McNair Scholar Program is path to success for first generation student

Senior Samantha Gonzalez studied public health programs during her semester in Brazil. Gonzalez credits the support and mentoring she received from Upward Bound and the McNair Scholars programs with helping her achieve her college degree.

Studying in Salvador, Brazil, last spring was a long way from San Antonio's Lee High School, but Trinity senior Samantha Gonzalez, the first in her family to attend college, felt right at home.

A product of Trinity's Upward Bound program in high school and a McNair Scholar, Gonzalez is a sociology major who spent the semester abroad learning about a public health program in Brazil. She worked alongside students from such institutions as Johns Hopkins, Tulane, Brandeis, and Smith College, all of whom competed for the intensive program and wrapped up the international experience by writing a 40-page research paper.

Gonzalez’s first exposure to public health issues took place during a McNair-sponsored summer research program in the health promotion and disease prevention department at the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio. There, she learned that health is more than a medical profile; it is also influenced by education, language, and other social factors. “I fell in love with this type of work and hope to further my education in this field,” she says.

After she graduates in May, Gonzalez plans to pursue a master's in public health, which will represent a “personal best” for her and a joyous moment for her family. “They are very proud of me and not only because I’m the first to graduate from college, but because I will be graduating from such a prestigious institution as Trinity. They always tell my younger cousins and my nieces to follow my lead because if I could do it, then they can, too!”

Gonzalez acknowledges the help she got along the way. Upward Bound staffers provided guidance on her college applications and admissions essays, and the program required Saturday classes, which instilled a work ethic that prepared her for Trinity's rigorous courses. She even got a “sneak peak” at a typical Trinity class by taking a writing workshop the summer before her first year.

McNair staffers have continued to nurture Gonzalez and her McNair cohort by offering academic and emotional support. Once, Teresa Morrison, the program’s assistant director, personally drove Gonzalez and two other Scholars to Fort Worth to visit graduate schools when scheduling conflicts arose.

When asked to advise other first-generation students, Gonzalez says the path to college isn’t easy, but it isn’t impossible, either. She urges talented high school students to take the initiative to find resources to help with the process. She said Upward Bound director Simone Carnegie-Diaz was vital in making sure she didn’t miss any of Trinity’s application deadlines.

Without the McNair program, Gonzalez says she “would have been so lost at Trinity. I wouldn’t have felt as assertive with what I wanted to do with my life, and I wouldn’t have met the amazing life-long friends or mentors. I am so thankful for both of the programs because they have helped mold me into the woman I am today.”

In 2012, the U.S. Department of Education renewed funding for both the Upward Bound program and a $220,000 five-year grant for the McNair Scholars program, which prepares first-generation, low-income, and underrepresented students for substantive research in order to pursue a doctorate. Since its inception at Trinity in 2007, the Ronald E. McNair Post-baccalaureate Achievement Program has assisted and mentored 69 Scholars. Upward Bound is now in its 34th year at Trinity, while the McNair program is entering its sixth year.

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