

Collaboration: Student Perspective

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On a fairly average day during my first semester of college, I found myself sitting in my introduction to criminal justice classroom before class trying to look as awake as my completely sleep deprived posture could manage. I was a typical freshman at the University of Northern Colorado, wanting to learn but wanting to find a way to do it passively. As class time neared, an unfamiliar academic entered the room. During his guest lecture, Dr. Woody explained his previous research and lit a fire of curiosity within me. Little did I know, that entirely impersonal introduction would have the second greatest impact of any single moment in my academic life.

Sometime during the second semester of my sophomore year, I made a personal decision to change my role in my college career from passive to active. I decided to actively pursue opportunities to maximize my educational investment. Sometime thereafter I received an email invitation to apply to become a member of the 2005-2006 cohort of the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program. The McNair scholars program is a federally funded program aimed at increasing the number of students from backgrounds that are typically underrepresented in graduate school by providing a structure for them to conduct original research with faculty mentorship. Without knowing anything about the program, I applied. That application would have the greatest impact of any single moment in my academic life.

During the course of the selection process, I steadily learned more about the McNair scholars program. By the time of the final interview, I knew that the program was my niche in academia. The opportunity to become an undergraduate researcher and producer of knowledge beckoned me though I knew next to nothing about what it would mean. As one of our first assignments in the program, my cohort and I were asked to select three potential mentors for our research. Most of my cohort had a fairly solid idea of what they wanted to study but were at a loss as to with whom they wanted to work. I, however, knew exactly with whom I wanted to work, but I had only a vague idea of what I wanted to study. During our preliminary conversation, Dr. Woody was very straightforward about how exactly

he saw our potential mentor-student relationship. On that first day, I had a very rough but surprisingly accurate understanding of how the next two years were to play out. The outline of our relationship was provided by the scholars program, but all of the details were left to my mentor and myself. Dr. Woody informed me that he would expect a situation very much like one found in a graduate program. He would be very available when needed, but the motivation would be entirely left up to me. He also informed me that he took revisions very seriously and would be likely to give a great deal of feedback on anything submitted to him.

As I mentioned, I was in a unique situation when compared to my fellow scholars. Most of them seemed to feel very strongly about a topic that they wanted to research. My specific topic came instead out of conversations with my mentor. I came to him as a fairly blank slate with a direction but nothing even resembling a course. After a very focused conversation, we were able to identify a specific question that fascinated me and that he believed could be completed in the span of the McNair program. We intended to examine how a group of mock jurors would react if they read a case summary in which the age and competency of the defendant were systematically manipulated as between-participants independent variables.

Following the McNair outline, the first step was a comprehensive review of the current literature on the topic. During one of our meetings, Dr. Woody walked me through the search for current literature and gave me a list of major names in the fields of juvenile defendants and the research that tried to determine how their age or other characteristics interacted with jurors' verdict and beliefs about defendants. From that information and preliminary list, I spent many a late night at the university library compiling an extensive stack of papers on everything from evaluating juvenile defendants' competencies to defendant-jury interaction. The process of reading the articles and compiling the information into a manageable entity was predominately mine. McNair made small assignments due weekly, so most of the early revision process included passing drafts back and forth with the McNair office, but the last few

were almost exclusively with Dr. Woody. As he had warned me, the drafts I sent Dr. Woody were always returned with almost more red than black ink. However, his suggestions tended to be just that—suggestions. He never wrote anything for me or reacted negatively when I did not take his advice on word choice or structure. This tended to work well for me as I thrive on feedback, but tend to be very opinionated in my writing style.

After completing the literature review, which would later become the first few pages of my research paper, the next assignment was to make the then theoretical construct of the research itself into something we could empirically study. Over the course of the next few weeks and after many office visits and emails, we decided on independent variables, a stimulus, and a population. Dr. Woody would tend to lead the conversations but was always ready to stop and explain or hear a counterpoint. The population was to be undergraduates at a regional university, and the stimulus was to be an amended version of one he had used in a previous study. He gave me a copy of the stimulus and questionnaire, as it appeared when he had previously used it. During the following week, I read over the materials and edited where I felt appropriate for our study with the Microsoft “Track Changes” function with which I had become so familiar. When I felt comfortable with the stimulus, I sent the file back to Dr. Woody for his approval.

The next step in our endeavor was to obtain approval for our project with the Institutional Review Board at UNC. The process was explained to me within the McNair program, and I had known for some time that this was something Dr. Woody would take particularly seriously. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at UNC knew his work and expected nothing but the best if it had his name on it. Consequently, he did most of the work on preparing the proposal, but he was careful to keep me involved. He sent the proposal to me for my approval and assembly before it was completed. Finally, though I am quite sure that he would have done it himself, he had me physically submit the proposal. This seemingly menial task, which quickly became a cross-campus treasure hunt, gave me the basic knowledge of where such papers were reviewed, knowledge that escapes most other undergraduates but which faculty can take for granted. After several weeks, our project was approved and the game began.

With our project officially in motion, Dr. Woody and I began data collection. In yet another series of meetings in his office, we formalized our strategy. The responsibility for collecting the data would be placed squarely on my shoulders, but I was prepared,

having received a great amount of advice. In the subsequent meetings we discussed everything from professors who had been receptive to providing class time for data collection to a demonstration of how to walk around a classroom while the participants were working through the stimulus. He shared his own tips and tricks and even offered to allow me to use a lecture from him as a bargaining chip when talking with the professors. Three professors were kind enough to offer me their students as participants as approved by the IRB. The week before data collection, I sat in Dr. Woody’s office for one last go-over of the procedure and a pep talk. The following week I entered each classroom with my own self confidence, his confidence in me, and his personal phone number in case the unthinkable should happen. I do not remember ever using the number, but it was comforting to have this recourse.

The end of data collection ushered in the onerous task of data entry. Gathered around the warm glow of the flat screen monitor, Dr. Woody walked me through the Excel spreadsheet and codebook he had prepared for our data and wished me well. The next few weeks left me skilled in the operation of the oft-ignored numeric keypad on the right side of every keyboard, a skill I had never had the time or inclination to practice before.

After all of the data had been entered, the next step was to try to make some sense out of it all. It was now summer and Dr. Woody had become much more difficult to access than previously because of his wedding. He had warned me long before that he would be hard to reach at times over the summer, a courtesy not all of my McNair colleagues were afforded by their mentors. In the interests of keeping with my deadlines in the McNair program, I spoke with the program’s staff statistician. She helped me run the statistics that I had originally intended, but she expressed her disagreement with the methodological design. She felt that our tests would be inappropriate for the data. She was kind enough to take the time to help me find what she believed to be a more accurate test.

When Dr. Woody returned from his wedding, he and I met to discuss the statistics. I had emailed him with weekly (or so) updates of what I had been doing. I showed him the analysis that I had run with the McNair statistician, both the original and the new ones. Dr. Woody seemed slightly put off by my newfound doubt in our methodological design, but he took the time to show me exactly what she was talking about and how it really would not make much of a difference for our particular project. He then explained that the statistics that the statistician was suggesting were different from those that would be expected at a psychology conference. He showed me

the expectations of our field and helped me understand how and why to “speak their language.”

After two or three meetings with Dr. Woody to analyze our data and the several hours I spent in the statistics lab, we were ready to start writing the paper. Oddly enough, writing the paper was the part of research I entered with the most personal confidence and yet, the part with which I needed the most help. I knew the project inside and out by this time, but I did not understand my audience as well as I could have hoped. As the McNair program instructed us, I took the literature review and research proposal that I had already written as my starting block. I worked my way through the methodology, discussion and conclusion, but I had no idea how to even attempt the results section. I sent my very rough draft to Dr. Woody and the McNair assistant director in order to get as much feedback as possible in the shortest amount of time as it was already halfway through the summer. I got the draft from the program staff first, and it was very focused upon the mechanics of the paper. By the time I made those corrections, I had received the draft from Dr. Woody. His corrections covered the mechanics of the paper as well as the bigger picture. He also made suggestions about wording and terminology that were specific to our discipline. After we had made headway on the rest of the paper, we met to discuss the results section. Dr. Woody talked me through the essentials of what should be covered and what a results section actually is. After I was fairly comfortable with it, he sent me home with a few examples from his previous papers. My second draft was still extremely rough, but with subsequent revisions (entirely between Dr. Woody and myself) we were able to smooth the edges into something very effective. Upon its completion, the project was submitted to the UNC McNair Research Journal.

Over the course of the McNair program, the project was presented three times, twice at undergraduate conferences and once at a regional professional conference. Dr. Woody’s support played a huge role for each presentation. For the poster presentation, not only did he review the poster itself, but I remember coming into his office just to talk about the project in general so that I could feel like I had a better grasp on the research area as a whole.

One of the presentations took place on campus and Dr. Woody was able to attend. I had not expected to see him there but it was quite the pleasant surprise. I still remember the pep talk he gave me before my presentation. His confidence gave me that last little bit that I needed. In spite of this support, I honestly felt that it was the worst presentation I had ever given. The week leading up to the symposium had been particularly busy and as such I had approached

the day lacking significantly in preparation for the specific presentation. Also, after having explained my research to friends and family a mere thousand times beforehand, I had become quite proficient at explaining the bare essentials of the study in a very short time. The symposium itinerary gave each student fifteen minutes to present and the subsequent five minutes for questions. When my turn came, I stepped to the front of the room and began the recitation of my presentation. I remember wondering if I was moving too quickly through my slides, but I did not want to slow down too much for fear that I would go over my time. At the end, I realized that between the accelerated pace of speech from my under preparation and my expertise in summarizing, I had managed to leave myself a full ten minutes for questions. The audience was kind enough to invent questions to fill the time, but I knew I had delivered my personal worst presentation. Even so, Dr. Woody remained positive and without lying to me, he kept me positive and left me simply wanting to be sure to become more comfortable estimating fifteen minutes without a clock by over-practicing my presentation next time. I had my chance the following spring while preparing to present at the 2007 Rocky Mountain Psychological Association conference in Denver where I delivered what I consider to be my single best research presentation to date.

Over the course of this student/mentor relationship several effective practices became apparent to me. First, I believe that the fact that the drive to conduct undergraduate research was birthed within myself created an internal locus of motivation. My mentoring relationship with Dr. Woody began with my taking an active role in the research and established a theme for the duration. Also, when I approached Dr. Woody, our initial meeting included the establishment of a series of expectations that he had for the relationship. These expectations included whether or not he expected complete creative control, how involved he intended to be, who the principal researcher would be, what he expected from me and how the project would be submitted for publication. I was also encouraged to express my own expectations. McNair had done a great job priming my cohort to consider our expectations, but this did not preclude a moderate level of difficulty when identifying them.

Finally, we developed an outline/timeline for the project. McNair gave Dr. Woody and I a fairly extensive and specific timeline for the major steps of the project, specifically, a review of current literature, a formal literature review, a research proposal, an IRB proposal, the development of the methodology, data collection, data entry and analysis, and that period where one tries to make sense out of it all. However, we were still left with a great deal of

autonomy regarding the smaller steps in between. Every step of my specific research followed a rather specific formula that seemed to be particularly effective. Each step began with my reading the McNair outline/timeline to determine what the next step was to be. It was helpful for me that Dr. Woody was aware of the steps required so that he also knew what was coming up, but I do not remember a time when he ever had to remind me to get started on something that I had forgotten. The next step was always to email Dr. Woody to set up an appointment to meet with him and discuss what needed to be done. It was in these meetings that Dr. Woody would explain the procedure and make the step practical. He would also take these meetings to explain the more theoretical constructs of the steps and their place in the big picture. The next step would be for me to actually do whatever it was that needed to be done. I would then take the product of my labors to Dr. Woody for his review. As necessary, he would revise my work or redirect my efforts. This exchange would continue until we were both satisfied with the product. My satisfaction did seem to take precedence, but my mentor was always there to ensure that we had a quality product.

Our arrangement had only one major drawback, and it was the turn-around time. Like every college student, I frequently had many academic and personal projects on my plate at any one time. On two separate occasions I had to ask the McNair office for an extension on a deadline because I had taken too long writing a portion of the paper and had not given Dr. Woody enough time to look over it. He did

the best his busy schedule could permit him to do to hurry the papers back to me. Since the deadlines for the McNair program were my responsibility, he left the bulk of the responsibility for making those time lines on my shoulders. Happily, the McNair office was particularly understanding both times.

My experiences with Dr. Woody have certainly shaped my academic career. With his guidance and challenging, I have changed from a passive undergraduate to one that is much more actively involved in choosing his own future. I now have a real love for research that had been stifled by problematic experiences in classrooms before McNair. These classroom experiences lacked the one-on-one direction that was tailored to a specific research discipline and the project at hand. We were able to delve much deeper and complete much better research than is possible in a one-semester research methods class of thirty-odd students. His willingness to explain and really show me the “ins and outs” of research gave me a feeling of ownership in the process that was incredibly helpful in fielding questions and preparing presentations. I felt as though I had real creative control of the research, whether or not I truly did. What my mentor would have done if I had been particularly attached to what he had seen as a bad idea is unknown, but his confidence in my intellect spurred me on. I am exceedingly grateful for this mentoring relationship that has been so pivotal in bringing me to where I am today.