

THE PHASE

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The Our Lady of the Lake University McNair Scholars Program Newsletter



Writing Retreat



Financial Literacy



Academic Enrichment



Graduate School Prep

A MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

By: Director Dr. Jessica M. Quintero

From student loan reform to academic freedom, to the national debate on the value of an advanced degree, the attacks on higher education are causing some to wonder if this is the right time to pursue a graduate education.

The challenges we face today are not unprecedented, but they demand the same response that has served us well throughout history: unwavering commitment to learning, research, and the pursuit of truth. By choosing to persist in your graduate studies or mentor those in pursuit of an advanced degree despite current obstacles, you're not just investing in your own future, you're participating in progress that has consistently moved our society toward greater understanding, innovation, and equity.

Do not be deterred. Now more than ever, society needs a morally educated populace that can contribute to the production of knowledge and economic and social prosperity.

Is this the right time to pursue a graduate education? Yes! Stay engaged, persist, finish. We believe in you, you inspire us, and you've got this.

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SCHOLAR NEWS

SRI 26 Highlights

The **Spring 2026 Scholar Session** launched the academic year by providing incoming scholars with a strong foundation for personal, academic, and professional success! Throughout the session, scholars engaged in a variety of activities designed to promote self-awareness, goal setting, and academic planning. They were introduced to scholarship tracking systems and learned strategies for monitoring application requirements, deadlines, and funding opportunities. Scholars also explored the concept of educational identity, reflecting on their personal experiences, values, strengths, and aspirations as students. Through guided discussions and self-reflection exercises, scholars examined how their backgrounds and motivations influence their educational journeys. A key component of the session focused on helping scholars synthesize their personal experiences, goals, and passions into meaningful mission statements. This process encouraged participants to articulate a clear sense of purpose and establish a framework for future academic and career decision-making. The session concluded with scholars developing SMART goals for the Spring 2026 semester. By creating actionable plans and identifying strategies for success, they were able to leave the session equipped with the tools, confidence, and direction needed to achieve their academic objectives and maximize their potential throughout the semester.



In observance of TRIO Day of Service, scholars volunteered with Habitat for Humanity San Antonio



where they actively contributed to community development while strengthening essential leadership and professional skills. Throughout the service experience, scholars practiced a growth mindset by embracing new challenges, developed active listening skills through collaboration, and exercised situational leadership by adapting to changing tasks and supporting team goals. TRIO Day of Service is an annual national initiative that encourages students and staff from TRIO programs to give back to their communities while

promoting awareness of the educational opportunities and support services available to low-income, first-generation college students to achieve academic success while becoming engaged and compassionate leaders within their communities.

SCHOLAR NEWS

Undergraduate Research Week

Undergraduate Research Week 2026 celebrated the accomplishments and scholarly contributions of undergraduate researchers across the nation. Observed annually during the third week of April, Undergraduate Research Week highlights the importance of undergraduate research through a variety of events, including research symposiums, poster presentations, networking opportunities, professional development workshops, and panel discussions.

As part of Undergraduate Research Week 2026, McNair Scholars attended the panel discussion, "From First-Gen to Ph.D.: Navigating the Hidden Curriculum."

The event featured an inspiring conversation with McNair alumni who shared their journeys from first-generation college students to successful doctoral graduates and professionals. The discussion centered on four key pillars designed to prepare scholars for graduate education and beyond. Panelists offered practical guidance on navigating the transition from being an OLLU McNair Scholar to pursuing a doctoral degree, overcoming the often-unspoken challenges of graduate school, building strong academic and professional networks, and balancing family and community expectations while pursuing advanced education. They also shared strategies for helping family members better understand the demands and experiences of doctoral study. The distinguished panel included Dr. James Hernandez, Founder and CEO of Paragon Praxis Education Consulting; Dr. Ramiro Ramirez, SABER and IRACDA Postdoctoral Fellow at UT Health San Antonio; Dr. Eden Robles, Assistant Professor of Social Work at Our Lady of the Lake University; and Dr. Julieta Rubio Hobbs, Founder and Clinical Supervisor of Lavanda Wellness, PLLC. Through their personal stories and professional insights the panelists



SCHOLAR NEWS

Undergraduate Research Week

In honor of Undergraduate Research Week, each SAM institution (UT San Antonio, Trinity University, St. Mary's University, and OLLU) selected two scholars to present their research at the San Antonio McNair (SAM) Poster Session. Seniors Alessandra Orosco and Darianna Carrillo were selected to represent OLLU. They presented their work to other undergraduate researchers and faculty judges.



This year, Clarissa Vega, Director of Strategic Initiatives & Government Affairs, collaborated with the McNair Scholars Program to welcome guest speaker Senator José Menéndez. The event provided scholars with a unique opportunity to hear directly from a state leader about the importance of civic engagement, higher education, and public service. When asked on the importance of the Senators involvement, Vega shared, “It’s important for our state

senator to be actively involved with our students and campus community because his engagement helps ensure that the needs, challenges, and successes of our students are adequately represented at the state level. A state senator plays a key role in shaping policies and funding decisions that directly impact higher education, including financial aid, workforce development programs, campus infrastructure, mental health services, and student support resources.” Connecting students, faculty, and staff with state representative is imperative for higher education and advocacy. “By connecting with students, faculty, and staff, the senator gains firsthand insight into the issues affecting our campus and can advocate more effectively for solutions. Their involvement also creates valuable opportunities for students to learn about government, civic engagement, and public service,” shared Vega. “Through campus visits, discussions, and partnerships, students can share their perspectives, ask questions, and better understand how state decisions affect their education and future careers. Additionally, a strong relationship between the senator and our campus can lead to increased visibility, collaborative initiatives, and potential state support for programs that benefit both students and the broader community.”

SCHOLAR NEWS

Research

Karis Alcoser, Environmental Science & Sustainability Major

Research Title: Nutrient Retention and Yield Efficiency in Hydroponic Systems

This research proposal focuses on nutrient retention and yield efficiency in hydroponic systems using basil as the primary crop. While hydroponics is often described as an efficient method of food production, it is not always clear how effectively these systems use the nutrients they are given. This study will use a controlled hydroponic system alongside Texas FAST Garden



beds to model differences between controlled and traditional growing conditions. Data collection will focus on nutrient use and yield over a growing cycle. If needed, a supplemental dataset may be used to support analysis in cases where plant performance or data collection is limited. Overall, this project aims to better understand how nutrient efficiency varies across systems.



Clarissa Briones, Communication Science & Disorders Major

Research Title: How the Environment Impacts Maternal Language

Early childhood language development is strongly influenced by the quality of caregiver strategies and interactions. Maternal linguistic input, including vocabulary diversity, sentence complexity, and conversational style, plays a critical role in shaping children's expressive This study examines how

maternal linguistic input varies across different environmental settings and activities. Specifically, the study compares interactions within a mother-child dyad across conditions: outdoor versus indoor environments, traditional versus electronic toys, and print books versus electronic books, and how these variables affect maternal language. Maternal language will be analyzed using measures such as the number of different words, the mean length of utterance, the frequency of open-ended questions, and instances of joint attention. It is hypothesized that outdoor environments, traditional toys, and print books will promote more diverse vocabulary, longer utterances, and greater conversational engagement compared with indoor settings, electronic toys, and e-books. Findings from this study will hopefully contribute to a better understanding of how everyday environments and materials can influence language development and may encourage strategies for supporting early communication skills in young children.

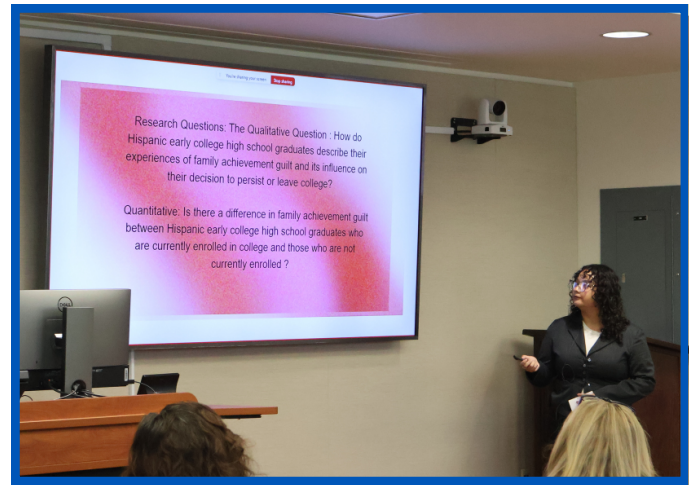
SCHOLAR NEWS

Research

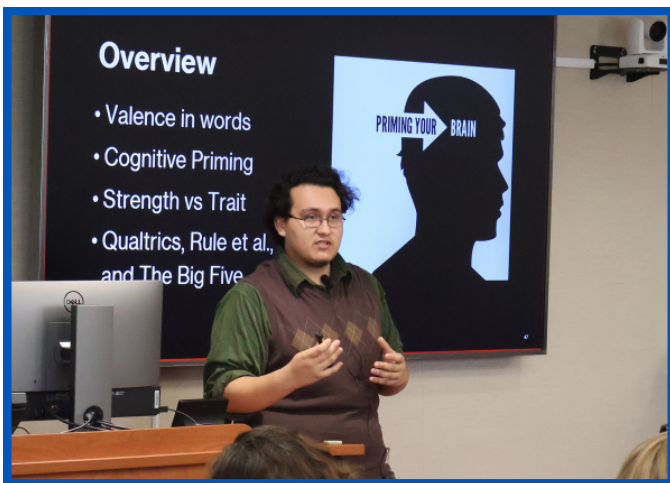
Jacqueline Gloria, Social Work Major

Research Title: Family Achievement Guilt and Bachelor's Completion among Hispanic Early College High School Students

This study examines the role of family achievement guilt in influencing bachelor's degree completion among Hispanic Early College High School (ECHS) graduates. Early College High School programs are designed to increase access to higher education for underrepresented students such as first-



generation and low-income students. Even though the goal is to enroll their students in a 4-year program, not all participants persist to complete four-year degrees. Hispanic students often navigate strong cultural values such as Familismo, which emphasizes family loyalty over oneself. These values can contribute to family achievement guilt, where students feel conflicted about having opportunities their families did not have or feeling guilty for pursuing a higher education. Using a mixed-methods approach, this study explores both the measurable differences in guilt and students' lived experiences to better understand how cultural and emotional factors impact college persistence.



Emilio Gutierrez, Psychology (Pre-Counseling)

Research Title: Self Exploration and Creative Projection

In psychology, priming is a technique in which the introduction of one stimulus influences how people respond to a subsequent stimulus. Valence in psychology refers to the intrinsic attractiveness or aversiveness of an event, object, or situation, determining whether it elicits positive or negative emotional responses - which has shown to be more

powerful than basic priming. By utilizing these two tools, I constructed a self-assessment survey, priming one group to be more positive, and the other to be more negative according to hypothetical valence associated with the words "strength" and "trait". Participants will then take part in a creative segment, to record if the positive priming strength was powerful enough to persevere throughout the survey.

SCHOLAR NEWS

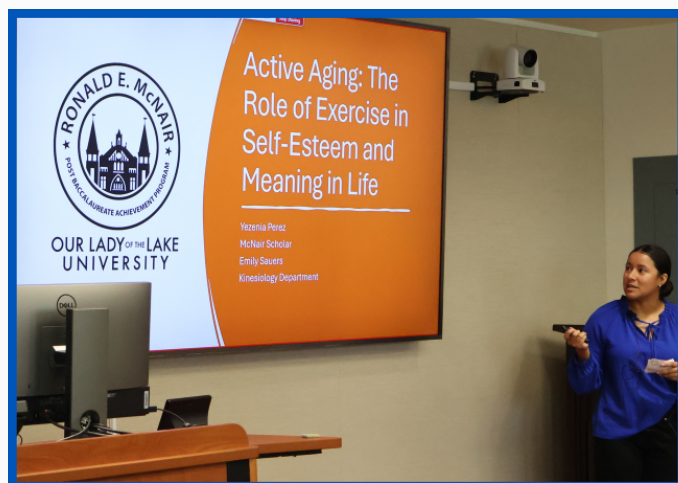
Research

Larissa Ortega, Psychology Major

Research Title: Parental Perceptions of Social Media Engagement and Mental Health in Adolescents

This study explores how parents perceive the impact of social media on the mental health of adolescents ages 12 to 15. As social media becomes a daily part of adolescent life, concerns about its effects on anxiety, self-esteem, and overall mental health continue to grow. While most research

focuses on adolescents' perspectives, this study highlights the often-overlooked viewpoint of parents. Using a mixed-methods approach, participants complete a questionnaire followed by an interview to provide both measurable patterns and in-depth insights. The findings aim to better understand how parents interpret emotional and behavioral changes and how their monitoring practices may influence outcomes, ultimately supporting healthier social media use among adolescents.



Yezenia Perez, Kinesiology Major

Research Title: Active Aging: The Role of Exercise Frequency in Self-Esteem and Meaning in Life

Physical activity has been shown to positively impact overall health and well-being. There is not enough research on its effects on the well-being of the older adult population. This study will investigate the frequency of exercise and its effects on well-being, specifically the meaning of life and self-esteem, among older adults. In this research,

data will be collected through outreach to the older population, who will complete a survey, provide a short medical history, and participate in a hand grip test. The survey will include questions focusing on self-importance, self-esteem, and wellbeing. The results of this study will pave the way for educating and providing insight for further research on how much exercise is needed to achieve positive results in the well-being of older adults.

SCHOLAR NEWS

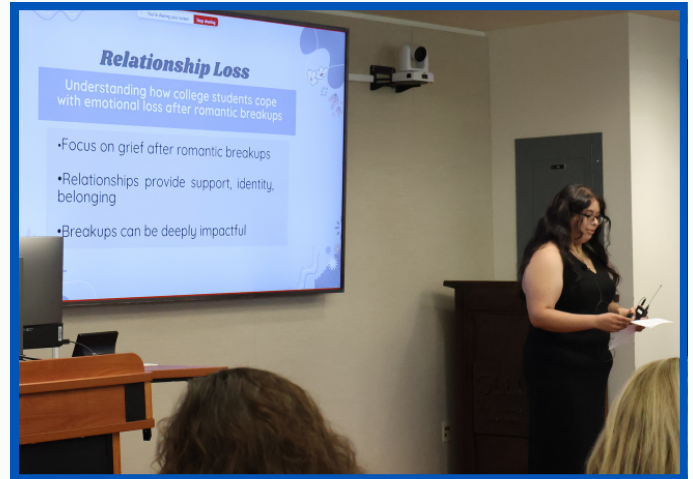
Research

Star Sanchez, Psychology & Social Work Major

Research Title: Grieving the Loss of a Meaningful Relationship Ambiguous Loss, Attachment Styles & Emotional Regulation Among College Students

This presentation looks at the emotional effects of romantic relationship breakups among college students, focusing on ambiguous loss. Ambiguous loss happens when someone is physically present but not part of a person's daily life anymore. This

situation often leads to limited closure and complicated feelings. The study investigates how attachment styles and the ability to manage emotions affect the level of grief after a breakup. Data were gathered through an anonymous survey of university students and analyzed to find connections between challenges in emotional regulation and the intensity of grief. The findings show that lower emotional regulation relates to higher levels of grief. This highlights the need for more emotional support for students dealing with relationship loss.



Sofia Santacruz, Psychology Major

Research Title: Food Insecurity & Body Image in Hispanic/Latina College Women

This presentation looks at how food insecurity connects to body image among Hispanic/Latina college women. It focuses on understanding real experiences, especially how cultural and family comments about weight or appearance shape how women see themselves. Food insecurity is common for college students and is linked to stress and

mental health, while body image is influenced by culture and everyday life. The study uses interviews with Hispanic/Latina students who have experienced food insecurity to hear their stories in their own words. Overall, the goal is to better understand these experiences and help improve support for students dealing with both food access and body image challenges.

SCHOLAR NEWS

Graduation



Catherine Blood, B.S. in Biology

While in the program, Catherine served as PI for her study, “The Investigation of the Differences in Antibacterial Activity and Chemical Analysis of Stems, Leaves and Roots of Ambrosia Trifida Against Escherichia Coli and Staphylococcus Epidermidis.” Her work was accepted for presentation at Baylor’s National McNair Scholars Research Conference, UT San Antonio’s Summer Research Conference, and the 2026 Sigma Zeta National Convention.

She plans to conduct clinical research and apply to PA programs at UThealth, Baylor Scott and White Health.



Darianna Carrillo, BA in Psychology with a Pre-Counseling Focus

While in the program, Darianna served as PI for her study, “Balancing Dreams: The Struggles of Latinx University Students.” Her work was accepted for presentation at the UT San Antonio Summer Undergraduate Research Conference, Baylor’s National McNair Scholars Research Conference, and the New Mexico McNair Scholars Research Conference.

She will be attending Eastern Michigan University to pursue a Master of Science in Clinical Behavioral Psychology.

SCHOLAR NEWS

Graduation



Steven James Engbrecht Jr., B.A. in History

While in the program, Steven served as PI for his study, "Queer Alamo City: Health and Community Building in San Antonio, TX, 1980-2000." His work was accepted for presentation at the UT San Antonio Undergraduate Research Conference, and the Baylor National McNair Scholars Research Conference.

He will be attending the University of Texas at El Paso to obtain a Master of Arts in History.



Khristian Harden B.A. in Psychology & Counseling

While in the program, Khristian served as PI for her study, "Self-Esteem. It's in my Genes." Her work was accepted for presentation at UT San Antonio's Summer Undergraduate Research Conference, and Baylor's National McNair Scholars Research Conference.

She will be taking a short break before going into a PhD program for Marriage and Family Therapy.



Annika Litterio B.A. in Psychology & Minor in Math

While in the program, Annika served as PI for her study, "The Mental Effects of Injury on College Athletics." Her work was accepted for presentation at UT San Antonio's Summer Undergraduate Research Conference, and Baylor's National McNair Scholars Research Conference. She also competed in the inaugural Undergraduate Three-Minute Thesis (3MT) at OLLU.

She plans to attend OLLU's Master of Arts in counseling and be a graduate assistant with the OLLU softball team.

SCHOLAR NEWS

Graduation



Alessandra Orosco B.A. in Communication Sciences & Disorders and B.A. in Psychology

While in the program, Alessandra served as PI for her study, "Exploring Teacher Perceptions of Students Receiving Speech Services in Rural, Low-Socioeconomic School Districts." Her work was accepted for presentation at UT San Antonio's Summer Undergraduate Research Conference, Baylor's National McNair Scholars Research Conference, the 2026 San Antonio McNair Undergraduate Research Conference, and the 2026 Texas Speech-Language-Hearing Association Convention where she received an award for "Best Student Poster."

She plans to attend graduate school in Fall 2026 to pursue her Master of Science in Speech-Language Pathology at Abilene Christian University.



Princess Pompa B.A. in Criminology & Political Science

While in the program, Princess served as PI for her study, "Declining Democracy within the United States." Her work was accepted for presentation at UT San Antonio's Summer Undergraduate Research Conference, Baylor's National McNair Scholars Research Conference, and the University of New Mexico McNair Scholars Research Conference.

She plans to study for the GRE and apply to graduate schools that resonate most with her academic goals.



Charlyne Reyes B.A. in Criminology and Political Science

While in the program, Charlyne served as PI for her study, "Difficulties Latinos Face When Entering College and University." Her work was accepted for presentation at UT San Antonio's Summer Undergraduate Research Conference, and Baylor's National McNair Scholars Research Conference.

She plans to work in juvenile probation, focus on graduate school applications, and serve at church.

ALUMNI NEWS

Career Acclamation

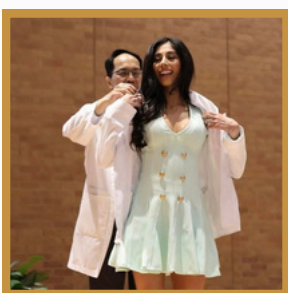


Pictured on the right: Abby Jimenez

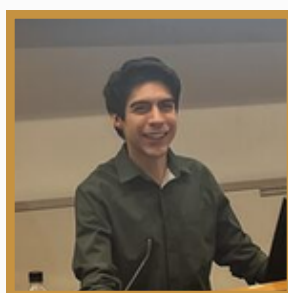
Congratulations to Abigail Jimenez, OLLU c/o 25, on receiving full funding for her 2nd year at UT Austin. Abby Jimenez is a McNair alumna and second-year MSSLHS graduate student at the University of Texas at Austin studying speech-language pathology. Her experience as a McNair scholar helped prepare her for the academic rigor of graduate school. Currently, she is a Project ACCESS scholar and is completing training on how to address barriers faced by children with disabilities with high support needs. She has completed pediatric and adult experiences at the UT Speech and Hearing Center, gaining experience in a variety of treatment areas. She will be completing her final externship placements at St. David's Hospital in the acute care setting and Baylor Scott and White in the pediatric outpatient setting. Overall, she has loved the challenging environment of graduate school and having the opportunity to grow along with her clients.



Congratulations to Kelly Salinas, OLLU c/o 23, on completing her Graduate Certificate in Biomedical Sciences from Burrell College of Health and receiving her traditional white coat. Beginning undergraduate studies at Our Lady of the Lake University opened numerous opportunities for Salinas. Through participation in the McNair Scholars Program, Salinas secured an undergraduate research opportunity with UT Health San Antonio. After earning a Bachelor of Science in Chemical Biology with a minor in Mathematics, Salinas continued her education in the UT Health Science Center San Antonio Post-Baccalaureate Program, where she further continued her research and healthcare work. During the rigorous program, Salinas co-authored two research publications, prepared for the MCAT, and developed meaningful professional relationships with faculty and physicians.



Congratulations to Jacqueline Padilla, OLLU c/o 23, on earning her White Coat from the Doctorate of Physical Therapy Program at UT Health San Antonio. Having successfully completed all program course requirements, Jackie will now enter her final year of the program where she will conduct 34 weeks of full-time clinical rotations. Jackie has really enjoyed the experience and is looking forward to serving her community.



Congratulations to Dr. Kevin O. Rodriguez for completing the Post-Doctoral Fellowship Program at Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center Paul L. Foster School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry.

ALUMNI NEWS

Graduation

Congratulations to Our Alumni Graduates!

MATTHEW HERNANDEZ, C/O 2023,



received his Master of Business Administration (MBA) and a Graduate Certificate in Business Essentials for Healthcare Professionals from Our

Lady of the Lake University.

ROGER SALAS, C/O 2024,

received his Master of Science in Cybersecurity Management from Our Lady of the Lake University. Roger is currently pursuing a fully funded Ph.D. at Northeastern University.



DAVID GARCIA, C/O 2021



graduated Fall 2024 and walked the stage May 2025 obtaining his M.S. in Information Studies from UT Austin's iSchool. He studied UX

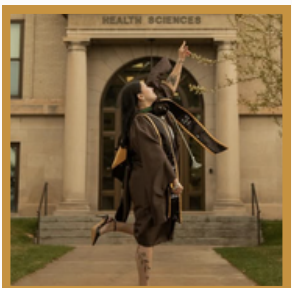
(user experience) with a final capstone project focused in cyber security.

MONZERRATH ROHER, C/O 2022

received her Master of Arts in School Psychology from The University of Texas Rio Grand Valley in Spring 2026.



ANGELIQUE LUNA, C/O 2023



received her Master of Science in Kinesiology and Health from the University of Wyoming. Angelique will be starting her Ph.D. at the University of Houston in Fall 2027.

MARCUS ANTU, OLLU C/O 2023

received his M.A. in Psychology from The University of Missouri-Columbia. Antu will remain at the University of Missouri to continue onto his Ph.D. where upon completion he plans to remain in academia as a professor of psychology, both teaching and conducting research.



ALUMNI NEWS

Graduation

Ph.inisheD It!

A huge congratulations to Dr. Gutierrez and Dr. Kirksey for earning a terminal degree in their respective fields. This monumental accomplishment reminds us that TRIO Works!



Dr. Genoveve Gloria Gutierrez, OLLU c/o '20, graduated from The University of New Mexico obtaining a Ph.D. in Analytical Chemistry.

Dr. Jessica Kirksey, OLLU c/o '18, graduated from Palo Alto University obtaining her Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology.



ALUMNI NEWS

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