

THE ACCIDENTAL PHD: MY JOURNEY FROM ENGINEERING TO HIGHER ED ADMINISTRATION

Samesha Barnes Ivey, Ph.D.

Director & Lecturer, UF Ronald E. McNair Scholars Program

Office of Undergraduate Affairs

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DOES ANYONE “ACCIDENTALLY” GET A PHD?



When I say *accidental* PhD, I didn't just trip one day and get up with a PhD, but I did have unexpected trip-ups in my life that launched my journey to the PhD and ultimately landed me in a career in Higher Ed Administration.

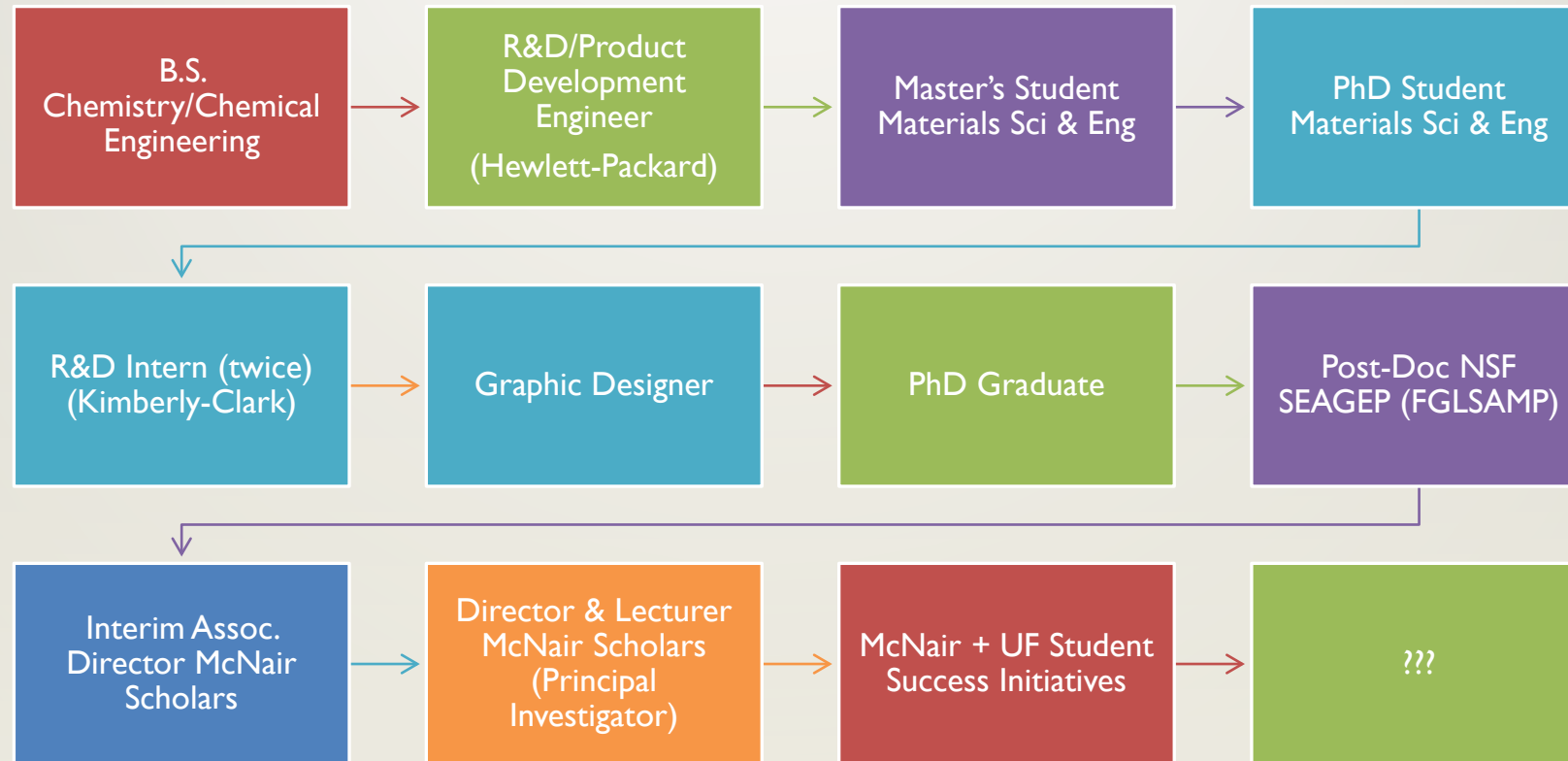
I didn't choose the PhD life. The PhD life chose me.

A LITTLE BACKGROUND

- Born and raised in Augusta, GA
- Youngest of 3 children and the only girl
- Mom describes me as a “busy body” that was always independent and wanted to do things on my own
- I was always singing and wanted to be a singer
- But, I LOVED math & science and decided to become an engineer



MY CAREER JOURNEY



THE RONALD E. MCNAIR SCHOLARS PROGRAM

Launching Exceptional Students Into Graduate Education

- Funded by a grant from the U.S. Dept. of Education
- One of several federal **TRIO programs**: Upward Bound, Educational Talent Search, Student Support Services
- Governed by the Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1965
- Part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society program to address lack of representation of underserved groups in higher education
- 1986 amendments to the HEA provided for the creation of the McNair program in honor of Dr. Ronald E. McNair
- 1st McNair programs established in 1989



THE RONALD E. MCNAIR SCHOLARS PROGRAM

Launching Exceptional Students Into Graduate Education

Prestigious & highly competitive national program

- 334 applicants in the 2017 competition
- UF is 1 of 187 McNair programs funded nationwide

Program Goals

- Increase the number of LIFG and underrepresented students pursuing research-based doctoral degrees, specifically Ph.D. or Ed.D.
- Encourage careers in research & teaching

UF McNair

- Established in 1995 --- 26 years strong!
- Funded to support 25 participants per year
- Housed in the Office of Undergraduate Affairs

MCNAIR PROGRAM BENEFITS

- Faculty-guided research experience
- Research stipend
- Preparation for GRE & graduate study
- Guidance through graduate school application process
- Multi-layered mentoring
- Academic counseling & educational planning
- Opportunities to attend professional conferences & visit prospective graduate schools
- Graduate school application fee waivers & funding opportunities
- Peer support
- Ongoing support and follow-up from McNair staff



MY JOB DESCRIPTION

- Recruit, supervise and mentor outstanding low-income/first-generation and underrepresented minority undergraduates
- Coordinate and implement workshops, trainings and other scholarly activities to prepare students to successfully pursue doctoral degrees
- Oversee day-to-day operations of the program and supervise and evaluate staff
- Recruit and supervise McNair Graduate Mentors
- Assess student and program performance, track success of alumni and prepare the annual performance report
- Promote the program to the university community and work with other academic units on projects pertaining to undergraduate research and graduate school preparation
- Manage the budget and draft proposals for funding
- Teach the Research Methods for McNair Scholars course
- **Other duties** within the Office of Undergraduate Affairs (30%)

WHAT I ACTUALLY DO



Professional Multitasker

- Coordinate activities & teach
- Meetings
- Put out fires
- Meetings
- Mentor, mother, big sister, confidant, counselor, life coach, cheerleader
- Meetings
- Respond to urgent requests
- Meetings
- Whatever is needed at the time

A MONTH IN THE LIFE



-
- Forward planning for McNair activities
 - Review and update materials for class
 - Review expenditures & reconcile budget
 - McNair staff meetings/individual meetings
 - Meet with/follow up with students
 - Troubleshoot any issues
 - Document all student contacts
 - Meet with McNair Directors/campus partners
 - McNair Association of Professionals meetings
 - Attend trainings and conferences
 - One-on-one with Associate Provost
 - OUA Directors meeting
 - UF Student Success leadership team meetings
 - Respond to peer tutoring help inquiries
 - Communicate with peer tutoring platform staff/peer tutoring update meetings
 - Assist with drafting UF Student Success announcements
 - Teach First Year Florida (Fall)
 - Invited talks/workshops
 - _____

PROS & CONS OF AN ADMINISTRATIVE ROLE

PROS

- Flexibility in the type of work you can do
- Not tied to a specific department
- Mobility & visibility
- Not concerned about tenure
- Get a holistic view of the university – connections across campus
- Can potentially teach, pursue grants, publish
- Satisfaction of making a difference

CONS

- May work longer hours & after hours
- The work that you do may not always be valued/respected compared to faculty
- Have to sell others on your ideas/programs
- Have to seek out ways maintain academic credentials, if desired
- Not eligible for tenure (job security)
- Will not make as much as your PhD classmates

A WORD OF CAUTION

- It is very easy to overextend yourself in this type of work
- Many of my colleagues don't follow 8 to 5 schedules
- Student activities may occur on evenings & weekends
- Working late can become a way of life because there is ALWAYS something to do
- You have to be intentional about self care and work-life balance or you will burn out
- Vacationing without being plugged into the office can be difficult
- Protect your peace & guard your time



MY APPROACH TO THIS WORK

I don't **have to**, but I **get to**...

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS: THINGS I'M PROUD OF

- Several McNair Scholars from my first cohort (2011) & beyond now have PhDs
- Helped to maintain funding for the UF McNair program (2012, 2017)
- Reviewer for the NSF Graduate Research Fellowship Program (2018, 2019)
- Co-chair for UF's inaugural Student Success Summit (2019)
- Helped to lead efforts for establishing free online peer-tutoring during COVID-19
- UF SISTUHS, Inc. Unsung Hero Award (2016)
- Lead 3 study abroad trips (Chile, China, Brazil) for UF PhD Students as a post-doc (2011)
- I **get to** make a difference!

SKILLS/QUALITIES THAT LEND THEMSELVES TO A CAREER IN HIGHER EDUCATION ADMINISTRATION

- Time management/prioritization
- Oral & written communication
- Program development/event planning
- Organization
- Teaching & presentation skills
- Evaluation/assessment skills
- Independence
- Enthusiasm
- Collaborative
- Relationship-building
- Wisdom
- Problem-solving
- Grant-writing
- Budgeting
- Visionary
- Adaptable (e.g. COVID-19)
- Open-minded
- **Student-centered**

STUDENT SUCCESS AT UF

is a *shared responsibility* where *all members of the UF community* inspire intellectual growth, engagement, holistic wellness, and a solution-focused disposition that catalyzes student persistence, timely graduation, and personal achievement for societal benefit.



Definition unveiled at UF's Inaugural Student Success
Summit – November 2019

THE STUDENT IS...

...THE MOST IMPORTANT PERSON ON THE CAMPUS.
WITHOUT STUDENTS THERE WOULD BE NO NEED FOR THE INSTITUTION.

...NOT A COLD ENROLLMENT STATISTIC, BUT A
F L E S H A N D B L O O D
HUMAN BEING WITH **FEELINGS** AND **EMOTIONS** LIKE OUR OWN.

...NOT SOMEONE TO BE **TOLERATED**
SO THAT WE CAN DO OUR THING.
THEY ARE OUR THING.

....NOT DEPENDENT ON US. RATHER,
WE ARE DEPENDENT ON THEM.

...NOT AN **INTERRUPTION** OF OUR WORK,
BUT THE PURPOSE OF IT.
WE ARE NOT DOING THEM A FAVOR BY SERVING **THEM**.
THEY ARE DOING **US** A FAVOR BY GIVING US THE
O P P O R T U N I T Y T O D O S O .

*From Dr. Angela Lindner
Associate Provost for
Undergraduate Affairs*



*My PhD may have felt like an accident,
but my success is by divine design.
All things work together for my good.*

THANK YOU!