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Undergraduate Opportunity Spotlight

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Undergraduate Opportunity Spotlight *McNair Scholar's Program*

Jessica Neno

Dr. Ronald E. McNair, one of the astronauts who died in the *Challenger* explosion in 1986, was the second African-American to fly in space. In honor of Dr. McNair, the McNair Scholars Program was founded to prepare underrepresented groups to pursue doctoral degrees. It is designed specifically to help more low-income, first-generation college students, as well as minority students, enter doctoral programs, with the overall goal to diversify college faculty.

The University of Southern Mississippi is proud to host its branch of the McNair Scholars program. Susan Bourland, director of the program, and Fred Varnado, the academic coordinator, emphasize two aspects of the program: undergraduate research and graduate admissions preparation.

Each year, 20 McNair Scholars work with faculty mentors who advise them during the creation of a research paper, which students present at the national McNair conference. The scholars also receive intense preparation for the Graduate Record Exam (GRE), and develop a portfolio to present to admissions boards, all of which give McNair scholars the admissions edge.

Other benefits of the program include workshops (where students learn practical and scholarly skills) and financial support in the form of research stipends and GRE fee waivers.

Students interested in becoming a part of this opportunity must be either from a low-income family as well as be a first generation college student, or be from a minority group underrepresented in graduate programs. Other eligibility criteria include at least 60 credit hours and a 3.0 GPA. McNair scholars must be U.S. citizens or permanent residents, and are expected to stay in the program until graduation. Most importantly, scholars must be committed to completing the Ph.D. (Dr. McNair held a Ph.D. from M.I.T.)

The individual attention and intense preparation prove that the McNair scholar program will continue to be one of most unique undergraduate research programs and be a vital support system for students looking toward graduate education. 