

UW-Eau Claire: Federal grant supports UW-Eau Claire's McNair program

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A targeted graduate school preparation program aimed at first-generation, low-income and historically underrepresented undergraduates at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire has been awarded federal funding to operate for the next five years.

The Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, has operated a sponsored program at UW-Eau Claire since 2000. Named after American astronaut Dr. Ronald McNair, the McNair program aims to level the playing field in graduate education and diversify the American research community.

The \$275,516 grant for the 2022-23 academic year is expected to be the first of five annual grants to the McNair program on campus. The federal grant is the sole source of funding for the program, says Dr. Kelly Wonder, McNair program director at UW-Eau Claire.

“Without the grant, this opportunity would not exist for UW-Eau Claire students,” Wonder says.

Olga Diaz, vice chancellor for equity, diversity and inclusion and student affairs, was thrilled with the federal grant that is essential to UW-Eau Claire's McNair program.

“This program offers our current undergraduate students the support and inspiration they need to seek an advanced degree,” Diaz says. “We are honored to continue the legacy of Ronald McNair at UW-Eau Claire.”

The McNair program serves 27 Blugold students a year, providing holistic support to assist undergraduates with graduate school admissions, developing research skills, and providing social and emotional support systems for students, Wonder says.

Program offerings include research seminars, colloquia, internships, faculty mentoring, tutoring and a six-week Summer Research Institute. The activities prepare McNair Scholars to undertake research projects with faculty who will support them during the research process.

Wonder emphasized the importance of the support the program receives from faculty and administrators on campus.

“The academic departments are essential in helping us identify and recruit potential scholars as well as mentor scholars through the research process,” Wonder says. “We get amazing interns from the English department and other academic programs that help us carry out our work.”

Wonder notes the support of the Provost’s Office, Academic Affairs, EDISA, Career Services, the Center for Writing Excellence, Office of Research and Sponsored Programs and the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning — units that all play key roles in the success of the program.

“Every scholar is a success story even if they don’t pursue graduate school immediately after completing their undergraduate degree,” Wonder says. “As a McNair Scholar, they have all done something they never thought was possible before entering the program.”

From the 2021-22 graduating class, all seven UW-Eau Claire McNair Scholars who applied to graduate school were accepted into their programs.

Among the McNair program graduates in recent years are:

- Choua Xiong, a 2014 graduate in liberal studies, earned her Ph.D. from UW-Madison in educational policy studies in May. She will begin a faculty position this fall.
- Tayo Sanders II, a 2015 materials science graduate, earned a Rhodes Scholar Award to complete his doctoral degree in biomedical/medical engineering at Oxford University. He is a senior associate at Axsun Technologies.
- Clorice Reinhardt, a 2017 UW-Eau Claire graduate in biochemistry/molecular

biology, graduated in May from Yale University with a Ph.D. in molecular biophysics and biochemistry. She has accepted a postdoctoral research position at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

- Leah Martinez, a 2019 graduate in biology, completed her master's degree at Penn State in homeland security and currently is a presidential management fellow.
- Tyler Gonzalez, a 2021 graduate in mathematics, is a Ph.D. candidate in applied mathematics at Yale. He was the recipient of a National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship Program grant.