

CREATIVE WORKS

OPPORTUNITY MATTERS:
Journal of Access and Opportunity in Education
Volume 2 (1): 28-35
COE Research, Evaluation and Data Use COP
Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education
© 2016 The Author(s) All Rights Reserved

Student Activism on a College Campus: *Valió La Pena*

Tiffany C. Martínez*



Following the rise of social media, we have entered an era where students now have the platform to voice their own concerns. Mainstream media has fallen short, the middle man has been eliminated, and no longer are our words filtered through the lens of corporations. Through this narrative, my words are raw and my experiences are nothing less than valid because they are indeed MY experiences. Today, I am in charge of how this story is told. A version of this piece was initially published on my blog as a way to tell the world what really happened when the McNair Scholars fought Suffolk University in December of 2015. Our story had been silenced. Until now.

Keywords: Student Activism, McNair Scholars, Personal Narrative

As a first-generation college student and U.S citizen, I have navigated the streets of Suffolk University on my toes. Living in the body of a low income person of color on a campus overflowing with privilege, it is radical to live unapologetically as a minority. It is unusual to meet administrators, faculty, and professors that openly ask to embrace my culture and that of people like me in an academic environment *unless* you were in the arms of the McNair Scholars program. As a McNair Scholar, I was taught to believe my future Ph.D. was less a dream and more an upcoming reality, even as a *Latina sin complejos*. The program has freed students like myself from fear and lack of access. However, Suffolk University clearly underestimated the power of students and student activism when they proposed the McNair Program be moved to another location on campus in a new “open-floor” layout that threatened our privacy and our ability to be ourselves. We had no other choice but to prove what we, as radically unapologetic scholars, were capable of. This is our story.

The McNair Scholars program at Suffolk University is one of many federally-funded TRIO programs; there are currently about 150 McNair Programs around the U.S. Established by congress to

*Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Tiffany C. Martínez, Suffolk University, Boston, MA, USA. Email: tcmartinez@suffolk.edu

increase academic success from underrepresented student populations, TRIO programs serve primarily students with historically disenfranchised identities. This means that most of the McNair Scholars – as well as other TRIO program participants – are first-generation college students and people of color. *En otras palabras, son mi gente*¹. Raised in a family that emigrated from *La Rep6blica Dominicana*, my skill set is broad but not necessarily tailored to be successful in an American private institution such as Suffolk University. The McNair Scholars program provides mentorship and access to resources that helps people like myself attain the cultural capital and academic preparation needed to pipeline us into Ph.D. programs; a journey that can change the course of our lives forever.

At Suffolk, I consistently find myself negotiating with those in power in order to have some sort of agency on campus. What the higher administration needs to understand is that I should not be negotiating my worth with people who do not care to learn my story, my talents, or my experiences. They should be asking me and my peers what we need. This is a concept that non-first-generation students learn way before stepping on campus. They learn that it is okay to speak to your professors after class when you have a question; they have family members who have been reviewing their resumes since high school; they know to send thank you cards after a job interview...a gesture I learned only last year. After I became a McNair Scholar, I ascended from the “minority of the minority.” Inside the Center for Academic Access and Opportunity², I am treated as a future colleague by the advisors and directors whose main goal is our success. In the Center, we are finally able to breathe. When we speak about our lives and our experiences, we are not pitied. We are empowered. Our “one-down identities”³ don’t feel very down anymore.

In the middle of November, I received a message from a fellow McNair scholar with word about the status of the program we loved (see Figure 1). The administration at Suffolk University had decided to implement an open floor plan transforming a set of departments into an open community for offices on campus to share resources. This would push the entire Center into a tiny corner with absolutely no chance for privacy. Offices for one-on-one student interactions would need to be reserved, and there would be no space for showcasing student research (like we currently had). This setup was not conducive for students who needed one-on-one care and private resources. We knew we deserved an entire center, and they were only giving us a few square feet. Our space, our privacy, and our home would be at jeopardy if the students didn’t do anything about it. This was a clear representation that the importance of our program was not properly acknowledged by the university and our value was being

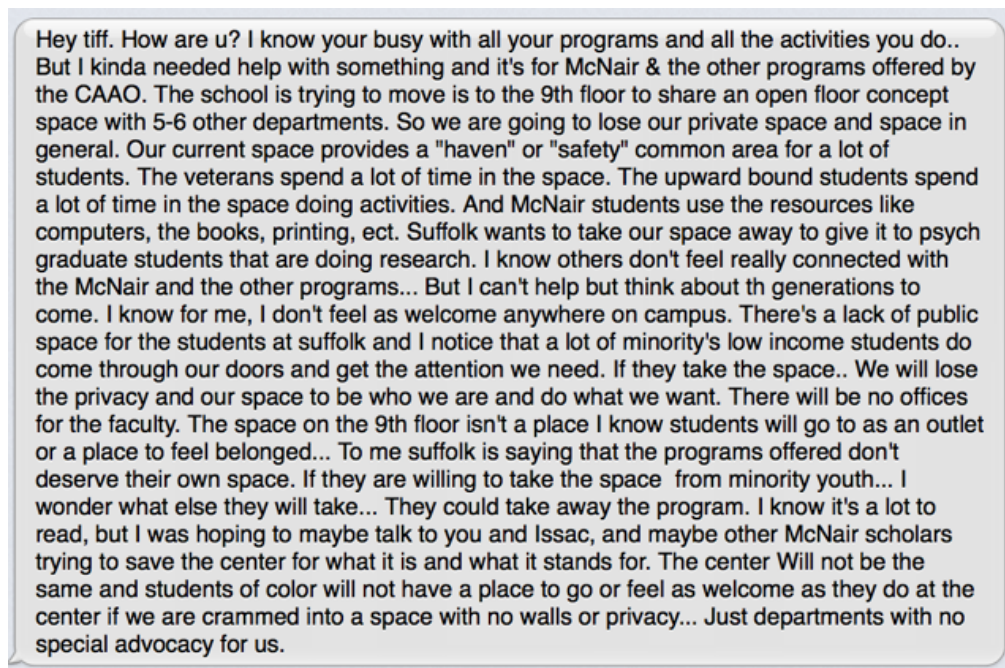
¹ “In other words, they are my people”

² The Center for Academic Access and Opportunity (CAAO), or simply “The Center,” is the administrative home of the TRIO programs on campus. These include: The McNair Scholars, Upward Bound, and Veteran’s Upward Bound. As it stands, the Center includes: a reception area, a conference room, a copy and supplies room, a kitchen, an open area with designated space for McNair Scholars and Upward Bound students, desktop and laptop computers for program participants’ use, a separate and enclosed area for Veterans served by the Veteran’s Upward Bound program called the “Veterans HQ,” and private offices for each of the program staff members.

³ “One-down identities” refer to social identity groups that fall under the umbrella of oppression. In this context, the “one-down identities” directly reflect those who have been historically disenfranchised in the United States including but not limited to people of color, low-income people, non-U.S. citizens, differently abled, and LGBTQ+ identified individuals.

overlooked. It was my responsibility to respond to that text with action, and so the movement began. If the administrators in the Center had decided to do what I did, or anyone paid by the University spoke up and demanded a change in plans, I knew they could lose their positions. The McNair Scholars thus began communications about how to make the university administration listen to us and give us our space back. We needed to stop negotiating and start demanding. Flowers need space to bloom.

Figure 1. Text Received from Fellow McNair Scholar Alerting Me to the Move



Hey tiff. How are u? I know your busy with all your programs and all the activities you do.. But I kinda needed help with something and it's for McNair & the other programs offered by the CAAO. The school is trying to move is to the 9th floor to share an open floor concept space with 5-6 other departments. So we are going to lose our private space and space in general. Our current space provides a "haven" or "safety" common area for a lot of students. The veterans spend a lot of time in the space. The upward bound students spend a lot of time in the space doing activities. And McNair students use the resources like computers, the books, printing, ect. Suffolk wants to take our space away to give it to psych graduate students that are doing research. I know others don't feel really connected with the McNair and the other programs... But I can't help but think about th generations to come. I know for me, I don't feel as welcome anywhere on campus. There's a lack of public space for the students at suffolk and I notice that a lot of minority's low income students do come through our doors and get the attention we need. If they take the space.. We will lose the privacy and our space to be who we are and do what we want. There will be no offices for the faculty. The space on the 9th floor isn't a place I know students will go to as an outlet or a place to feel belonged... To me suffolk is saying that the programs offered don't deserve their own space. If they are willing to take the space from minority youth... I wonder what else they will take... They could take away the program. I know it's a lot to read, but I was hoping to maybe talk to you and Issac, and maybe other McNair scholars trying to save the center for what it is and what it stands for. The center Will not be the same and students of color will not have a place to go or feel as welcome as they do at the center if we are crammed into a space with no walls or privacy... Just departments with no special advocacy for us.

Activism requires vulnerability. Before the McNair Scholars united and acted, I decided to share my own narrative to professionals to make them understand how much the program meant to me and why we were so passionate about keeping the space we had. As a young child, I was told every day by *Mamá* that I could do whatever I wanted as long as I had *paciencia* and *inteligencia*. Young, wide eyed, and hopeful, I believed her. When we were priced out of our New York home, I believed a little less. When I didn't do well in school, I believed a little less. When my dad died, I almost didn't believe at all. I physically could feel myself lose trust in the potential I had, and learned how much harder I had to work to fight the statistics stacked against me. I needed to mentally build myself back and believe I was capable of escaping government welfare paperwork and *worthy enough* to not let my experiences define me. I decided what defined me.

I learned about privilege in 2013, when I slept over at my friend's house and saw their⁴ dad doing the dishes. Eating a toasted bagel with strawberry cream cheese, I watched my friend's mother sipping

⁴ I use the pronouns "they", "their", and "them" in this narrative as *singular pronouns* to remain gender neutral

coffee and thought about the realities of students who didn't have to translate their school paperwork for their parents. Some students didn't have to buy a calling card to talk to their father who was in another country. Some students didn't walk straight to the clearance rack when they entered the store. Some students didn't have to try to fit in; they just did. The envy started in my chest. It took years to break down this ugliness and realize that regardless of my background I was still the one controlling my future. I learned to cherish my story and take it with me to the Suffolk University campus the following August. When I stepped in the library for the first time, I remember looking around and thinking that I was literally on the same playing field as all my peers. I believed that neither my background, my income, or my clothes could dictate my future. Unfortunately, I slowly realized I was playing a card game where I never learned the rules. My naivet6 was exposed, but the McNair Scholar program caught me when I was falling into a dangerous place.

This is why we, the McNair Scholars, decided to refuse the disrespectful offer to change locations. Too many students like me step onto these campuses with these experiences; I am not scared to demand affirmation rather than invisibility anymore. An individual who never experienced living without the resources we were provided would have never seen the terrible idea of combining our center with other departments in an open floor plan. The first step we took included meeting and deciding exactly what we were going to do. We met in a conference room and wrote out all the plans and timelines. The objective was to maintain the McNair space and receive written confirmation before the Fall semester ended. We would send out an email and ask for support from administrators in the Center, then contact a high level administrator with enough power to request we be allowed to stay in our current space. In addition, we would only allow two days for a response from the high level administrator since we were working with very limited time (less than a month before Winter Break), and had to also meet with the administrator whose decision it had been to move our office. The last resort, if these emails and meetings were futile, would be to organize a sit-in outside the front door of the Center.

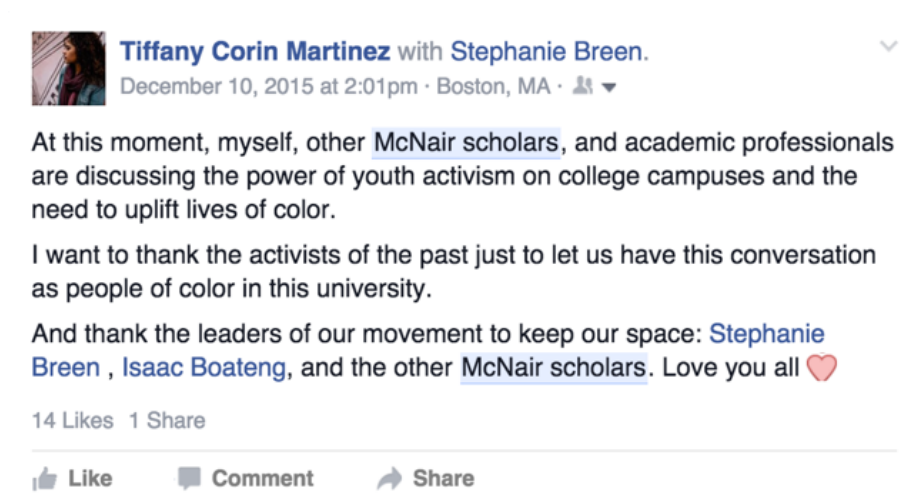
The McNair Scholars sent the email to recruit support for our efforts and almost immediately a university administrator got in contact with us to discuss exactly what we were fighting for. Once we had support from faculty and staff the movement was in full motion. The administrator who contacted us limited the meeting to three specific scholars: Stephanie Breen, Isaac Berko, and me⁵. The meeting started off simple, the administrator smiled at us and welcomed us into a conference room on the highest floor of the building. The hallways had windows in place of ceilings, and the sun's rays illuminated the translucent navy blue and gold ridged doors. It was the most beautiful location I had ever seen on campus. I remember thinking it was ironic that three first-generation people of color walking onto this floor, professionally dressed and significantly prepared, were the ones in charge now. With the support of the McNair staff behind us, Stephanie, Isaac, and I started fighting for our lives.

Before the meeting, Stephanie had sent out an email to the McNair Scholars asking for us to organize and meet in a place where we could discuss a revised timeline and specifically the content of our meeting with the administrator – after all, this person was the one in charge of the move and so we needed to be prepared to make a strong case as to why we should be allowed to keep our current space. Within two days, a handful of McNair Scholars gathered and we talked about the implications that the move would have for our program. We wrote various themes on a white board such as the

⁵ Written permission was obtained from my fellow McNair Scholars to use their names in this narrative.

racial politics on campus and the classist practices that seemed to have been guiding the decision to relocate various departments on campus. This community organizing meeting was a mixture of logistical clarifications and tearful, passionate discussions about our love for the program. Given our deep conversations we came to the realization that this movement was more than just the McNair possible relocation, it was about agency on campus. Our passions grew. In order for this movement to be successful it was imperative that we were all on the same page. When Stephanie, Isaac, and I spoke on the phone the day before the meeting, we created the action plan that a “no” to keeping our space was not an option. It was simple and it was powerful. As long as the three of us rejected any other option but keeping our space, then there would be no space for us to lose.

Figure 2: Post from my Facebook page



When the administrator tried to convince us that we would be “better off” with a smaller space because the new space had more windows than we currently did, Stephanie quickly revoked his statement and said we were fighting for our space not for lighting. When they tried to tell us that the open-floor concept worked at the international campus and that it would be an “upgrade,” we thanked them for the “upgrade,” but politely declined. When they talked about our need for privacy and how privacy conflicts with building a sense of community, we made it very clear that we require privacy to feel safe, especially when people like us cannot be promised safety on this campus unless the right resources are intentionally provided for us. Half an hour into the meeting, it was obvious that the administrator was frustrated; so were we. Surely, they did not expect us to be so prepared and respond to all of their points *con paciencia y inteligencia*.

In that meeting, we used our personal experiences, our honesty about campus inclusion, and our wit to stand our ground. Together we emphasized our need for privacy, the impracticality of the open floor concept, the importance the McNair program had in our lives, and the disrespect we felt when we

found out our office would be condensed. The administrator responded with bewilderment. They did not understand how much this meant to us. I still do not think they understand how a group of students were able to organize and fight for a few hundred square feet on campus. In all honesty though, how could we ask them, in that hour, to understand the discomfort we feel every day holding the identities we hold? How could we ask of them how important it was for us to feel like our voices were being heard? Universities nationwide take pride in being student-centric, but this becomes a facade when students are not represented in areas on a campus that make the most change. If a university is meant to serve students, then as students we have every right to ask what we need to be successful and expect these demands to be fulfilled.

At the end of the meeting, the administrator told us that since we rejected the “upgrade” (as *they* put it), we should consult with the other McNair Scholars to compile a list of resources that we needed in order to feel satisfied if we were to be moved. The scholars responded the following Monday with an email that included the following resources for our “dream space”: a kitchen, bare walls for research posters, a conference room, private offices with doors for administrators, a lounge, a couch, a computer lab, an office for the office assistant, a welcome desk, and ample space for gatherings. We strategically decided to send a response in this way because it included all the resources we already had, and we knew it was impossible to replicate in an open floor plan. We were scholars after all. The administrator responded with merely two words: “thank you.” Empty. Brittle. Unproductive.

Given the response, Stephanie, Isaac, and I then decided that the sit-in would need to happen as soon as possible. It was clear that our voices were being silenced, and the McNair Scholars were ready to fight. Immediately, I started to contact various organizations to co-sponsor the sit-in, and right before I had my first meeting with a club interested in helping us get more people participate in the sit-in, we contacted the University President for support.

Below is an excerpt from the letter to the President (**see APPENDIX A for full letter**):

“When we say “us,” we are the marginalized, minority, historically disenfranchised, underrepresented students in this University who need the most support from people like you. After consulting with other McNair Scholars we do not believe the new space will be worthy of our potential. Consistently campuses nationwide are telling us we don't matter via budget cuts, vandalized cultural centers, and ignored pleas for action. The relocation decision is supporting the trend these campuses are falling into and we would like to set up a meeting with you to discuss our concerns.”

Shortly after this email was set, we heard back from one of the highest-ranking university officials, a woman who held much more authority than the administrator with whom we had previously met. She told us our voices had been heard. She told us we were keeping our space.

Students rallied, fought, and won this battle. For the next few years, we can be comfortable sitting in our Center knowing it was our activism and our strategy that was able to convince faculty, administrators, and even the President that we are done negotiating. We are *announcing* our worth and our power on this campus. We knew change was going to happen because we would not stop until we were satisfied. It is imperative for students to realize how much power they really have on campus. We

Martínez

learned throughout this process that while we may have to work harder than anyone else to get what we need, in that hard work comes more reward for the people who will come after us. If I was a university employee, sending these emails and potentially organizing a sit-in would have had me immediately terminated. As students we have power; your status as a student actually protects you on campus. Although we made people angry, sacrificed hours planning, and sent countless emails, the time was anything but lost.

We won.

Valió la pena⁶.

AUTHORS

Tiffany C. Martínez is a Sociology major at Suffolk University with a concentration in Youth & Community and minor in Advertising. She works as a Diversity Peer Educator in Suffolk University and currently holds the title of McNair Scholar. Her research is primarily focused on racial dynamics in the United States, specifically among Latina/o young people.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to send a dearest thank you to Dr. Carmen Veloria who introduced me to the McNair program and changed the course of my life. She consistently reminds me the power of confidence, self-assurance, and guidance. In addition, I want to thank Professor Abrahám Peña-Talamantes for unraveling the value in my words and my culture. Thank you to Marty Elmore and Kedrick Perry for teaching me self-love and self-care, two vital pieces necessary for greatness.

We need to all acknowledge the McNair scholars of the 2015-16 academic year. Together we found strength in unity. Together we have been liberated. I want to specifically acknowledge Stephanie Breen for leading this movement with me and sending the text that sparked a student revolution. When women of color join together, our magic ascends all oppression. Soul sisters.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the *Opportunity Matters: Journal of Access and Opportunity in Education* for finding power in student activism and publishing this piece and *mi querida madre. Mami, me enseñaste como ver la luz en la oscuridad. Gracias por todo.*

⁶ "It was worth it"

APPENDIX A

Email to President from McNair Scholars

Good Afternoon President McKenna,

The Center for Academic Access & Opportunity is about to face a relocation that will significantly affect all the students that reap the benefits from the center. As you know, the CAAO is an umbrella for various programs aimed to support marginalized communities on campus to succeed and feel supported in the Suffolk community. The center provides us a safe space to learn, acquire mentors, and form community. **The McNair scholars have joined together and discussed the pain we feel from the future relocation.**

The center's new location, 9th floor of 73 Tremont, will be shared with various departments. There will be no designated closed spaces for McNair scholars, Upward Bound students, Veterans, and other students who benefit from the center. These closed spaces are absolutely vital for these students to succeed. For some of us, the lounge area and closed offices give us the community space to safely spend time together without fear of judgment. The fact that the space is going to be shared will revoke the ability for Upward Bound students to use our resources and relax without fear of other departments dictating their behaviors.

This decision to merge our office's space with other departments is Suffolk not realizing the impact that the center has to students like us. When we say "us," we are the marginalized, minority, historically disenfranchised, underrepresented students in this University who need the most support from people like you. After consulting with other McNair scholars we do not believe the new space will be worthy of our potential. Consistently campuses nationwide are telling us we don't matter via budget cuts, vandalized cultural centers, and ignored pleas for action. The relocation decision is supporting the trend these campuses are falling into and we would like to set up a meeting with you to discuss our concerns. We spoke to a representative in your office this afternoon at 4:30pm who suggested we send you this email directly. We also met with [REDACTED] about these concerns and would love to extend the conversation with you. Please let us know when you are available.

Thank you for reading.

Sincerely,

The McNair Scholars of Suffolk University

Tiffany Martinez

Sociology & Advertising | Suffolk University 2017
McNair Scholar | Social Justice Educator