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The purpose of this study is to shed light on how the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro promotes social capital for its' scholars as well as how that impacts graduate school motivation. Using qualitative interviewing the experiences of ten McNair scholars and McNair staff are examined to determine the linkage between their experiences and the gained social capital. The findings highlight how social capital and the COVID-19 pandemic impact graduate school motivations. It is concluded that the program at this institution provides scholars with gained access and knowledge to campus faculty, staff, resources. While this gained access and knowledge positively impacted graduate school plans and motivations, the COVID-19 pandemic certain delayed plans for graduate education.

SECURING CAPITAL: HOW THE RONALD E. MCNAIR POSTBACCALAUREATE  
ACHIEVEMENT PROGRAM PROMOTES SOCIAL CAPITAL FOR ITS SCHOLARS

by

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Approved by

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Dr. Shelly Brown-Jeffy  
Committee Chair

## DEDICATION

To my ancestors,

This entire project is for you. The sacrifices that you made are what allowed me to have the opportunity to pursue an education and commit to a project that I'm so passionate about. I am your wildest dream and I know you were with me along this journey every step of the way.

To my participants,

A special thank you for your willingness and participation to make this project happen. Thank you sharing your stories with me as I've learned so much about you.

To my students, friends, and colleagues,

Thank you for the continuous encouragement and for believing in me sometimes more than I believed in myself. I couldn't have finished this without you.

APPROVAL PAGE

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

University administrators consistently face low rates of enrollment and degree completion among students who identify as first-generation, low-income, minority, or a combination of all three. Students identifying with these backgrounds are less likely to complete high school and if they do enroll in college, they are often underprepared for the academic rigor of college courses (Engle and Tinto 2008; Hébert 2018; Muraskin and Lee 2004). From 2000 to 2016, high school graduation rates for both Black and Hispanic students increased; however, graduation rates for Black and Hispanic students remained lower when compared to White students (de Brey et al. 2019). De Brey and colleagues (2019) found that the same graduation gap is evident when students enroll in postsecondary education and even graduate education. For years university administrators have sought to understand how to improve recruitment of such students, increase their retention rates, and support these students in the attainment of undergraduate degrees (Gittens 2014; Hébert 2018). The Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program (McNair Program) is one of many programs that has the goal of decreasing the graduation gap and increasing not only undergraduate degree completion, but also completion of graduate degrees.

Within the Department of Education, the McNair Program is one of eight that make up a larger initiative called TRIO Programs. TRIO Programs were established in 1965 as a part of President Lyndon Johnson's war on poverty. He argued that education was a means to increasing social mobility for low-income families. There were originally three programs created under his administration, generating the "TRIO" title. The original three were Upward Bound, Student Support Services, and Talent Search (McElroy and Armesto 1998). There are currently eight total programs under the TRIO Programs umbrella. The McNair Scholars Program was the sixth

program that was established, and McNair Programs are becoming increasingly popular as colleges and universities start to recognize the need for them.

The McNair Program was established by the U.S. Department of Education in 1986. It was named in honor of Ronald McNair, the second African American male to go to space who tragically died in the 1986 Challenger disaster (Koele 2018). McNair was passionate about education and to honor his legacy, a variety of programs, schools, and scholarships have been established in his name. The purpose of the McNair Program is to increase the pursuit and attainment of doctoral degrees by undergraduate students from disadvantaged backgrounds, defined as being from an underrepresented minority group (any group that identifies as non-white), first-generation (no parent has a four-year college degree) and low-income (an individual whose family's taxable income for the preceding year did not exceed 150% of the poverty level amount). To participate in the McNair Program, students must either be both first-generation and low-income or they can be from an underrepresented minority group. The Department of Education also requires that two-thirds of each program's participants identify as both first-generation and low-income. The remaining one-third of program participants can be from underrepresented minority groups. Since Black and Hispanic students are more likely to identify as first-generation and low-income, it is no surprise that more than half of all McNair participants identify as Black or Hispanic (Seburn, Chan, and Kirshstein 2005).

The purpose of this study is to understand the ways in which social capital is promoted through the McNair Program at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG). The focus of the research will be the strategies, activities, and access to institutional agents (faculty, staff, and resources) that the McNair Program deploys to prepare its scholars for graduate school. According to the Department of Education, these strategies and activities can include a variety of

things such as, research and internship opportunities, activities that prepare students for graduate school admission, and much more (Renbarger and Beaujean 2020). There are, however, some activities that each McNair Program must provide for participants, which includes some type of research experience and graduate school preparation. While these activities are required by the Department of Education, programs have a substantial amount of freedom to implement the program in a way that aligns with the goals of that particular institution (Renbarger and Beaujean 2020). The goal of this study is to identify whether the way in which the UNCG McNair Program is implemented not only promotes social capital for its scholars but also prepares its scholars for graduate studies.

This study aims to answer the following questions:

1. How does the UNCG McNair Program promote social capital for its scholars?
2. How does exposure to social capital impact the motivation to attend graduate school?

This thesis is organized as follows. Chapter two will explore the relevant literature on first-generation, low-income, and minority students as well as explain the conceptual framework on which this study is grounded. Chapter three will focus on the methodology for this study. This will include research design, sampling, and data collection and analysis. Chapter four will present the findings in relation to the conceptual framework used for this study and how they help us make sense of social capital. Finally, chapter five will review the key findings, discuss the significance of the study as well as limitations, and provide suggestions for future research.

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

This section will focus on the previous research that has been conducted on first-generation, low-income (FGLI) and minority students and the conceptual framework for which this study is grounded. The first section will include FGLI and minority students accessing college, persisting through college, low enrollment and completion rates, concluding with FGLI and minority students in McNair programs. The second section will include literature regarding the conceptual framework for this study. It should be noted that not all students who identify as first-generation are also low-income and vice versa. As mentioned earlier since each McNair program must have at least two-thirds of its participants who are both first-generation and low-income, in this study the terms will be used together.

### **Access to College**

The challenges to college access that are faced by FGLI and minority students begin well before they enroll in college. Many of these challenges for these students begin in elementary and middle school (Demetriou et al. 2017; Kuh 2003). These challenges include income, the schools they attend, and other academic barriers. Students who come from low-income backgrounds disproportionately attend high schools that often times offer less college preparatory classes and also have fewer counseling resources available (Kezar et al. 2020; Martinez 2003). Low-income students are also more likely than high-income students to lack access to rigorous course work (Kezar et al. 2020). They are often directed away from honors and advanced placement courses that ultimately would prepare them for college course work (Kezar et al. 2020).

Perna (2015) sought to address multiple forces that limit college enrollment of students who are FGLI and minority. Perna offered five recommendations that would help improve access

and enrollment of these students. The first recommendation was the need to target students with the greatest financial need. Perna stated that in order to create meaningful improvements in college access and completion for these students, higher education as a whole must recognize and address the many ways that inequality is structured into the pathways into and through college. Students from low-income families have fewer financial resources to pay both the direct costs of college attendance, and the admissions tests and college application fees (Perna 2015).

The second recommendation offered was to assist students in navigating pathways into and through college. Perna (2015) emphasized that helping students navigate the financial aid process was one of the most important things. Many students who come from low-income families or who are the first in their families to attend college, have limited or incomplete information about the benefits and costs of higher education, as well as the different types of student aid available (Perna 2006, 2015). Perna made it clear that students need to understand things like the financial aid process before they arrive to college.

The third recommendation was the need for educational institutions to recognize the relevant context and characteristics of targeted students. Here Perna mentioned how it is important for state, regional, and local programs to recognize the uniqueness of these students being served. These programs also need to address the characteristics of students being served. For example, TRIO programs collectively serve these students across the educational pipeline. About half of TRIO participants are middle and high school students (49% of all TRIO participants), 26% are current college students, 24% are adults aspiring to higher education, and 1% are veterans (Perna 2015).

The fourth recommendation is to leverage federal spending to serve greater numbers of students. Perna (2015) stated that while the federal government's investment in TRIO programs

allows many FGLI and minority students to be served, it doesn't include all FGLI and minority students in the educational pipeline. TRIO programs serve only a very small fraction (less than 5%) of the nation's total population of FGLI and minority college students (Ceballos 2010; Perna 2015). Perna suggested that the federal government should consider ways to leverage its investment to encourage greater support for these programs that can include state governments and support from colleges and universities.

Lastly, Perna encouraged constant research and evaluation. To maximize the return investment in college access and success programs, we need to know more about what components and services work, for which groups of students, in which contexts (Perna 2006, 2015). It is important that the federal government not only support the delivery of college access and success programs but also encourage research that improves understanding of best practices. This kind of research would ensure that resources are being used to improve outcomes of FGLI and minority students most effectively.

Page and Scott-Clayton (2016) sought to describe the barriers that FGLI and minority students face during the transition to college. Page and Scott-Clayton mentioned that in more recent years, states are devoting a smaller proportion of their budgets to higher education, even as enrollments have increased. This causes families to face financial barriers to college access as low state investments means higher tuition costs. The average net cost of attendance for a full-time student in 2014-15 was \$5,960 at a community college, \$12,830 at a public four-year college, and \$23,550 at a private four-year institution (Page and Scott-Clayton 2016). According to Page and Scott-Clayton (2016) the cost of higher education is continuing to increase as family income remains constant. Page and Scott-Clayton called for a need to simplify the Free

Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) because its complexity is what hinders many FGLI and minority students from even applying.

Other than financial barriers, Page and Scott-Clayton (2016) included additional barriers that FGLI and minority students may face in trying to get to college. This includes academic preparation and knowledge of how to complete college admissions applications. As mentioned before, FGLI and minority students may lack the academic rigor in high school that will ultimately prepare them for college (Kezar et al. 2020). To improve student preparation and readiness for college, they emphasized the critical role of high school counselors. When compared to higher-income peers, lower-income students have less access to school-based college counseling (Page and Scott-Clayton 2016). While there is a need for more high school counselors, they also emphasized the importance of counselors understanding the uniqueness of FGLI and minority students. Many FGLI and minority students don't have a parent or older sibling in their family that has been to college, and it's important that counselors acknowledge that and assist these students in understanding the college going process (Page and Scott-Clayton 2016).

In terms of academic preparation FGLI and minority students also face barriers in taking college entrance exams (SAT/ACT). There are many testing policies that have an impact on if and where students enroll in college (Page and Scott-Clayton 2016). To improve this Page and Scott-Clayton suggested that establishing testing centers on high school campuses would improve the rates of FGLI minorities taking the SAT or ACT. Students from these backgrounds are less likely than their peers to have transportation to testing sites that aren't located on their high school campuses (Page and Scott-Clayton 2016).

Page and Scott-Clayton conclude with the importance of changes in policy to better support FGLI and minority students. Policy changes that focus on just one type of barrier, such as college affordability, may lead to improved access but may not be the most effective use of resources if other challenges still stand in students' way (Page and Scott-Clayton 2016). As an example, Page and Scott-Clayton (2016) mentioned that additional grant funds that allow students to enroll in college may not be well invested if students then use those funds to attend institutions that don't maximize their chances of persistence and success. It's important that the most effective solutions need to be solutions that meet the needs of all students.

Mudge and Higgins (2011) desired to explore efforts aimed at closing the education attainment gaps and removing barriers to higher education for FGLI and minority students. This was done by examining the current literature and practices in higher education. Through assessing the current literature, Mudge and Higgins (2011) characterize their considerations and findings into three different domains climate/affective considerations, instructional/cognitive variables, and systemic/developmental variables.

Climate/affective considerations took into account the things that students can't control. This included the student's familial education background and cultural differences and expectations. To remove barriers for FGLI and minority students Mudge and Higgins (2011) recommended that school administrators and teachers need to understand the student's cultural differences and expectations of education. This consideration needs to happen well before college because these students often don't have a parent who attended college and that greatly impacts feelings of even wanting to go (Mudge and Higgins 2011).

Instructional/cognitive variables focused on the student learning process in a way that met the needs of FGLI and minority students. Here Mudge and Higgins (2011) suggested that



academic needs of students needed to be addressed through focused and individualized learning time. This tailored approach to learning increases relationship building and has a positive impact on the learning experience (Mudge and Higgins 2011). Lastly, systemic/developmental variables focused on the things on a systemic level that can minimize the barriers for FGLI and minority students. Mudge and Higgins (2011) suggested that school systems should value early childhood education as an essential component of the student success journey. If valued from the start school systems would then invest more into education starting at the elementary school level. This investment could provide teachers with the tools for establishing a culture of care early in a child's education journey (Mudge and Higgins 2011).

It's obvious that FGLI and minority students face many barriers as it relates to college access. These barriers were only exacerbated once the COVID-19 pandemic began. Kimble-Hill et al. (2020) investigated the challenges that FGLI and minority students faced during this time. To do this they examined best practices to improve the virtual learning experience for students from these backgrounds in chemistry courses at three academic institutions, Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), The College of New Jersey (TJNJ), and Los Angeles Community College District (LACCD). It was noted that all three institutions consisted of very different student body demographics and learning environments.

Kimble-Hill et al. (2020) discovered how COVID-19 exacerbated the problems that FGLI and minority students faced. To do this they examined FGLI and minority college students that were forced to continue their education at home due to the pandemic. Many students noted difficulty accessing technology, environmental disruptions, and cultural pressures to be successful. FGLI and minority students disproportionately reported having more Wi-Fi connection issues, lack of cameras on computers, lack of access to printers, and difficulties with

video-conferencing software than their more affluent counterparts (Kimble-Hill et al. 2020). These students were also more likely to experience job loss in their family as well as dealing with COVID directly. Many of these environmental factors outside of their control impacted their ability to focus solely on school (Kimble-Hill et al. 2020). Kimble-Hill et al. stated that during this time many FGLI and minority students felt an increased pressure to try and remain successful in school and reported feelings of imposter syndrome.

Two suggestions were offered. The first suggestion was that there needs to be adequate access to faculty. Faculty should not only be flexible for students but also reachable as well. FGLI and minority students reported larger challenges than their White and more affluent counterparts in communication, literature/information management, and problem solving with their faculty (Kimble-Hill et al. 2020). Secondly, there needs to be a more universal design approach to course materials. When creating materials for students, faculty need to be mindful about whether material can be accessed in more than one way. For example, while some video conferencing platforms have the capability of generating live closed captioning, the captioning may have issues with jargon that students with hearing loss may not understand (Kimble-Hill et al. 2020).

### **Persisting Through College**

In an earlier study conducted by Thayer (2000), the objective was to examine student retention in higher education, with a specific interest on students from FGLI backgrounds. He emphasizes that students from FGLI backgrounds are graduating at lower rates than students who aren't from these backgrounds. One of his reasons for emphasizing this was to offer the suggestion that, "If more equitable educational attainment rates are desired, then students from these backgrounds need to be taken into account" (Thayer 2000). Thus, if we want students from

all backgrounds to attain higher degrees, more initiatives need to be in place for students from FGLI backgrounds. As one way to help resolve this problem, he suggested that first year and learning community initiatives are needed within TRIO programs and at colleges and universities around the country.

Engle (2007) identified different factors that impacted first-generation college students, many of whom are also low-income and minority students, success in college. Engle (2007) also offered many different interventions that could help better serve students from this group. One factor that contributes to access and success was poor academic preparation. “First-generation students are less likely to enroll in college, even if they are academically qualified for admission” (Engle 2007). Another factor identified was financial support. For first-generation students not having parents who have attended college, it can be harder to financially prepare for college. First-generation college students are more likely to hold jobs while in school to support themselves, their family, or both. Most first-generation students are part-time students because of the financial barrier (Engle 2007). The last factor that Engle mentioned was support from family. The more involved families are with the college admissions process, the more likely students are to go to college. Involvement can be as simple as encouraging students to go to college or going on college tours/events with students. Engle implied that family support is the most important factor, which is hard for students from these backgrounds whose parents never went to college.

Engle (2007) closes with five interventions for higher education institutions and programs like TRIO to promote access and success for FGLI students. The first intervention suggested was to improve pre-college preparation for FGLI students. Engle (2007) states that students need to be aware of “gateway courses” to college well before they enter high school. “The math track to college starts with eighth grade algebra” (Engle 2007:38). A rigorous high

school curriculum can certainly help narrow the gap in college attendance for FGLI students, which can also help them persist through college. The second intervention recommended was forming early aspirations and plans for college. Engle (2007) mentions that this intervention is important for parents as well, as parental involvement is crucial regardless of the parents' level of education. Early information about how to apply and prepare for college would improve college participation of FGLI students. Third is access to financial aid. FGLI students need to know when, where, and how obtain information about financial aid. They are more likely to work a part-time and sometimes full-time job while also being enrolled in school than their more affluent counterparts. "Delayed enrollment, initial enrollment in the two-year sector, part-time and discontinuous enrollment while working full-time and living off-campus all reduce the likelihood that FGLI students will persist in college" (Engle 2007:39). The fourth intervention proposed was easing the transition to college. Many FGLI students often need a good amount of support while adjusting to the academic, social, and cultural transitions of college. Many of these students struggle with "imposter syndrome" and feeling like they don't belong so reassurance through campus initiatives will help ensure not only a sense of belonging but also academic success. Lastly, Engle suggested to increase exposure to and engagement with the college environment. "Colleges and universities must remove the barriers (primarily financial) that prevent FGLI students from fully participating and engaging in experiences that enhance college success" (Engle 2007:39). These experiences can include living on campus, extracurricular activities, interaction with faculty outside of class, and more. Engle suggested that offering additional opportunities for work-study is one thing that could increase the amount of time that FGLI students spend on campus while meeting their financial need.

Means and Pyne (2016) wanted to explore the impact of capital gained for first-year college students during their participation in a college access program. To do this, high school graduates who attended an intensive college access and success program were recruited to participate from a success academy. The mission of the academy that was chosen was inspire underrepresented FGLI and minority students to pursue higher education. Students of the academy participated in a year-round program during their 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> grade years that provided college admissions counseling, academic tutors, enrichment activities, and continuous mentoring by staff and trained undergraduate mentors. There were ten participants selected for the study, who were first-year college students who had participated in the academy during high school.

What Means and Pyne (2016) found was that participants described the program as a form of college-going capital that most wouldn't have developed without the intervention. This newly gained capital had a positive impact on college admissions knowledge, familial and personal motivation for going to college, and confidence on attending college. There were many key program elements that helped students' academic and social development throughout high school and made the transition to college easier. Ultimately Means and Pyne (2016) concluded that college access programs are likely to have a positive impact on college persistence for FGLI and minority students and that college access programs need to be structured in a way that these programs and higher education institutions work in collaboration to better support these students.

### **Graduate School Enrollment and Completion**

It is no surprise that graduate school enrollment and attainment follows the same trend as undergraduate outcomes. The journey to graduate education has certainly improved over recent years for underrepresented students (Renbarger and Beaujean 2020). However, there is a gap that

remains when it comes to enrollment and completion. In 2017, doctoral degrees awarded to Black students was up by 23% and 43% for Hispanic students compared to a decade prior (National Science Foundation 2018). However, racially underrepresented students only make up 7% of all doctoral degrees awarded (National Science Foundation 2018). The mission and purpose of the McNair Program is to decrease the gap of doctoral degree attainment for underrepresented students.

Gardner and Holley (2011) sought to understand how first-generation students progressed through their doctoral degree. The authors interviewed 20 doctoral students at two institutions that were known for graduating doctoral students who identified as first-generation. Throughout many interviews, four major themes were identified for how these first-generation students continued to progress through their PhD's. The first theme was what they called "breaking the chain." These doctoral students knowing that they were the first in their families to attain a degree at this level is one thing that kept them going. The second theme that was identified was "knowing the rules." Throughout their graduate school experience, these students had to learn for themselves the unwritten rules of graduate school that no one told them. The third theme was "living in two worlds," in which these students talked about how they sort of live two different lives. One life being at home and around family and the other the world of academia. These students described feeling like that at times as a graduate student they felt like they didn't belong. The last and final theme was "seeking support," in which they described the importance of seeking support as a graduate student from peers, faculty, and other mentors. Gardner and Holley's goal was obtaining that student voice for first-generation graduate students in trying to understand the barriers that these students are faced with while in graduate school.

As a first-generation college student himself, Lunceford (2011) argued that first-generation college students have many challenges when they pursue graduate education. Lunceford divided his advice for students into three parts, contemplating graduate school, applying to graduate school, and preparing for graduate school. In terms of contemplating graduate school, Lunceford mentioned how it is important to have a mentor or faculty member to help guide first-generation students through the graduate school process. It is with this mentor or faculty member that the student should talk about their long-term goals and aspirations. “The first step to helping first-generation students who may go to graduate school is to know if graduate school is a likely path for them” (Lunceford 2011:14). Lunceford mentioned that the second step was helping students understand the difference between the workload of undergraduate vs. graduate studies.

When applying to graduate school, Lunceford offered advice when it came to application materials and choosing the right school. Lunceford (2011) emphasized the importance of application deadlines, preparation for the appropriate entrance exams, statement of purpose, and letters of recommendation. Making sure that students give themselves enough time in advance to prepare all application materials and be able to ask mentors for feedback will make applications even stronger (Lunceford 2011). In choosing the right school, Lunceford stated that it’s important that students know in graduate school it is more about the people whose research interests align with the students and not so much the institution itself. “Although a school’s reputation may be a factor in selecting an undergraduate program, students often choose a program to work with a particular advisor or scholar” (Lunceford 2011:16).

Lastly, when preparing for graduate school Lunceford offered advice to not only help first-generation students prepare but also persist through graduate school. The first piece of

advice was a love for the subject matter. To invest time into a graduate degree, students need to have a love for the material or field that they are in. It is important for mentors to help students understand that enjoyment of material is essential to graduate school success (Lunceford 2011). The last piece of advice offered for preparing for graduate school is developing a research agenda. Lunceford (2011) mentioned that the importance of gaining research experience in undergrad will help students to better understand what they would and wouldn't want to do as a part of their own research. The advice that Lunceford offered is beneficial not only for first-generation students considering graduate education but also for programs like McNair that can tailor program activities to the advice that Lunceford has given.

Tate and colleagues (2015) sought to examine challenges that underrepresented, first-generation, and low-income (UFGLI) students face while in pursuit of a graduate degree. More specifically, the study investigated the influence of graduate school self-efficacy, self-efficacy for coping with barriers, and family influence on UFGLI students who are pursuing graduate degrees. To better understand self-efficacy, this study was grounded in Bandura's (1986) general social cognitive theory that considers an individual's personal agency and contextual influences on their development (Tate et al. 2015). In short, self-efficacy is an individual's estimation about their own ability to perform particular skills or combination of skills.

Survey results from 158 McNair program directors revealed that of the 170 scholar participants, 70% of the scholars had goals to attain a doctorate degree (Tate et al. 2015). The findings from the survey responses indicated that self-efficacy positively predicted a students' pursuit of graduate school only when self-efficacy was linked to research and family values. These two findings came as no surprise to Tate and colleagues (2015) given the fact one of the intentions of the McNair program is to increase confidence in conducting research for students of



these backgrounds. The finding of family values was also no surprise as research shows that family support positively impacts students from these backgrounds pursuing doctoral degrees (Tate et al. 2015).

Piatt and colleagues (2019) sought to examine the relationships between formal mentoring program participation, science identity salience, and graduate school enrollment for a group of students who were first-generation, low-income (FGLI), and from underrepresented minority groups. More specifically they wanted to know whether these relationships were the same for students who identify with all three backgrounds (FGLI and minority) and what aspects of a formal mentoring program were the most important in graduate school enrollment for this group. Piatt and colleagues were aware that the McNair program is meant to build mentoring relationships for students from these backgrounds, however the concern was more about students in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields (Piatt et al. 2019).

Gathering data from a previous national study that was conducted on all STEM majors, Piatt and colleagues used surveys to determine which students identified with all three backgrounds. Of a database of 1,040 students, 517 met the criteria of FGLI and from an underrepresented minority group. The selected group of students were then asked to complete a series of surveys to serve as their participation in the study. What they found was that both mentor programs and science identity salience were positively associated with graduate school enrollment. Students who participated in a formal mentoring program during their entire undergraduate career have a 75% chance of enrolling in a graduate program compared to only 50% among those with no participation (Piatt et al. 2019). Piatt and colleagues suggest that their findings show that formal mentoring programs, like McNair are effective for motivating FGLI underrepresented students to enroll in graduate programs.

## **FGLI and Minority Students in McNair Programs: Program Components**

Most of the research conducted on McNair programs can be separated into two categories, studies that generally describe the nature and components of McNair programs or a series of reports that offer insightful data about McNair programs in various parts of the country (Waller et al. 2014). This section will include studies that focus on components of the McNair Program and the following section will address various reports conducted on McNair programs.

The components of McNair programs have been examined at least for two decades. In a 1998 study, Grimmatt and colleagues focused on how effective selected McNair program components were in preparing scholars for graduate school. After collecting survey responses from one particular McNair program, four program components were identified. The program components were: financial support, research, internships, and mentorship (Grimmett et al. 1998). Regarding mentorship, what was found was that mentors were most effective as teachers, advocates, and guides to academic culture and less effective as academic advisors. It was noted that the mentorship that was developed with scholars were often not faculty in the participating scholars' departments, but instead tended to be McNair Program staff. In relation to internships, Grimmatt and colleagues (1998) found that internships were the most effective as opportunities for scholars to conduct research in their chosen fields.

Willison and Gibson (2011) sought to identify program factors that influenced McNair scholar persistence and matriculation in graduate school. In addition to using surveys, Willison and Gibson (2011) conducted interviews with 22 McNair scholars from Northwestern University. From interviews with scholars, fourteen factors or "learning curves," were identified and grouped into 5 different themes. The themes identified were academic readiness, weaving a supportive web, managing the clock, being accepted, and staying financially fit (Willison and

Gibson 2011). These themes that were identified were the determining factors that influenced whether or not each scholar persisted through graduate school.

Willison and Gibson (2011) emphasized the importance of continuing to support scholars once they have completed the program and entered graduate school. Although some of the themes identified were similar to the study by Grimmett and colleagues, Willison and Gibson recognized that these themes are salient even after McNair scholars leave the program and enroll into graduate school. “To better prepare scholars for managing the demands of their time, it would be helpful to have mentors focus on time management strategies or have seminars on this topic” (Willison and Gibson, 2011, 165).

In recent research, the focus of McNair programs has been on improving the components that the program possesses to enable scholars to reach their full potential. The goal of a study by Cruz (2015) was to identify areas of improvement for the McNair program at UT-Austin. Three themes emerged from the data. Cruz labeled them as, “lack of tailored attention to students, an unrealistic time frame for program completion, and inadequate guidance in developing academic and networking opportunities within a student’s discipline” (Cruz, 2015,1).

Tailored attention surfaced as a theme because students expressed that not all McNair scholars come from the same academic background and some students were more advanced than others when it came to certain components of the program. One student mention, “I sat in a research methods class for McNair for a semester, relearning things that I already knew but others didn’t” (Cruz, 2015: 3). Cruz emphasized that McNair programs need to tailor to scholars across the academic spectrum to best prepare them for graduate school.

Regarding time frame for program completion, students expressed the challenge of not only keeping up with general course work, but also the additional work involved in being a part

of the McNair program. It was noted that students felt that one year to complete a research project wasn't adequate time. Consequently, some students delayed graduation. "I'm staying an extra semester (graduating in four and a half years) so I can finish my project, apply to graduate schools, and just make sure I'm caught up" (Cruz, 2015: 4). Cruz insisted that McNair programs reevaluate their components constantly to be sure that students are graduating on time and persisting on to graduate school.

Relating to discipline specific work, students expressed that based on their discipline it was difficult to enter graduate school immediately because they didn't have work experience. Cruz (2015) mentioned that a few students needed to take gap years before entering graduate school to make themselves "a more competitive candidate." Overall, Cruz agreed that McNair program components were effective, they just needed frequent evaluation to be sure they are meeting all its' scholars needs.

Based on interview results, Cruz developed three recommendations for all McNair programs. First, he recommended that all programs should create subsets of scholars within their program. "Creating groups of scholars allows the programming to be tailored to meet the needs of students at different research levels" (Cruz, 2015: 5). Secondly, was to extend program duration. More time to complete the program can allow students to gain a deeper perspective on their discipline. However, Cruz did recognize that this may present a challenge in terms of recruitment. Lastly, Cruz suggested that McNair programs should adopt UT-Austin's Intellectual Entrepreneurship perspective. This Intellectual Entrepreneurship (IE) model aims to partner undergraduates with faculty and graduate students within the same discipline to gain research, academic, and career experience. Cruz suggested that the IE model should be a part of program requirements, so that when students join McNair, they join with research experience.

Gittens (2014) conducted a study interviewing 18 former McNair scholars from various programs, who had completed their doctoral degrees. Gittens (2014) wanted to better understand how the program served as a socializing agent to enhance successful completion of graduate school. Many factors emerged from the interviews that were put into two different themes: academic integration and social integration.

In relation to academic integration, scholars reported that they benefitted from learning about the graduate school application process and summer research experiences. Max, a participant in the study, mentioned, “Coming into my PhD program I had already made a decision to become a professional academic. I took a more realistic look at the process, and I was better prepared to become a professional academic than my peers. So, issues with graduate student labor, blind spots in the program...the curriculum, I didn’t complain about this as much as my peers, because I had already been exposed to some of the concessions that had to be made” (Gittens, 2014: 375). In terms of social integration, most scholars reported that the most beneficial aspects were being able to network with others at conferences and events and the connections that were made with faculty, graduate students, and other scholars. Robin, another participant, mentioned “I went to my McNair mentor for everything when I was in grad school. I would call him, and he would coach me through things” (Gittens, 2014: 376). Throughout the study, Gittens thoroughly captures the student voice, which is what this study implemented.

Renbarger and Beaujean (2020) conducted a meta-analysis of the impact of the McNair Program on graduate school enrollment. Compiling many different publications that had specific key words like McNair program and McNair program effectiveness, Renbarger and Beaujean found a total of seven publications that met their inclusion criteria. The authors concluded the McNair Program was an effective program. From the studies they found that McNair program

scholars were almost 6 times as likely to enroll in a graduate program than a comparison group who weren't involved in the program.

### **FGLI and Minority Students in McNair Programs: McNair Reports**

Every year McNair Program directors are required to submit an annual performance report (APR) to the Department of Education as an evaluation of their specific program. These APR's are crucial to each McNair Program as they determine the annual amount of funding provided by the Department of Education. Funding is important to the success of a McNair Program (Renbarger and Beaujean 2020). The more funding a program has, the more resources it can provide for its scholars' success and progression throughout the program.

Parker (2003) found that from 1990 to 2000 the total number of doctoral degrees in the U.S. earned by students who identified as Black, Asian American, Hispanic, or Indian American increased from 2,360 to 4,389. Even though this was a big increase, in 2000 these 4,389 PhD's only made up 15% of all people who had earned a doctoral degree. Parker argued that the McNair Program was a reason for the increase in doctoral degrees from students of these backgrounds, but he also argued that improvements to the program will need to continue to further increase the number of doctoral recipients from these backgrounds.

Seburn, Chan, and Kirhstein (2005) across five academic years, compiled information on all McNair Programs, all participants, the services that were offered, and the outcomes of participants. Overall, there had been an increase of grantees, or McNair Programs, across the country from 1997-98 to 2001-02 and on average each McNair program served about 26 students per year (Seburn et al. 2005). Most of the participants of McNair between the academic years 1997-98 and 2001-02 were Black and Hispanic. Most of the services provided included, academic counseling, seminars, summer internships, and assistance with admissions and

financial aid. Seburn and colleagues (2005) also found that about 95% of McNair participants had earned a bachelor's degree but of these students, Whites and Asians were more likely to earn an advanced degree (Seburn et al. 2005).

Waller and colleagues' (2014) evaluation of the McNair Program at Cornell University consisted of seventeen students who completed a 42-question survey. The survey was designed to elicit information on specific program characteristics that promote an undergraduate's ability and motivation to conduct research, how the McNair Program could be improved to provide more varied and meaningful research opportunities, and the extent to which their experiences increased their preparedness for graduate school.

Their results displayed overall that most of the scholars were motivated to conduct research and also felt prepared for graduate school. Scholars were asked to identify their top three reasons for being motivated to conduct research and the top three reasons identified were to gain hands-on experience, to clarify which field they wanted to study, and to enhance their graduate school application. The results that were reported were only answering the first area of information that the researchers were looking for. Improvements for the program were never mentioned and other aspects of preparedness for graduate school were not reported.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Social capital is a favorable framework to understand low enrollment and matriculation rates in undergraduate and graduate programs for FGLI minority students. Stanton-Salazar (1997) defined social capital as relationships with institutional agents and the networks that afford access to resources and information for social progression and the accomplishment of goals. Stanton-Salazar (1997) stated that "capital can be converted into socially valued resources and opportunities (e.g., emotional support, legitimized institutional roles and identities, privileged

information, and access to opportunities for mobility) (1997: 8). Those with more capital fare better in schools than their peers with less. The concept of social capital came about from the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron. In their early writing on the topic, both Bourdieu and Passeron declared that the accumulation of knowledge is used to reinforce class differences (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). That's because variables such as race, gender, nationality, and religion often determine who has access to different forms of knowledge.

Dika and Singh (2002) offered an explanation of Bourdieu's perspective. Bourdieu defined social capital as the aggregate of actual or potential resources linked to possession of a durable network of essentially institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition. This group membership provides members with the backing of collectively owned capital...social capital is made up of social obligations or connections and it is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital (Dika and Singh 2002). There are three important components of Bourdieu's concept of social capital. First, capital is cumulative and can potentially produce social benefits and profit (Dika and Singh 2002). Secondly, relationships can afford previously excluded individuals' access to information and resources enjoyed by the dominant group in power (Dika and Singh 2002). Lastly, the quality and quantity of such relationships can determine the convertibility of capital (Dika and Singh 2002).

FGLI and minority students often lack that initial knowledge of institutional resources such as support efforts and resources on campus that would in turn facilitate academic success and increase awareness of academic culture. It's common their there more affluent peers acquire this knowledge through a parent or older sibling that has been to college. However, just because these students lack the knowledge of the institution doesn't mean they are underprepared, according to Schademan and Thompson. Schademan and Thompson (2016) sought to understand



the role of faculty as cultural agents at higher education institutions and how they are critical to the success of FGLI minority students. Throughout a qualitative study they wanted to gain insight on student and faculty beliefs about college readiness.

There were three major findings that Schademan and Thompson (2016) identified in this study. First, faculty beliefs about student readiness impacted the degree to which faculty serve as cultural agents for FGLI and minority students. Many of the teachers that were interviewed didn't see the structural issues that FGLI and minority students face when coming to college. "These instructors did not see them as insurmountable barriers. Instead, they saw the classroom as the primary locus of control for enacting the kind of readiness practices students need to be successful in college" (Schademan and Thompson 2016). The second major finding was faculty who do serve as cultural agents enact particular practices and dispositions that enable students to become more academically prepared (Schademan and Thompson 2016). This often included faculty adapting course pedagogies to fit the needs of their students. When the adaptation was made, students were more likely to succeed in college. The third finding was that FGLI and minority students arrive at college with diverse forms of readiness that require varying forms of nurturing support (Schademan and Thompson 2016). Schademan and Thompson (2016) noted that if faculty are going to serve as cultural agents for all students, then adaptations in pedagogy need to be made.

One of the important functions of the McNair program is to promote social capital for its' scholars. Using Stanton-Salazar's definition of social capital the McNair program enhances relationships with institutional agents for its' scholars. One way this is done is through the McNair staff themselves. McNair staff often have more access or knowledge to institutional resources that they can share with scholars (Finley and McNair 2013). Another way that this is

done is through the relationships that scholars build with faculty. The U.S. Department of Education requires all scholars to participate in some kind of research activity. In this case, McNair program staffs and their scholars need to build relationships with campus faculty as they are often the institutional agents with most knowledge and access to research (Rodríguez et al. 2013). Scholars may also have the chance to network with each other. Each year there are many annual conferences just for McNair scholars so that they can gain experience in presenting at conferences or gain the interests of potential graduate programs (Rodríguez et al. 2013). As mentioned before, each McNair Program has their own way of implementing their activities. This study will take specific activities of the UNCG McNair program and closely connect them to Stanton-Salazar's definition of social capital.

This section explored the previous literature on FGLI and minority students. These students are often at a disadvantage before they come to college. Once in college, FGLI and minority students are less likely to persist, retain, and attain higher degrees. Access to social capital through the McNair program provides FGLI and minority students with the opportunity to graduate education that they may not have otherwise gained. The next section will look at the methodology used to conduct this study.

## CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, the decisions and rationale for the research methods are discussed. Strategies regarding sampling, data collection, and data analysis are described. This study uses a qualitative design to understand the ways the UNCG McNair Scholars Program promotes social capital for its' scholars. Corbin and Strauss (2015) state that "qualitative methods can be used to obtain the intricate details about phenomena such as feelings, thought processes, and emotions that are difficult to extract or learn about through more conventional methods." An interview design is appropriate for this study because it is effective in capturing the experiences of the scholars in a holistic way. The scholar's experiences are the most important part in this study to understand how social capital is promoted for them. Semi-structured interview questions allowed interview sessions to feel more like a conversation and less like an interrogation, since the purpose is to understand the stories of the scholars. It was important to make sure that these interviews feel more like conversations because scholars were inclined to share more intimate information about their experiences in the McNair program.

### **Site Selection**

While the purpose and research questions for this study were not initially site specific, they are population specific. The UNCG McNair Program was chosen because the first author as researcher had familiarity with the program as a former participant. The researcher participated in the program from 2017-2019 and had established many relationships with their cohort and the cohorts that followed. The focus for this study was on scholars who are current seniors or recent graduates of the McNair Program, who would now be first-year graduate students. The decision was made to exclude current scholars who were sophomores and juniors because they have yet to experience the McNair Program completely. For this study and to better understand how the

McNair Program has promoted social capital in its entirety, I specifically targeted students who are in their last year of undergraduate studies or recent graduates of the program. Interviewing these scholars provided this study with a broader scope of how McNair has promoted social capital and the impact on student motivation to persist to graduate school.

**Participants**

To be eligible for the UNCG McNair Program, students must be either first-generation college students and low-income, or from an underrepresented minority group (African American, Hispanic/Latino, Alaskan Native/American Indian, or Pacific Islander). All participants of the McNair Program are required to attend UNCG full time, maintain a cumulative GPA of 3.0 or higher, and be U.S. citizens or permanent residents. The participants of this study are scholars who are current scholars in the UNCG McNair program or recent graduates within the last year of UNCG McNair. Of the ten scholars interviewed, five were current seniors and five of them were recent graduates of the UNCG McNair program. Four of the five recent graduates were current graduate students at the time of this study. For participant confidentiality names of the scholars were not used. Participant characteristics for the scholars are included below:

**Table 1. Participant Information**

<b>Scholar</b>	<b>Gender Identity</b>	<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>Classification</b>
Scholar #1	Male	Black or African American	Senior
Scholar #2	Male	White or Caucasian	Senior
Scholar #3	Female	Black or African American	Senior

Scholar #4	Female	Black or African American	Senior
Scholar #5	Female	Black or African American	Senior
Scholar #6	Non-conforming	White or Caucasian	Graduate Student
Scholar #7	Female	Black or African American	Graduate Student
Scholar #8	Male	Hispanic or Latinx	Graduate Student
Scholar #9	Female	Hispanic or Latinx	Graduate Student
Scholar #10	Female	Black or African American	Other: Recent Alumna

Within this study it was also important to understand the program from an administrative level. This meant including staff who helped support the day-to-day operations of the program. It should be noted that during the time of this study there was a lot of staff turnover. For that reason direct quotes from the staff who did participate were omitted.

### **Recruitment**

This section describes the steps and processes that were taken to gain participants for this study. Outreach was first made to the UNCG McNair staff to obtain a list of all current scholars who were seniors as well as recent graduates of the program. Once all contact information was obtained, an email was then sent all scholars. This email contained information on the study, what participation would look like, how long interviews would last, and at the end directing them to complete a form that asked about demographic information as well as gaining their consent. After the consent form was completed, a second email was sent to scholars to schedule their

interview along with a frequently asked questions (FAQ) sheet for the scholars to review before their interview was being conducted. Before the start of each interview each scholar was asked if they had any questions or concerns about the FAQ sheet that they reviewed beforehand.

### **Data Collection**

All interviews were conducted in a virtual format. During the time of this study (October 2021- January 2022), the COVID-19 pandemic was still among us and there were many protocols that required masking and social distancing, so it was determined that virtual interviews were safer for both the interviewer and participants. Data was collected using a semi-structured interview format. The interview protocol contained 11 questions, with probing or clarifying questions on some occasions (see appendix A & B). Two different interview protocols were created to tailor to the experiences of both the senior scholars and recent graduates. Scholars were asked a series of questions that addressed their McNair experience, their exposure to campus networks and resources, as well as their motivations for attending graduate school. As for the McNair staff, a separate interview protocol was created to address things in addition to the McNair experience. (see appendix C). All interviews were recorded via Zoom with consent and varied in length from 45 to 60 minutes. These interviews were informal and open-ended to feel more like a conversation. Notes were taken during each interview and all notes and recordings were stored in UNCG Box, an online file storage platform provided by the university.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis first began with transcribing each interview. Once transcription was completed, each participants response was then typed into the same document for data organization. Thematic analysis was then used to identify themes and patterns in the data. This method was appropriate because of the flexibility that it allows for new insights and concepts to

be created (Braun and Clarke 2012). This was done by identifying similarities and differences between each interview question.

### **Research Questions**

This study aims to answer the following questions:

1. How does the McNair Program promote social capital for its' scholars at UNCG?
2. How does exposure to social capital impact the motivation to attend graduate school?

Question #1 sought to examine the ways in which the UNCG McNair Program sought to promote social capital for its scholars. Stanton-Salazar's definition of social capital was used to identify what networks, resources, and institutional agents scholars were exposed to while participating in the program. Question #2 sought to understand the motivations for attending graduate school based on the scholars' experiences in the McNair program.

## CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

This chapter presents the results from the analysis of how social capital is promoted in the McNair Program at UNCG and motivations for attending graduate school. Social capital was evident throughout the results in different forms. For this reason, the results are organized into three major themes. The first section, “Before the McNair Experience,” uncovers career plans that the scholars had before becoming a McNair scholar, understanding what the application process was like, and their initial motivations for applying to the program. In relation to social capital, there was a lack of it shown throughout this section. The second section, “During the McNair Experience,” explores the benefits, challenges, and expectations of the scholars’ experiences. It also brings to light the exposure that scholars received from institutional agents and campus resources. This section reveals the building of social capital. The third section, “After the McNair Experience and Beyond,” identifies feelings around the discussion about graduate school, feelings around the personal impacts on preparation, and future educational and career plans. This section highlights the social capital that was gained allows the scholars to reflect on their experiences.

It's important to note before the results are revealed participant confidentiality was important to uphold. The goal of this project was to hear the voice of scholars and the staff, but due to this program being fairly new and COVID-19 staff turnover was a big issue for this McNair program. During the duration of this study, there were a few staff vacancies that made daily operations more difficult to complete. Since there were many vacancies, the decision to omit the direct quotes of the staff who did participate was made to maintain confidentiality.



## **Before the McNair Experience**

### *Early Career Plans*

The scholars who participated in this study came from a range of different academic fields, thus resulting in different initial career plans. Each had different reasons that brought them to UNCG but ultimately it was the access to opportunities provided through financial support, their academic departments, or other communities on campus. One scholar mentioned:

UNCG was actually the only school that really sent me all of the information they had about the resources that they could offer me, and the aid I got from financial aid was almost close to like getting a full ride basically. (Scholar #9)

Another scholar specifically mentioned a campus program that made attending UNCG easier:

I didn't know about UNCG until my senior year. At first, I wanted to stay close to home [western part of NC] but then I realized that I wanted to get away from my rural area and move to a bigger city and UNCG Guarantee made it affordable, which was a worry. (Scholar #2)

A graduate scholar stated:

UNCG ended up being my first choice because it was close to home but also, they offered me a few scholarships at the time that would allow me to pay for college a little but easier. I also worked to help out my family, so it was nice to not worry about paying for school. (Scholar #8)

All scholars majored in a variety of fields in STEM, Social Sciences, Education, and Humanities. Initially most of the scholars' early career plans only included receiving a bachelor's degree and that was it. It was interesting to note that six of the ten scholars were the first in their families to go to college. All scholars who were first-generation hadn't considered going to

graduate school, nor did they know what graduate school was or that it existed. The McNair Program introduced graduate school and in a way that it could be seen as an option. One scholar mentioned:

When I came to UNCG I was actually exploratory [undeclared major], so I didn't know what I wanted to do but I was in Grogan Residential College on the south part of campus. That led me into Public Health, and it was an instructor in Grogan who introduced me to someone who was then a scholar but before I had met her, I didn't even think about going to grad school. (Scholar #1)

Another stated:

I'm first-generation so I was never really exposed to that. Then when I got to college and started hearing grad school more often it was still this hypothetical thing in my head. At that point I really thought only people with money went to grad school. (Scholar #2)

On the other hand, those scholars who were not first-generation knew what graduate school was and had graduate school plans but didn't know what all it entailed. These scholars knew graduate school was a thing but didn't know how to prepare, the financial aspect of things, or what to look for in a program. One scholar declared:

So, I had thought of grad school but never a PhD and never research. It really never crossed my mind and at first, I was really against it. The goal was just to get my masters and get my licensure, that was it. (Scholar #3)

Another scholar mentioned:

I did an early college program at 16 so I've known since then that I've wanted to go to grad school. I've always wanted to be an industrial organizational psychologist and go to

grad school. I just didn't know what grad school really entailed. I really thought it was similar to undergrad. (Scholar #4)

### ***Applying for the McNair Program: Scholar Perspective***

There were many similarities for scholars when it came to the motivations for applying for the McNair program. Overall scholars were eager to embark on something new and increase their knowledge in their field. Some mentioned that it was also a way to get involved with the research community on campus. Scholars said that they were introduced and encouraged to apply to McNair by faculty within their departments. One scholar mentioned:

I guess I wanted to leave my own carbon footprint on campus. I wanted to be a lot more involved with research and a lot more involved on campus. I just felt at that point my grades were just not enough. (Scholar #5)

Another scholar stated:

The number one reason why I became a McNair scholar would have to be just gaining expertise in my field and really self-achievement and self-accomplishment. I spent weeks thinking about joining McNair and ultimately what pushed me would be the community of like-minded individuals all pursuing something in higher education. (Scholar #1)

A graduate scholar mentioned:

They [faculty mentor] were part of the deciding factor of me applying, just because you know they saw that potential in me that I didn't really see in myself. I know a lot of first-gen students struggle with imposter syndrome and that what I was experiencing, I just didn't have the name for it at that time. (Scholar #10)

While the scholars were highly motivated to apply for the McNair program, the actual process of applying was more difficult than anticipated. The application process for the UNCG

McNair Program is made up of many components. The application includes a personal statement, a statement of research interest, a resume, and two faculty recommendations. After all documents are reviewed by the staff, applicants are then invited for an interview. Most of the scholars who identified as first-generation didn't know what a personal statement or statement of research interest was. Scholars recalled feeling stressed and worried trying to compile all documents and were unsure of what "they" were looking for.

I was really stressed because it got down to the wire. I was trying to do schoolwork and apply at the same time. Then when I got an interview, I felt like a phony or an imposter the whole time because I didn't know what they were looking for. (Scholar #5)

Another scholar mentioned:

I just remember there being so many documents that I had to submit. It was really stressful, and I remember talking to a friend because they had applied before me. Then after all of that the interviews were very soon after. It was just very fast, and I had like 2 weeks to apply. (Scholar #6)

Another stated:

I almost didn't apply. One of my mentors from another program had sent me the application and said I'd be good for it. At first, I told him that I was busy and had so many other things going on. Then I saw all of the documents needed and I thought, "there's no way I can do this too." So, I met with my mentor and kept coming up with excuses for not applying. He said I'd be stupid to not to. I told him I was worried about finding people to write me letters of recommendation and he wrote one right then and there. (Scholar #8)

*Applying for the McNair Program: Staff Perspective*

When it came to applying for the McNair program, it was important to understand how scholars were recruited and selected. This was uncovered when talking with a McNair staff member. Before COVID-19, the McNair staff would receive a list from the university's institutional research office of all students that would qualify for the program. The staff would then do outreach by email and hold in person information sessions that students could attend.

Once COVID came along, the staff tried to keep things the same as much as possible but moved to a virtual format. This resulted in outreach being much harder and fewer people applying for the program. It was also mentioned that during this time there was a lot of staff turnover in the program which didn't help recruitment efforts either.

### **During the McNair Experience**

#### ***Benefits, Challenges, and COVID***

For the scholars, there were many benefits of being a part of the McNair Scholars Program. The two most common benefits reported were the resources provided and the mentorship provided by faculty. The beneficial resources included GRE preparation, various workshops on graduate school, learning how to write in an academic way, and being able to conduct research. In terms of the mentorship provided by faculty, some scholars mentioned this was the most beneficial because that relationship also helped solidify graduate school plans. One scholar stated:

Everything was beneficial. Learning how to formulate a topic. That's something that people don't often think about a lot. When you're telling a story or trying to create something, you must have a topic and it's not easy to create. So, creating a topic and learning how to write in an academic way that people understand, and your discipline understands was the most helpful. (Scholar #3)

Another stated:

I liked the relationship I had with my faculty mentor. She not only helped me with conducting research but also, she was just very transparent about her own experiences in grad school in the discipline and just gave me so much advice and made me think about things that I hadn't even thought of when it came to grad school. (Scholar #4)

A third scholar mentioned:

I think the most beneficial part of McNair was the research with SRI [Summer Research Institute] mainly because I really built a relationship with my faculty mentor, who is actually the graduate director of the program I'm in now. It was just really awesome to get close to her through my research. (Scholar #6)

With many benefits of being a scholar, there also came challenges as well. Of the various challenges that scholars experienced, there were two that were continuously mentioned. First, was the support from the staff. While scholars were the most active during the program there was a lot of staff turnover, and many felt like they didn't have anyone to go to for questions or concerns. This staff turnover resulted in a decrease in morale among the scholars as well. Many felt disconnected from their cohort members and there was a sense that everyone was "doing their own thing." One scholar declared:

The most challenging thing would be the support. Since I did my SRI earlier, I was thrown into the mix of one McNair AD leaving and another coming in and with that I felt the least connected to the program and my cohort because of that. It just made things really confusing because my cohort was about to graduate, and I wasn't even though I had already done SRI. (Scholar #1)

Another scholar mentioned:

The most challenging part was that I felt not everyone in my cohort was just on different pages. I understand we have different disciplines and different needs for preparing for grad school, but we are all underrepresented scholars all trying to get to graduate school. I just wished the staff wouldn't done more relationship building activities, so it didn't feel like we were just doing our own thing. (Scholar #4)

The second challenge that emerged was the workload of completing their research. At UNCG during the summer before scholars begin their senior year, all scholars are required to participate in the Summer Research Institute (SRI). SRI at UNCG is an eight-week program in which scholars conduct their own academic research under the guidance of a faculty mentor. The research component can extend beyond the eight weeks depending on the scholar and faculty mentor. Along with research, they also take classes together that consists of academic writing and professionalism for graduate school, as well as GRE preparation. While completing SRI, scholars are given a stipend to go towards data collection if needed and UNCG also provides housing and dining so that scholars can remain on campus and get the most out of their research experience. At the end of SRI there is an annual research symposium in which scholars present their work in a poster and presentation format. The purpose of SRI is so that entering senior year scholars have a completed research project that can then be presented at conferences and discussed on graduate school visits to make them more competitive candidates for graduate programs. One scholar stated:

SRI was the most challenging thing. It was just very intense trying to complete my research and prepare for grad school through GRE prep and things like that. For example, my research was historical research, and I was working with many primary resources and

things like that and UNCG didn't always have the materials that I needed. I either had to drive to Chapel Hill or App State just to look at materials. (Scholar #2)

Another mentioned:

SRI was just a lot. I was still working and doing SRI. I wasn't in a position to give up working and making money. So, I was working 40 hours a week and doing the research. Sometimes I just wish we could've had a mental health break or something. Everything was just going so fast. (Scholar #3)

The Summer Research Institute (SRI) was conducted during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time, SRI had shifted to a virtual format in which all classes and check ins with faculty mentors and program staff were held via Zoom. Scholars mentioned that they were still adjusting to Zoom because during that time they had just finished the second half of their spring 2020 semesters online. Scholars also brought up outside factors that hindered their focus during this time as well. This included family issues around finances, political issues involving tragic murders of Black and Brown bodies, and overall mental health.

It was just such a stressful time for absolutely everybody involved, including me. Like no one was really channeling their inner grace for each other. So, I think SRI became more like checking boxes instead of enjoying the experience. (Scholar #7)

Another scholar mentioned:

SRI really became just a checklist of things to do. I struggled a bit that summer going into senior year because we had to do this research and prepare for my last year and the program was just really requiring a lot of workshops that I really didn't think were helpful to me. To me the extra workshops were more geared towards the sophomores and



juniors in the program. I just felt that they didn't really tailor to the needs of seniors.

(Scholar #8)

Before this study was conducted, the researcher predicted that COVID-19 would have a big impact on the scholars' experiences. Since this was predicted, a question about the pros and cons of pre-COVID versus post-COVID had to be asked. Before COVID happened, scholars really enjoyed the in-person interactions with the staff but mostly other scholars. Many scholars described how empowering it was to be connected with other scholars in other disciplines who came from similar backgrounds. One scholar stated:

The pre-COVID experience was much better for sure. We did the induction ceremony in person then we did a spring retreat in person that really helped to get to know the rest of the scholars. It was just great to everyone in one space and just feeling really connected.

(Scholar #1)

Another scholar mentioned:

I really liked things before COVID. I really enjoyed meeting with the staff and the weekly newsletters that went out. They were just really on top of things and always very consistent with communication. They were just always there if we needed them. (Scholar #7)

The only negative for pre-COVID McNair experiences was that McNair required the scholars to attend too many workshops and events. This was hard for scholars to balance because many were involved with other communities on campus like being tour guides, RAs, and a part of other clubs and organizations. One scholar mentioned:

I was involved with a lot on campus before COVID hit and McNair was very strict about attending their events and stuff. Like they were constantly sending emails and requiring a

bunch of workshops which was hard because I didn't like all of them were the most helpful. (Scholar #8)

Another stated:

I really liked the workshops that they [McNair] did, it was just really hard trying to find time in my busy schedule to do them because I just had so much going on then. I think COVID really forced flexibility. (Scholar #9)

Surprisingly when asking about post-COVID the overwhelming positive was that everything was more flexible because of things being online which allowed scholars time for other commitments. One scholar declared:

I really do enjoy things being online for McNair. This being my senior year, there are just a lot of things going on along with me applying to grad programs. I just really appreciate the flexibility of having things online for McNair at the moment. (Scholar #3)

Another stated:

With COVID, making it to events has actually been a lot easier to attend since they are online, and I live off campus. I also work off campus as well so being able to log in on my laptop at work or go back and watch a recording in my free time is so much easier. (Scholar #5)

The negative aspect of completing McNair during COVID was the loss of in-person interaction with staff and other scholars. Scholars also mentioned not being able to go on graduate school visits which they felt like would've helped them more when choosing their programs. One scholar mentioned:

I really missed interacting with scholars when COVID hit. I didn't really talk to them as much and the staff wasn't as consistent in communication. They were more like, "call us if you need us." As a student, I didn't respond well to that. (Scholar #7)

It's obvious that COVID had a big impact on the UNCG McNair experience, so it was important to understand programmatic structure pre-COVID and post-COVID. In a normal year during the fall seniors had different requirements than the other scholars. When asking staff, it was noticed that there were different programmatic things during different times of the year and depending on their class. For example, in the fall semester for seniors, they were mostly preparing for graduate school applications and taking the GRE. For others it was encouraging them to go to various workshops and reminding them of expectations. During the spring semester seniors still had different requirements than other scholars. It was recommended that there could've been more done to actually prepare seniors for what was next. During this time, seniors were hearing back from programs and making decisions, so it was preparing them for what's next. For the others, it was preparing them for the Summer Research Institute. When COVID happened, completing the same activities in a virtual format were harder. There were many things that were lost because of COVID that were hard to maintain in a virtual format. This included, daily operations, in person interactions with cohorts, and not being able to travel to conferences.

Connections between cohorts was hard to sustain in a virtual format. Scholars didn't feel as connected to each other nor did they feel as connected to their research. Traveling to conferences was not an option which was difficult because it was said to be a crucial part of the McNair experience. The ability to network with others and gain practice talking about research

and how to present at a conference was something that was needed for the graduate school preparation process. A scholar stated:

Once COVID happened and we went online, it was kind of like everybody was doing their own thing. Like I there was no true unity between the scholars, and I didn't really feel connected to anyone. (Scholar #1)

### ***Exposure to Institutional Agents***

Exposure to institutional agents such as campus faculty and staff is one of the main aspects of the McNair scholar experience that increases social capital. Overall, scholars shared that McNair did a great job at helping them establish relationships with faculty in their respective disciplines. Many then described that it was up to them to then foster those relationships into what they wanted them to be. Fostering relationships with faculty mentors for some scholars led to being introduced to other faculty members in the field. One scholar mentioned:

McNair has done a job of increasing the faculty and staff I'm connected to on campus. I'm really close with my library mentor and she's even helping me out with a program I have coming up for my fraternity. I'm also very close with my mentor in the public health dept. so much that he's connected me to other minority professors in Chemistry, Biology and even Psychology. (Scholar #1)

Another stated:

He's the only Black faculty in my department and I just feel so comfortable with him. I've learned so much from him mostly outside of the classroom and in my field, I'm not going to get that. Like if I go to grad school, I'll be lucky if even see any type of Black faculty. He's even introduced me to someone who does the same work at ECU. (Scholar #3)

A scholar mentioned:

McNair really opened me up to new faculty on campus. Actually, my McNair research is what got me into the higher ed program really. I had talked about my research to someone who was in the program, and they had suggested that I meet one of the professors. From there I met with her and now that I'm in the program, we've been collaborating on a few different projects. (Scholar #8)

After probing to understand what it was that scholars of color appreciated the most about their faculty mentor relationship a few of them immediately said that it was the fact that they had someone doing the work in their department who looked like them. A scholar stated:

Fortunately for me two of my mentors are Black women and they are in the area that I want to be in, and our relationship has grown so much because they've been so open about their experience navigating academia as Black women. (Scholar #4)

Another stated:

My faculty mentor looked like me and that meant everything because she understood where I was coming from. She really held me accountable and really challenged me to be courageous and put myself out there. She's still my mentor to this day even though I'm now navigating grad school. (Scholar #9)

Faculty mentors weren't the only institutional agents that scholars gained access to. Relationships with the McNair staff were also developed. What was interesting was that the senior scholars reported having a good relationship with the McNair staff. As for the recent McNair alums, they all mentioned the staff turnover and how difficult it was to stay connected to the McNair because there wasn't consistency in staff. A scholar mentioned:

Honestly, my connection with the McNair staff has only strengthened over time. Starting with the director down to the graduate assistants. Given COVID and everything I know that they are only trying their best and they really do try to be here for the scholars.

(Scholar #2)

On the other end of the spectrum another scholar mentioned:

There was so much staff turnover that it was really hard to build relationships. As soon as I got connected with someone they would leave soon after. It was even harder trying to get adjusted to new staff members because at time I felt like I knew more than them.

(Scholar #6)

McNair staff were also asked about exposure to institutional agents that the program provided for scholars. It was stated that scholars were exposed to staff through the various workshops that were offered. Different speakers were welcomed to talk about various research topics. There was also an annual McNair Colloquium held so McNair scholars could have the opportunity to meet faculty and learn from different academic areas.

It was also important to understand from the McNair staff how the program was supported on an institutional level. It was uncovered that there was an abundance in campus support. The Provost's Office very generously donated funds to support scholars with graduate school preparation. Faculty mentors were also given a generous stipend for assisting scholars during the research process.

### ***Exposure to Campus Resources***

The second aspect of the McNair scholar experience that increased social capital was exposure to campus resources. All of these scholars were very high achieving students who were involved in many different communities on campus. For that reason, many had already known

about the various campus resources that UNCG offered. What was surprising was that because of the McNair Program everyone's knowledge about the University Libraries had been increased. Some scholars stated that they originally thought it was just the place to study and check out books. Through McNair they learned the value of librarians and asking for help, different research database systems, how to properly cite information, and how to complete a presentation or design a research poster. Resources like the library are valuable as it not only provides assistance in finishing their undergraduate degree, it's also a useful to be a successful graduate student. One scholar mentioned:

I was really blown away by the library. I didn't realize all of what they had to offer.

Things like Zotero and the different databases to look up research articles were really helpful, and I really enjoyed the workshops that they did for us. (Scholar #6)

Another declared:

I had never really heard of Zotero before until the library had done a workshop on it. It was really eye opening. It was like brand new skill I had for research that I got to learn and put in my back pocket, and it made the process much easier. (Scholar #7)

When probing to find out what was most enjoyable when learning what the library offered, many scholars stated the University's Digital ACT Studio (DACTS). DACTS is a center on campus open to students, faculty, and staff to assist in creating digital projects. This provided scholars with trained staff to help assist in the creation of their research projects in a digital format. Many scholars said they found this beneficial when preparing to present at conferences.

One scholar mentioned:

I had never heard of the Digital ACT Studio in my life until I became a McNair Scholar. I also didn't know where they were located either. They were so helpful especially when it came to presenting at conferences and knowing how to format things. (Scholar #3)

Another stated:

I never really explored resources on campus before I joined McNair. I was really excited to learn about the Digital ACT Studio. I had no idea all of those resources were in the basement of the library. I had never even been down there before McNair. (Scholar #4)

There were other resources that scholars had known about but not what they could do for them. These included the University Speaking and Writing Centers as well as the Career and Professional Development Center (CPD). Some scholars mentioned that the Speaking Center became helpful when preparing for conference presentations in which scholars were allowed to do mock presentations in front of staff and receive feedback on their skills. The Writing Center became useful when completing their SRI research papers and graduate school essays. Lastly, CPD was helpful when preparing for graduate school interviews. This center provided scholars with the opportunity to meet one-on-one with a career coach to review their resumes and practice interviewing skills. One scholar stated:

I knew what the Career and Professional Development Center was and a little bit of what they did, but I never really had a reason to go until McNair. When I finally did, I met with a career coach, and they helped me craft my resume to fit the graduate programs I was interested in applying to. (Scholar #10)

### ***Expectations of the Program***

When talking with scholars about their experience it was important to know if they received everything from the program that they were expecting. Overall, the scholars'



expectations of what the McNair experience would be like were met and even exceeded for some. For many scholars because of these met expectations, they now feel prepared to pursue or continue through their graduate school journey. With the help of this program, graduate school no longer seemed like something that was unattainable. One scholar noted:

I feel like my expectations have been exceeded because for me it gave me the opportunity to do research and really prepare for grad school. For example, the GRE seemed really scary to me and they [McNair staff] helped me navigate that process, which I'm really appreciative of. I had known a few things since my mom attended grad school, but that was long ago and when talking with her the process has changed so much so McNair was more than helpful. (Scholar #4)

A grad scholar mentioned:

My expectations of the program have been exceeded even more than I thought they would be. I realized that an application process for an MPH [Master of Public Health] is so different from a PhD. I was so prepared for all of the things that I learned about for the PhD but an MPH, at least at this school is a little more relaxed. Now I know what to expect when I do go for that PhD. (Scholar #9)

Another grad scholar stated:

I would say that my expectations were met. McNair really helped me clearly define my goals long term and during the program I got the chance to actually sit down and really think about and plan out what it is I really wanted after college. (Scholar #10)

From the conversation about expectations, there were a few things that scholars didn't expect. One thing that some scholars weren't expecting was for McNair to change their career goals. Secondly, most scholars weren't expecting the realization that conducting research could

be enjoyable. Some envisioned research being conducted in labs wearing white coats, but McNair helped them realize that there's no one way to conduct research. One scholar had said:

McNair actually changed my goals from when initially started the program. They've been so helpful at giving me advice and just offering so much compassion. I wouldn't have even added a psychology minor if it wasn't for them helping me figure what it was I actually wanted. (Scholar #5)

A grad scholar noted:

McNair helped me realize that I didn't want to do anthropology and the thought of going to grad school for anthropology at the time was stressful. This led me to Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies. I didn't know it was possible to do research and go to grad school in this discipline. McNair helped me realize, "Oh I do enjoy doing research."

(Scholar #6)

## **After the McNair Experience and Beyond**

### ***Preparation and Personal Impact for Graduate School Journey***

One of the main objectives of the McNair Program is to prepare its' scholars to enroll in graduate school immediately after undergrad. During this study it was crucial to understand what discussion was being had to aid students in the preparation process. An interesting finding was that those who were first generation said that before McNair they weren't prepared at all for graduate school and now feel very prepared. Those who weren't first generation said that they had felt semi-prepared beforehand but weren't prepared for the financial aspect or how to find programs or faculty in those programs. Overall, all scholars now feel prepared for graduate school.

Scholars mentioned that they appreciated the workshops about the application process, finding the right program, and funding their graduate school education. Scholars were then asked, who or what had the most impact on their preparation. In terms of who, most scholars said that it was their faculty mentors as well as the McNair staff. There were a few scholars that mentioned their peers, who were already in similar programs of interest, were the most impactful because they provided a real-life perspective of what their programs were like. One scholar stated:

My faculty mentor has had the most impact on my preparation. He knows so much about the field, and he knows what I'm looking for in a program and in my grad school experience. Based on my decision he even knows certain faculty and grad students at these institutions to connect me to. (Scholar #3)

A grad scholar noted:

I really appreciate my faculty mentor. She really encouraged me to be honest with myself and think about how I'm feeling and about what I want out of my experience as a grad student. She really pushed me to do that self-reflection. (Scholar #10)

### ***Future Educational and Career Plans***

As mentioned earlier all scholars are in a range of disciplines and majors, therefore their educational and career plans are all different. All but one of the scholars who were completing their final year of undergrad said that they plan on enrolling in graduate school the following fall (fall 2022). One scholar mentioned that because of McNair she had found interest in a different field and had decided to add it as a minor but plans on enrolling in graduate school in the fall of 2023. All scholars mentioned that McNair helped them recognize the many possibilities of different schools and programs that they could apply to. Some of their lists included top schools

and programs like Columbia, Johns Hopkins, Brown, Stanford, George Washington, and many more. One scholar mentioned:

McNair really helped me see my own potential even when I didn't. It helped me realize "you know what, I'm pretty cool." I can and will apply to the ivy league schools. I might not get in but that's a once in a lifetime thing. The worst they could say is no. (Scholar #4)

While the McNair program was successful in preparing scholars for graduate school, COVID-19 had an impact on the plans and paths of those that already had their bachelor's degree at the time interviews were conducted. Of the five scholars with their bachelor's degree, four were currently enrolled in a master's program and plan on getting a PhD in the future but also saw the need to take time off in between for financial reasons. The one scholar who wasn't enrolled in a graduate program still plans on doing so but recognized that taking time off now was a better fit for them and their family due to COVID-19. Before the pandemic, all of the grad scholars planned on continuing through school until they reached the doctorate. Since the pandemic and being current graduate students in a pandemic, they all now see the need to make what they called "real money" rather than continuing straight through school. One scholar stated:

COVID has made things really hard, and people in my field are needed more than ever. After this program I really want to get out in the community and gain experience and make real money doing what I enjoy. During that I also want to improve my research and grant writing skills. Then I will go back to get either a PhD or DrPH. I'm not sure yet. (Scholar #9)

As stated earlier, one of the main objects of the McNair program is enrollment in graduate school immediately after undergrad. After talking to the McNair staff , the number of

scholars who went to graduate school right after undergrad was drastically impacted due to COVID. Before COVID (2018-2019 academic year), seven out of eighteen scholars (about 40%) enrolled in graduate school directly after undergrad. Once COVID came (2019-2020 academic year), only three out of seventeen scholars (about 18%) enrolled in graduate school the following academic year. When probing to find out if there was anything besides COVID that contributed to the drastic drop, many different factors were uncovered. One of the factors was that scholars are doing a lot in their senior year on top of trying to apply to graduate school including taking on full course loads and working multiple jobs. The second factor mentioned was that there are many steps to the application process depending on the discipline. The McNair staff explained that certain disciplines in graduate school want more than just a bachelor's degree and wanted some work experience in between. Lastly, it was stated that some students are just burned out.

This chapter identified how social capital is promoted in the McNair program at UNCG and the motivations that scholars have for attending graduate school. Scholars reported not having graduate school aspirations before joining the program nor clear career plans. Once joining the program scholars gained knowledge and access to campus resources as well as faculty and staff to support their success. It's clear that the program at UNCG promotes social capital for its' scholars and provides access and opportunity. It should be important to keep in mind that this study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic and the scholars' responses were impacted based on their pandemic experience.

## CHAPTER V: CONCLUSIONS

This section is organized into three major parts. First, the answers to both research questions will be addressed. Second, the significance of this study will be discussed along with the limitations. Last, recommendations for future research will be suggested.

The goal of this study was to answer the following questions:

1. How does the McNair program promote social capital at UNCG?
2. How does the exposure to social capital impact the motivation to attend graduate school?

To answer the first question, it was clear the McNair program promoted social capital for scholars in a variety of ways. It began by showing a lack of capital that the scholars had before joining the program. This included not knowing what graduate school was or how to complete the McNair application. The gain of social capital came during their time in the program through exposure to institutional agents and exposure to campus resources. Exposure to institutional agents included faculty mentors across campus and the McNair staff themselves. Scholars developed great relationships with their mentors which led to them being introduced to faculty in other departments as well as other campuses. It was clear that scholars finished the McNair program with a sizeable faculty network in their field. Exposure to campus resources included, an increased knowledge about the university's library and all that it entails to help them succeed as scholars and beyond undergraduate studies. This exposure also included resources like the campus Speaking and Writing Centers, as well as the Career Development Center. Had scholars not been in the McNair program, they probably wouldn't have known all of what each resource could do for them as students. The last section showed what capital had been gained and how it was being applied during their graduate school application and future career plans.

The second question sought to understand how this increased exposure impacted the motivation to attend graduate school. Exposure impacted motivations to attend graduate school in a positive way even given their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Being in McNair, scholars felt more prepared for graduate school than when they initially joined the program. This feeling of preparedness was attributed to the program as well as faculty mentors in their respective disciplines. It was also clear that long term most scholars want to earn a doctorate degree.

### **Significance and Limitations**

This study provides a unique perspective of impactful components of the McNair program that increase social capital for students from these marginalized backgrounds. This study adds to the literature specific student experiences that shed light on how social capital could be gained through tailored programming. According to the literature, FGLI and minority students have a difficult time getting to college as they are typically less academically prepared than their more affluent peers (Kezar et al. 2020; Kuh 2003). These students also have a difficult time persisting through college as they have lower retention rates and graduation rates than their more affluent peers (Engle 2007; Thayer 2000). Lastly, these students are less likely to enroll and complete graduate degrees (Gardner & Holley 2011; Renbarger & Beaujean 2020). The McNair program is a program that can help close the gaps between FGLI minorities and their more affluent peers.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education has had to shift and adapt to the needs of students and this study provides insight on what FGLI and minority students experienced during this time. The literature on the experiences of FGLI and minority students during COVID-19 is currently very limited and this study adds perspective of its impact. As seen in this

study, COVID-19 had a negative impact on the interpersonal relationships that scholars would build among each other. It's important that McNair programs find a way to provided interpersonal relationships for their scholars as it contributes to their involvement with the program.

As mentioned earlier, McNair programs across the country have the freedom to implement program objectives in their own way. The way in which program objectives are implemented at UNCG shows that the McNair program is successful in promoting social capital even during a pandemic. The results from this study could be beneficial for McNair programs and other college access initiatives in understanding the experiences of their students and how they impact career plans. The results could also be useful for universities on a larger scale to improve student success, enrollment, and retention efforts.

While this study provides helpful insight to the FGLI and minority student experience at UNCG, there are some limitations. There are currently 187 McNair programs across the country and each program at each institution has its' own uniqueness. The ten scholar experiences from UNCG for this study are not representative of the other estimated 5,000 scholars across the country. The program implementation of the McNair program at UNCG works because the implementation aligns with the overall university mission and goals. Therefore, program implementation at UNCG is also not generalizable to other programs at different institutions with different missions and goals. The McNair program at UNCG is currently in the process of ending its' first grant cycle. The program received the grant during the 2017-2018 academic year and therefore hasn't produced any scholars with a doctorate degree as of yet. It's important to note that most of this grant cycle was impacted by COVID-19. Given that McNair programs have



been around since the late 1980's, the UNCG McNair program hasn't existed long enough to know how impactful program implementation is long-term.

### **Recommendations for Future Research and Program Implementation**

There are many possible directions for future research based on the findings, significance, limitations, and existing literature of McNair programs. One of the first recommendations include the application process for scholars as they are trying to join the program. For students who are already marginalized in terms of access to things on college campuses, McNair programs need to recognize that something like an application process could be further marginalizing FGLI and minority students. Scholars in this study mentioned, not knowing what a personal statement was or who to go about receiving a letter of recommendation. They mentioned that the process was stressful and difficult. Thus, McNair programs either need to simplify the process or explain to scholars as they are applying what each document means.

It's also recommended that McNair programs continuously check in with scholars to ensure that not only their needs are being met but also there is some level of compassion and care for these scholars as people. Due to COVID-19, mental health has been significantly impacted. A few scholars from this study stated that they wished the program wasn't always so focused solely on academics. McNair programs including UNCG need to provide opportunities for scholars beyond academics to prevent burnout and increase connections among each other. Another recommendation discovered during this study, is for institutions with McNair Programs to prioritize staff stability. A few scholars stated the constant staff turnover in the program made it hard to build and maintain relationships they felt were important for graduate school preparation. McNair programs need to have stability in staffing to ensure successful completion of the McNair program and enrollment and persistence in graduate education.

Future research opportunities should consider more long-term studies as well as longitudinal studies. Long-term studies could focus on scholars after they've obtained doctorate degrees and understand how the McNair program impacted their journey. On the same note, longitudinal studies could examine the same group of scholars and follow their journey through their doctorate education. It is important to obtain an accurate picture of degree attainment for FGLI and minority students due to the constant barriers that they face. Qualitative data is important for understanding the lived experiences of these students, but quantitative data can provide insight about scholars on a national level.

Overall, this study provided the experiences of scholars during the pandemic and understood how the UNCG McNair program promoted social capital for them. The findings show that scholars gain an increase to faculty networks and campus resources during their time in the program. Programs like McNair are important for supporting the success of FGLI and minority students. The McNair program can have a tremendous impact on a student's educational journey. If policy makers and higher education institutions prioritize the success of FGLI and minority students, more McNair programs are necessary. This would increase the diversity among all doctoral degree recipients.

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## APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL – SENIOR SCHOLARS

1. Can you tell me about yourself? Where are you from? What's your major?  
What made you decide to attend UNCG?
2. Before you became a McNair Scholar, tell me about the goals you had as a student?
  - a. Had you considered going to graduate school? (if so) what program?
  - b. What were your expectations about graduate school?
  - c. What job did you want after graduating from undergrad?
3. What made you decide to apply to be a part of the McNair Program here at UNCG?
  - a. Applications process
  - b. Motivations
4. How would you describe your McNair experience up until this point?
  - a. What has been the most beneficial and how has it benefited you?
  - b. What has been the most challenging part of your McNair experience?
  - c. Pre-COVID experience vs post-COVID?
5. In what ways has the McNair Program increased your relationships with faculty and staff across campus?
  - a. Relationship with McNair staff?
6. In what ways has the McNair Program increased your knowledge about campus resources?
7. Thinking back to your goals prior to McNair, how has your McNair experience impacted your goals?
  - a. Have your expectations been met?

8. Before McNair, how prepared do you think you were for graduate school vs. now being a McNair scholar?
  - a. How much discussion about grad school has McNair provided?
  - b. Who or what had the most impact on your preparation for graduate school?
9. What are your current feelings and plans about attending graduate school?
  - a. If not planning on attending, then why?
  - b. When do you plan on attending?
  - c. How has McNair impacted these feelings or plans?
10. Now imagine that you get to sit down with the McNair staff and help make the program better to prepare students for graduate school. If you could make any recommendations to the McNair staff, what would you tell them?
11. Is there anything that we didn't cover or that you would like to share?

## APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL – GRAD SCHOLARS

1. Can you tell me about yourself? Where are you from? What your undergrad major was? What made you decide to attend UNCG?
2. Before you became a McNair Scholar, tell me about the goals you had as a student?
  - a. Had you considered going to graduate school? (if so) what program?
  - b. What were your expectations about graduate school?
  - c. What job did you want after graduating undergrad?
3. What made you decide to apply to be a part of the McNair Program here at UNCG?
  - a. Application process
  - b. Motivations
4. How would you describe your McNair experience?
  - a. What was the most beneficial and how did it benefit you?
  - b. What was the most challenging part of your McNair experience?
  - c. Pre-COVID experience vs post-COVID?
5. In what ways did the McNair Program increase your relationships with faculty and staff across campus?
  - a. Relationship with McNair staff?
6. In what ways did the McNair Program increase your knowledge about campus resources?
7. Thinking back to your goals prior to McNair, how did your McNair experience impact your goals?

- a. Were your expectations met?
8. Before McNair, how prepared do you think you were for graduate school vs. now being in graduate school?
  - a. How much discussion about grad school did McNair provide?
  - b. Who or what had the most impact on your preparation for graduate school?
9. What are your current feelings and plans about attending graduate school?
  - a. Where are you attending school & what program?
  - b. Long-term career goals?
  - c. If not attending school, then why?
  - d. When do you plan on attending?
  - e. How has McNair impacted these feelings or plans?
10. Now imagine that you get to sit down with the McNair staff and help make the program better to prepare students for graduate school. If you could make any recommendations to the McNair staff, what would you tell them?
11. Is there anything that we didn't cover or that you would like to share?

## APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL - STAFF

1. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself first? Your degrees & where you went to school? How you found your way working at UNCG?
2. What made you interested in becoming involved with TRIO Programs as a director, then receiving McNair, and what did you like most about your work?
  - a. What did you find most challenging about it?
  - b. How long have you been the director of this program?
3. How are McNair scholars at this institution recruited and selected?
  - a. In a normal year vs COVID?
4. What does the UNCG McNair experience look like? (also ask about her activities)
  - a. Timeline of scholar activities? What do scholars do and when?
    - i. Pre-COVID and how did scholar timeline change during COVID?
5. Through the McNair program at UNCG, in what ways are scholars exposed to faculty & staff across the institution?
6. In what other ways, if any have you had to change the McNair Program because of COVID?
  - a. Are there any adaptations during COVID that you are going to continue doing?
7. What kind of institutional resources are McNair scholars exposed to that other students on campus aren't?
8. As you are ending the first grant cycle what do you think has had the biggest impact on students across the years?

9. About how many of your students typically go straight to grad school right after undergrad?
  - a. For those that don't, what are some of the factors that cause them not to?
  
10. What kind of institutional support does McNair have at this University?
  - a. How is it perceived by others on campus? (Faculty, staff, and students)
  
11. Is there anything that we didn't cover or that you would like to share?