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OU professor secures third NSF grant for work with minorities in STEM fields

For the third time in less than a year, Oakland University Psychology Professor **Martha Escobar** has received a research grant from the National Science Foundation in support of her collaborative efforts with Tuskegee University in Alabama to increase participation by minority students in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) related fields.

“Dr. Escobar’s success in securing three significant NSF grants in under a year is remarkable,” said Todd Shackelford, Ph.D., distinguished professor and chair of the **Department of Psychology** at Oakland University. “We are so fortunate to have her on the faculty in the department.”

According to Escobar, the latest **NSF grant** will total nearly \$1.8 million over a five-year period. OU’s share of the award is approximately \$220,000.

“What this project is trying to do is help historically black colleges and universities, like Tuskegee University, revamp their curriculums, increase their course offerings, and increase their success in preparing minority students for careers in STEM fields,” said Escobar, who will serve as the principal investigator for Oakland University on the project.

Assistant Professor of Psychology Melissa McDonald will serve as the co-principal investigator on the project, which will focus primarily on Alabama’s “Black Belt” region.

“What we’re going to do is develop a minor in Materials Science and Engineering with the goal of increasing the number of engineering degrees awarded to African American students in a discipline that is in very high demand,” Escobar said.

Students enrolled in the program will complete a variety of coursework, gain experience in the field, and have an opportunity to interact with mentors in the industry.

“Our idea is that academics, networking and social support have to come together, and that is going to facilitate student success,” Escobar said.

She received funding from the NSF for similar projects in **September 2016** and **March 2017**.

“It’s very exciting to be involved in work like this,” Escobar said. “I do a lot of theoretical research and it takes a really long time to see any kind of impact, so it’s been an incredible experience to be able to talk to the students and to see them progressing. It really makes you understand that there’s more to our research than just theory. There’s practical applications that have an immediate impact.”

According to Shackelford, the continuing support of Escobar’s work by the NSF is just another example of the department’s ongoing transformation.

“We have worked hard over the past several years to build what has become a formidable research-active and grant-funded department that offers outstanding Ph.D. and MS programs alongside a superb undergraduate program,” he said. “Dr. Escobar has been an important contributor to the profound transformation that has occurred in the Department of Psychology just a few years.”

Escobar said the department’s transformation has been a positive one.

“The more we can do research-wise, the stronger our program becomes,” she said. “We have a very large major. The more research we do, the more opportunities we have for students get involved in things they’re interested in. It’s also a way to get the name of our institution out there to show people that we’re not just a teaching school; we’re also making great strides when it comes to research. It’s very exciting.”



Psychology Professor Martha Escobar (left) will serve as the principal investigator Oakland University on the project, while Assistant Professor of Psychology Melissa McDonald (right) will serve as the co-principal investigator.

“The psychology department has become a model for departments and faculty across campus looking to become more research-active,” he said. “The strategy that Dr. Escobar has taken, of partnering with other institutions to obtain federal funding, is an approach others should emulate.”