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

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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 at math & science and decided to become an engineer
MY CAREER JOURNEY

B.S. Chemistry/Chemical Engineering

R&D/Product Development Engineer (Hewlett-Packard)

Master's Student Materials Sci & Eng

PhD Student Materials Sci & Eng

R&D Intern (twice) (Kimberly-Clark)

Graphic Designer

PhD Graduate

Post-Doc NSF SEAGEP (FGLSAMP)

Interim Assoc. Director McNair Scholars

Director & Lecturer McNair Scholars (Principal Investigator)

McNair + UF Student Success Initiatives

???
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
• 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

- 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 FLESH AND BLOOD 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 OPPORTUNITY TO DO SO.

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!