



Saturday, April 25, 2026

*Hampton Inn & Suites –Columbia
at the University of Missouri*

The Thirty - Seventh
Annual
McNair Scholars
Conference & Luncheon

The McNair Scholars Program Presents

University of Missouri

McNair Staff

McNair Scholars Program Staff

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MU McNair Program Background—

The McNair Scholars Program was developed when the U.S. Senate was preparing the Higher Education Re-authorization act in 1986. This new program was created under the TRIO sub-section covering graduate education outreach to address the predicted shortage of persons with earned doctorates. The Division of Higher Education Preparation and Support Services of the U.S. Department of Education administers the program.

When the McNair Scholars Program was first funded in 1989, Dr. Vicki Curby prepared and submitted a grant proposal to compete for this funding. The University of Missouri was one of the first 14 institutions to be funded for the grant. The first group of scholars conducted their research that year, and the first McNair Scholars Conference was held in the spring of 1990.

RONALD E. MCNAIR

Ronald Erwin McNair was born October 21, 1950, in Lake City, South Carolina. After graduation from high school, he enrolled in North Carolina A&T State University, where he graduated *magna cum laude* with a degree in physics in 1971. McNair then enrolled in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology where he earned his Ph.D. in physics in 1976.

While working as a staff physicist with Hughes Research Laboratory, he soon became a recognized expert in laser physics. In 1978, McNair was selected for the NASA space shuttle program, and, after years of training, he served as a mission specialist aboard the space shuttle *Challenger* in 1984. He was the second African-American to travel in space.

Besides his academic achievements, McNair received three honorary doctorate degrees and many fellowships and commendations, such as the Presidential Scholar, 1967-71, Ford Foundation Fellow, 1971-74, National Fellowship Fund Fellow, 1974-75, Omega Psi Phi Scholar of the Year, 1975, Distinguished National Scientist, National Society of Black Professional Engineers, 1979, and Friend of Freedom Award, 1981. McNair also held a fifth-degree black belt in karate and was an accomplished jazz saxophonist.

A NOTE OF APPRECIATION

The McNair Staff would like to thank you for attending the Scholars Conference. The effort the McNair Scholars put into their research is quite evident, as reflected in the quality of their posters and presentations. The presentations are the result of each scholar conducting nearly 280 hours of research throughout this academic year.

We also wholeheartedly extend our thanks to all of our mentors for their desire to work with our scholars and for their patience in carrying out their responsibilities. We hope these efforts have a lasting impression on the scholars.

The McNair Advisory Committee is also commended for the exemplary efforts it expended in selecting the 2025-2026 scholars.

The University of Missouri's TRIO McNair Scholars continue to excel, reaching a milestone of **204** doctoral degrees earned to date. Following the **nine** degrees awarded in 2025, the program's momentum continues with **55** students currently enrolled in graduate programs.

Session One: Ryn Kreitz, *Plant Sciences*, “Historical Soil Management Practices Influence Insect Responses to Conservation Plantings”
Mentors: **Deborah Finke & Kyle Paddock**

Nya Dodd, *Psychology*, “Associations Between Borderline Personality Disorder and Existential Threats”
Mentor: **Sean Lane**

Adrianna Williams, *Environmental Science and Political Science*, “Evaluation of the Social and Economic Aspects of Solarize Columbia, a Community Group-Purchasing Approach”
Mentor: **Robin Rotman**

Mathias Lobb, *Geology*, “Exploring Interior Morphology of Spiral Coprolites from the Niobrara Formation”
Mentor: **Sarah Jacquet**

Antonio Flores, *Mathematics and Math Education* “Belongingness in Undergraduate Mathematics: A Case Study of the University of Missouri Among Underrepresented Student Populations”
Mentor: **Chuck Munter**

Vanessa Truong, *Psychology*, “Neural Correlates of Forward and Backward Search Through Episodic Memory”
Mentor: **Jeffrey D. Johnson**

Taylor Wiederhold, *Physics*, “Studying Globular Clusters in a Pair of Dwarf Galaxies Resolved by the James Webb Space Telescope”
Mentor: **Haojing Yan**

Serenna Pride, *Psychology*, “Nicotine Dependence and Anxiety: Does Anxiety Symptom Severity Play A Role in rIFG TBS Among Nicotine Dependent Individuals?”
Mentors: **Brett Froeliger** and **Nicholas Henigman**

Jose Torres-Gomez, *Information Technology*, “Campus Tour Guide of the Future: Combining Waypoint Navigation and Large Language Models”
Mentor: **Kristofferson Culmer**

Vanya Ewiwile, *Biological Sciences* “The Effect of Gene Knockout on Helms in *Daphnia sinensis*”
Mentor: **Sen Xu**

Tragan Chambers, *Psychology*, “Learning to Suppress Salient Distractors: The Roles of Cue Validity and Implicit Learning”
Mentor: **Nicholas Gaspelin** and **Yue Zhang**

Poster Session and Refreshment Break

Session Two: Vy Vu, *Health Sciences*, “An exploratory study of healthcare seeking practices and access to healthcare among international students with children under the age of five in Missouri”
Mentor: **Wilson Majee**

Amani Elzein, *Physics and Math*, “Investigating Ionic Conductivity and Structural Properties of Sodium Nickel Tellurium Oxid ($\text{Na}_2\text{Ni}_2\text{TeO}_6$) As a Potential Battery Material”
Mentor: **Thomas Heitmann**

Lillie Brooks, *Psychology*, “Relationship Between Adolescent Disclosure and Parent Response Types”
Mentor: **Nicole Campione-Barr**

Makenna Shifflett, *Biochemistry*, “The Effect of Progesterone Signaling in Ciliated Epithelial Cells of the Oviduct on the Fertility of Female Mice”
Mentor: **Wipawee Winuthayanon**

Alyssa Hansell, *Psychology*, “Attachment Styles, Personality Psychopathology, and Sexual Behaviors among Emerging Adults”
Mentor: **Keely A. Dugan**

Madilynn Wehmeyer, *Agriculture Education*, “First-Generation Female College Students Studying Agriculture: Motivations and Struggles”
Mentor: **Rebecca Mott**

Jayda Gooch *Psychology*, “Discrimination and Internalizing Symptoms for Black Late Adolescents: Co-Rumination as a Possible Moderator”
Mentor: **Donte Bernard**

Joseph Tietze, *Aerospace Engineering*, “Combing Low-Fidelity Tools for Estimating Aircraft Performance”
Mentor: **Craig Kluever**

Grace Anderson, *English*, “Magical Realism and Resistance in *The Water Dancer*”
Mentor: **Sarah Buckner**

Ellie Dugdale, *Physics*, “Environmental Quenching of Low-Mass Galaxies up to 10 Billion Years Ago”
Mentor: **Yincheng Guo**

George Dimas, *Computer Science*, “Security-Constrained Unit Commitment using Quantum-Assisted Reinforcement Learning on the Power Grid”
Mentor: **Mert Korkali**

Luncheon & Recognition Ceremony