

Prison Study Unlocks New Doors

Among St. Norbert's four McNair scholars who presented their research to the campus community last month was Rachel Gintner '14, above. Gintner's work on prison narratives took her to the University of Illinois at Chicago this summer. She reflects on a research opportunity that brought new perspective in more ways than one – and on the McNair experience itself, a program that prepares underrepresented students for graduate work. [Dec. 3, 2013]

I shook hands and greeted my faculty mentor for the first time in the corner of a large room. The space, alarmingly empty at first, slowly filled with other students and faculty mingling.

Amidst our small talk and chatter, I discerned that my new mentor was exceptionally kind and thoughtful. Quick to point out the obvious, he took note that I was the only white woman in the room.

It is a moment I will likely never forget. I had never been the minority quite like this before. I've always lived where white people are the rule and not the exception, so my exposure to this magnitude of racial diversity was a first.

An eye-opening experience

My mentor and I soon discovered we had a lot in common in terms of our mutual interest in social justice and literature. Our future discussions about race and systems of privilege were made possible by a nine-week summer research stint through the McNair Scholars Program, of which I have been a part since my sophomore year at St. Norbert College.

The University of Illinois at Chicago hosts this intensive research program to benefit underrepresented minorities in higher education, as well as first-generation, low-income students like myself.

I came to the program without knowing a soul. Many students were Chicagoans while others came from further shores like Puerto Rico. A few were from families that had immigrated from Colombia, Peru or Eastern Europe.

They were as excited as I to be there, and admittedly just as perplexed why a white student qualified for a program that historically admits racial minorities. It turns out that, as my studies and discussions with faculty would reveal, class and race intersect on such a level that my peers and I face similar challenges when it comes to accessing graduate education. Even so, my mentor thought I may well have been the first white member of the program.

Before long, my roommates and fellow researchers became my friends. SROP (acronym for the summer research opportunities program and fondly pronounced “shrop”) became my summer family. For the first time, I formed relationships with African-Americans, African-American-Asians, Native Americans, Mexicans and Puerto Ricans – just to name a few. A number of our group were nontraditional students pursuing graduate study in their thirties and forties. A few identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual or queer. Needless to say, we were a dynamic bunch.

In their diversity, my peers taught me as much, if not more, than I learned studying on my own. They broadened my perspective in terms of not only culture but of the unique experiences they face, because of their race, in the United States. Exposure to this reality awakened me to the importance of programs like SROP that cross state lines, disciplines and, most important, pre-constructed racial divides.

Research realized

I am an English major and religious studies minor. With a broad background in the humanities, I decided to study race relations as they manifest in contemporary literature, a topic I had studied the summer before. A recent tour of Green Bay Correctional Institution through an honors tutorial only reinforced my passion in learning more about the impact of race relations on the criminal justice system.

My faculty mentor urged me to study memoir and social justice literature. I wrote my paper on a memoir by R. Dwayne Betts titled “A Question of Freedom,” a contemporary work written in 2009 to expose the ramifications of incarceration. Prison ultimately disenfranchises black juveniles and many others who are disproportionately arrested and imprisoned in the U.S.

I met weekly with a Ph.D. candidate to discuss my paper and research strategies. This relationship enlightened and challenged me, changing my paper radically over the summer. My graduate-student mentor brought much deeper insight and more nuanced perspective to my academic thinking, and to my career plans post-graduation.

This summer was an incredible blessing for a student preparing for graduate study.Studying and researching became my lifestyle and source of income for the summer. My SROP clan and the wondrous city of Chicago ensured for me an unforgettable experience. Stationed near the hustle and bustle of a downtown filled with spectacular music, art and cultural opportunities, I enjoyed all that city-life had to offer this small-town Wisconsin girl.

The McNair program in brief

The McNair Scholars program prepares students for doctoral studies through involvement in research and other scholarly activities. McNair participants have demonstrated strong academic potential and are also either first-generation college students with financial need or members of a group that is traditionally underrepresented in graduate education.

St. Norbert College, Lawrence University and Ripon College are partners under the TRIO McNair Scholars program, funded by the U.S. Department of Education.

Other St. Norbert students in Gintner’s cohort are Severina Scott ’14 (studying the Wisconsin Vice Committee investigations into alleged white slavery within the state in the early 1900s), Crystal Skenandore ’14 (interning at the Oneida Social Services Department) and Travis Feaker ’14 (investigating the synthesis of butanol for use as an alternative to gasoline).