

# UW-Stout: McNair Scholars Program provides first-generation students resources for greater opportunities

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Menomonie, Wis. – It can be difficult for first-generation, limited income and underrepresented college students to reach their goals. Without family members' experience or financial resources, the road to a degree and potentially a graduate degree can be unpredictable and rough.

University of Wisconsin-Stout's [McNair Scholars Program](#) provides students a support system, with dedicated advisers who equip students with the means to achieve their goals. McNair, a federal program, has helped change thousands of lives since its inception in 1989, including those of UW-Stout student Chueseng Lo and recent graduate Mai Lia Vang.

McNair has been offered at UW-Stout since 2009 and encourages all [eligible students](#) to [apply](#). The program offers:

- Undergraduate research opportunities
- Faculty advisement and mentoring
- Fee waivers for graduate school application fees
- Free Graduate Records Examination preparation
- Funds for conferences, graduate school visits and interviews

[National First-Generation College Celebration Day](#) is Monday, Nov. 8. [UW-Stout's annual celebration](#), hosted by [TRIO SSS](#), will be held that day, from 11:15 a.m. to 3:45 p.m. in the Memorial Student Center ballrooms.

The campus-wide event celebrates the successes of first-generation students, staff and faculty. [Registration is required](#). Thirty-three percent of UW-Stout students identify as first-generation this academic year.

### **'Keep going no matter what'**

As a first-generation college student, Lo feels very accomplished. He'll graduate from UW-Stout in [human development and family studies](#), with an emphasis in school counseling, in the spring.

Friends introduced Lo to the HDFFS program, and he learned he could branch off to a career in education or psychology. "The HDFFS classes helped me with skills for the future," he said. "I want to help people and be a student counselor.

"I think counseling is an important aspect to get kids through secondary education. Counselors can help kids with their problems and help them find resources to go to college.

"Once students know you can help them, they come to you a lot. You can build a relationship of support," said Lo, who remembers visiting his high school counselor in Schofield once or twice a week.

Lo is applying to graduate programs, including UW-Stout's [Master of Science in school counseling](#). His parents believe education is key. "They say to keep going no matter what," he said. "I want to live up to those goals and further my education in grad school to be successful in life."

McNair is helping Lo reach his goals. Coming from a limited income family, the program provides him with financial aid, including for rent so he can live on his own.

It's also helping Lo with scholarship applications and covers application fees for graduate school. His advisers aid him in applying to different school counseling programs, while he explores his range of interests in attending in-state or out-of-state schools.

Lo also enjoys the additional research projects into areas outside of his field. With the ability to choose a research topic in any area, Lo studied video games. Knowing how to conduct research prepares him for what it's like to be a graduate student, he said.

But what Lo likes best about being involved in McNair is the advisers. "I'm very glad I met them. The program wouldn't be itself without them.

"If you're a first-generation, limited income or underrepresented student looking to go further with your education – if you want to make a better life for yourself, this is the first step to help you get there," Lo said. "McNair sets you up for success."

### **Obtain greater opportunities**

Vang was a very curious kid, always asking her older siblings and cousins to explain why the leaves change colors; why the sky is blue; or how a rainbow is made.

"I'm so thankful that they also loved science and were able to quench and ignite my

curiosity for the natural world. Science has answers to those tough questions,” Vang said.

Vang, of Eau Claire, is a former McNair Scholar. She graduated from UW-Stout in [environmental science](#) in fall 2018. She immediately went on to pursue her [Professional Science Master's in conservation biology](#) and graduated in fall 2020.

She is a research analyst at the university's [Center for Limnological Research and Rehabilitation](#), which researches eutrophication issues in the region's waterways and aquatic ecosystems. Vang runs the lab operations and uses the knowledge she gained in her degrees every day.

But Vang began her college career in a different field. She started in graphic design because she didn't think she was smart enough to pursue science. She enjoyed art, but she wasn't passionate about it and dropped out after her third semester. She took time off of school to figure out what interested her most and what she really enjoyed.

“Nature checked both boxes,” she said. “I knew that I enjoyed science and nature enough to be willing to put in the hard work.”

Vang thinks that others who struggle with self-doubt should try their best to believe that they are better than they think. “Our inner dialogues are very influential, and we should be more mindful of the things we tell ourselves,” she said.

Her second time around, she started her degree in environmental science, with an emphasis in aquatic biology and a minor in [geographic information systems](#).

As a first-generation, limited income and underrepresented student, no one in Vang's immediate family could help her navigate her college experience.

“The McNair program helped me tremendously,” Vang said. “It not only helped me navigate the process of applying to graduate school but helped financially by taking care of application and test fees.”

Vang was hesitant when she was first given the opportunity to join the program. She didn’t think she wanted to go to graduate school and wondered why she should join.

“My adviser told me – and this is the advice I give to everyone – ‘Give it a try. You can be in the program and not apply to graduate school. But if you change your mind and want to go to graduate school, then at least you’ll know how to,’” she said.

“The McNair program provided me an opportunity to obtain greater opportunities,” Vang added. “I know that I would not have pursued a graduate degree if I was not in the McNair program.”

Vang helps with the program when she can, serving on panels answering questions from students who are in the process of searching and applying for graduate school.

“I enjoy being a resource for others. I’ve been helped when I needed help and only hope to pass that on.”

*UW-Stout is [Wisconsin's Polytechnic University](#), with a focus on applied learning, collaboration with business and industry, and career outcomes.*