). I argue that HSIs typically only serve a single dominant narrative to encompass the experiences of all Latiné students, despite there being many different cultures and identities among these students. I examine how HSIs can meaningfully engage with different identities and experiences among Latiné students. I want to use my research to build community and create physical spaces within institutions of higher education where US-Central American Latiné students like myself can speak more openly about our identities. I want US-Central American Latiné students to be able to learn and carry on our histories and cultures, rather than have our stories and identities become lost to an institutionalized, homogenized Latine identity.

### **What are your plans for after graduation from UCSB?**

After graduation, I plan to go to graduate school at the University of California, Davis, and begin my PhD at the School of Education. I will be working under Dr. Marcela Cuellar doing research on education policy and educational organization. I will work in her lab to examine how institutions organize resources to provide students with specific skills and knowledge. I eventually want to become a tenure-track professor of

education so that I can do research among and with US-Central American students about their higher education experiences.

### **What advice would you give to McNair scholars planning to apply to graduate programs?**

Rejections are inevitable. It's important not to take rejection personally. There are so many things that go into rejections. Rejection doesn't automatically mean failure. If anything, it's up to you to determine the narrative around rejection. I learned that from *Is Grad School For Me?*, the book that Dr. Mirosława Chavez-Garcia co-authored. I also recommend applying to as many schools as possible, rather than restricting yourself to only the most well-known schools. Finally, you don't have to apply to grad schools alone! McNair has a group and community here to support you and provide you with resources and expertise. While you're applying, make sure to remind yourself about your "why" --- why you're applying to grad school, why you want to do research, and why you care about your work so much!

### **What is your favorite memory from your time at McNair?**

My favorite memories from my time at McNair came from the McNair Summer Research Program. We spent a lot of time together in the summer. Even as we were working really hard to prepare our research, we still found ways to laugh together! We were able to have workshops on important topics like imposter syndrome/imposter phenomenon, but then we were still able to gather afterwards and process those topics together over ice cream. I also loved the social time we had together, like when we went kayaking or when we went to the beach. I loved being able to eat food and dance to music in the sun with everyone from McNair. The socials always felt like a family gathering, which I cherished so much!

# New Juniors



**Miguel Barron**  
Major: Biochemistry and Molecular Biology  
Faculty Mentor:  
Dr. Andy Alexander



**Lakshmi Garcia**  
Major: Writing and Literature  
Faculty Mentor:  
Dr. Michelle Petty



**Maritza Gomez**  
Major: Sociology and Chicano/a Studies  
Faculty Mentor:  
Dr. Ralph Armbruster-Sandoval



**Natalie Guerrero**  
Major: Religious Studies  
Faculty Mentor:  
Dr. Joseph Blankholm



**Melanie Hidalgo-Garcia**  
Major: Chicano/a Studies



**Evan Ho**  
Major: Global Studies and Asian Studies



**Briana Le**  
Major: Aquatic Biology  
Faculty Mentor:  
Dr. Halley Froehlich



**Violeta Valdez Samaniego**  
Major: Sociology and Minor in Applied Psychology  
Faculty Mentor:  
Dr. Elena Skapoulli-Raymond

# McNair Alumni Spotlight



## Fernanda Castellón, PhD

UCSB McNair Alumna, Fernanda Castellón, PhD (UCSB '18), is currently a UC President's Postdoctoral Fellow at UC Riverside's SEARCH Autism Center. A graduate of UCLA's doctoral program in Human Development & Psychology, Dr. Castellón has participated in various federally funded multi-site research studies aimed at reducing autism disparities. While in graduate school, she was awarded the Cultural Diversity Internship from the International Society for Autism Research (INSAR) where she engaged in community based participatory research in México. Dr. Castellón's research interests—shaped by her personal experience as the sister of two autistic young adults—include family centered and culturally sustaining autism intervention services, international special education, transborder families of autistic individuals, bilingualism among autistic children as well as cultural considerations in the transition to post-se-

condary for autistic adults. She has published in the Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, Autism, Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders, and International Journal of Developmental Disabilities.

In describing the significance of the UCSB McNairs Scholars Program, Dr. Castellón writes: "The impact of the program in my educational journey is truly unmeasurable and continuous. As a first-generation student, McNair was able to guide me on the successful path to graduate school. Once in graduate school as a McNair alumna, I received the Eugene Cota Robles Fellowship, which covered my tuition, living expenses, and health insurance for four years at UCLA. While at UCLA, I also served as a McNair Graduate mentor, allowing me to refine my teaching and mentoring style in preparation for a tenure-track position. The principles that I absorbed through McNair have remained with me, allowing me

to cast off the imposter syndrome because I knew (and still know) that I belong in the academy."

Dr. Castellón also remembers fondly the people, including the then Program Director, Dr. Yvette Martinez-Vu, Faculty Director, Dr. Beth Schneider, and the graduate mentors, one of whom had a young child. She, in particular, Dr. Castellón stated, modeled how to navigate work-life as a mother-scholar.

In thinking about the future, Dr. Castellón plans to pursue an academic career in a research-intensive institution. "I would love to be at a university with an autism center that has a family resource center to integrate family involvement in the work. If not, I will pursue center-based grants to one day open an autism center with models grounded in community sustaining and neuro-affirming partnerships."



## Jamelia Harris, PhD

As a first-generation college student and the first doctor in her family, the McNair Scholars Program was instrumental in shaping my research trajectory. At the time, I was serving as Black Student Union President, advocating for institutional support for Black students at UCSB, and McNair introduced me to research as a tool for social change—ultimately leading me to pursue a Ph.D. Through McNair, I was encouraged to apply for a Summer Education Research Fellowship at UW-Madison, where I worked under Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings studying the school pushout of Black girls. That project became the foundation of my dissertation, which was later recognized as a semifinalist for the AERA Qualitative Dissertation of the Year Award and secured a book contract from a top academic publisher.

The mentorship I received from Dr. George Lipsitz, Dr. Victor Rios, and Dr. Claudine Michel extended beyond my time at UCSB. My McNair mentors continued to write letters of recommendation for competitive fellowships, postdoctoral positions, and faculty roles—including my postdoctoral fellowship at Rutgers University and the AAUW

American Dissertation Fellowship. Their ongoing support was key in securing full funding throughout my doctoral studies at UCLA.

McNair also shaped my passion for mentorship and research training, which has been central to my career. Since earning my Ph.D., I have directed a summer research program at UCLA supporting high school students of color in conducting social justice research and led a Spencer Racial Equity Grant project in partnership with NYU, facilitating a year-long research fellowship for girls and gender-expansive youth of color across New Jersey, New York, and the D.C. area.

McNair also provided an invaluable foundation in research, project management, and academic writing. Some of the most impactful components included, structured research training—writing IRB proposals, conducting data collection, and presenting findings prepared me for the rigor of doctoral research; long-term mentorship—having committed faculty mentors who continued to support my academic trajectory beyond undergrad was essential; cohort-based support—the peer community I developed in McNair

was critical for navigating grad school, and many of us remain connected today; and graduate school application support—the ability to apply broadly to Ph.D. programs with fee waivers, plus structured guidance on crafting a competitive statement of purpose, directly contributed to my ability to secure full funding at top universities.

Currently, I serve as Senior Director of Research at Justice & Joy National Collaborative, leading national research initiatives focused on race, gender, education, and youth advocacy. I also founded Write Your Dissertation, Sis, a coaching and consulting platform dedicated to supporting Black women and first-generation scholars in navigating the Ph.D. journey. Through this work, I have supported Ph.D. applicants in securing full funding at institutions like UCLA, USC, and Boston University; assisted current Ph.D. students navigate dissertation completion, publishing, and the job market; and designed structured coaching programs that provide research mentorship, accountability, and strategic guidance—filling the gaps in institutional support that disproportionately impact first-gen scholars and students of color.

**McNair**

# Publications and Awards

**Mayra Canseco**, a senior, received an Ismael “Mayo” de la Rocha Endowed Scholarship for her research on “Wild-fire Awareness Among Undocumented Immigrants in California: Enhancing Disaster Preparedness, Response, and Recovery.” That award provides financial assistance to first-generation, working class Latinx college students who demonstrate a commitment to social justice, community involvement, and activism.

**Evan Ho**, a junior and a PROPEL and Promise Scholar, received the Hilda Oppenheimer Scholarship, California Middle Class Scholarship, UC Health Insurance Grant, UCSB Scholarship, and other federal-based support for the 2024-'25 academic year.

**Citlali Ibarra**, a junior, received an URCA Grant (\$750) in 2024-'25.

**Laila Lore**, a senior, received an URCA Grant (\$750) in 2024-'25 and will be presenting at the Western Psychological Association Annual Conference in May. She is currently working with her faculty mentor and graduate student mentor on a manuscript for publication in the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies (ITSS).

**Natalia Rodriguez Martinez**, a junior, received an URCA Grant (\$750) in 2024-'25.

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