

# McNair Scholars, 300 strong, converge at Berkeley to showcase their research

## For many symposium participants, college was once a long shot; now they're gunning for a PhD

By [Cathy Cockrell](#), NewsCenter | 12 August 2009



*Sociology major Livier Gutierrez*

BERKELEY — Berkeley senior Livier Gutierrez vividly recalls the circumstances under which her current research interest was born.

It was May 1, 2006, and immigrants across the county were taking to the streets to protest a proposed federal law that would have raised penalties against undocumented immigrants. Riding in the car with her mother on their way to a rally, Gutierrez heard an immigration activist being interviewed by a popular Spanish-language radio host. The interviewee was not a pro-immigrant activist like herself, however, but a Latino who had joined the controversial Minutemen, a militant nativist organization that patrols the U.S.-Mexico border to intercept undocumented immigrants coming from the South.

Gutierrez knew that Latino opinion on immigration is divided. But a member of *la raza* deciding not merely to oppose undocumented immigration but to join the Minutemen? "My sociological imagination sparked," she says. There had to be a connection, she thought, between "seemingly impersonal and remote historical forces and this individual's life...."

"Someone should study this to understand why this was happening," Gutierrez recalls thinking. But it didn't occur to her, she says, that that someone "could be me" — not, at least, "until McNair."

That came later, in her junior year, when Gutierrez, a native of Jalisco, Mexico, was accepted into Berkeley's [McNair Scholars Program](#), which helps launch first-generation college students, typically from low-income families, into careers as scholar-researchers. Undergrads at schools across the country apply to the program, which at Berkeley takes 20 to 30 annually. Those accepted as McNair Scholars get "support on all levels," as Gutierrez puts it — from "believing in yourself" to "every little detail" about designing and conducting a scholarly research study, writing and presenting one's results, preparing for the GREs, and getting into graduate school.

Under the aegis of the McNair program, Gutierrez turned her curiosity about Latino Minutemen into an ambitious sociological study relying on three sources of data — news articles, [YouTube videos](#), and a three-hour one-on-one conducted in Los Angeles.

"I was more worried about my interview questions" than meeting with a Minuteman, she recalls of that encounter. Social-science interviewing is "not just asking questions," she had learned, "but asking the *right* questions and making sure the conversation stays on track. You have to be very careful about word choices." Next came the challenge of coding and analyzing her mountain of data and shaping it into a research paper. With original research, "you can't just look it up in a book," Gutierrez notes. "It's yours to present to the world; you don't want to present something that's not true."

Last weekend she shared her results with fellow McNair Scholars from around the country, who converged on the Berkeley campus, 300 strong. In a four-day symposium, Aug. 6-9, they shared research findings in a wide range of fields, from sociology to bioscience, and celebrated their completion of the program and their ambitions for the future.

"The diversity of knowledge and expertise at the conference was really eye-opening," says Berkeley McNair Scholar Dayo Spencer-Walters '09, a member of the Krio ethnic group of Sierra Leone, who investigated the relationship there between war-related sexual violence and post-war female genital mutilation. Thanks in part to McNair, she's about to begin a master's program in public health at UCLA, and hopes to later earn a doctorate.

Gutierrez, for her part, intends to continue studying nativism within immigrant groups, and ultimately to become a sociology professor and mentor to young people — much like the McNair mentors who helped put a career in sociology within her reach. She hopes to organize a national high-school social-science fair, and to teach students from under-resourced schools how to use social-science tools to understand their world and develop policies to solve community problems.

"What I don't like about research," she says, is when academics "go in" to marginalized communities, "extract data, and develop their own stuff. It's important to develop links between research, research application, and community empowerment."

## Berkeley McNair Scholars' interests run the gamut from food justice to frog hormones



This year's crop of McNair Scholars includes 27 from Berkeley, who reported on their diverse scholarly work at the 17th annual California McNair Scholars Symposium. Among the Cal presenters were:

- Jesus Miguel Diaz reporting on hormone levels and immune "competence" in a South African aquatic frog,
- Sandy Rodriguez on the use of code switching by Latino writers to convey identity,
- Karen Smith on survival strategies of Oakland African American mothers who have timed off of CalWORKs public assistance,
- Xavier Erguera on strategies for disclosing HIV+ status while "cyber cruising,"
- Claudia Garcia on population genetics of cycads,
- Brytanee Brown on West Oaklanders' response to food injustice, and
- Vida Manzo on the relationship between socioeconomic status and feelings of compassion for others.