

Behold the harvest



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I am writing this article as I sit in the back of the classroom at the Leadership Academy, watching Assistant Secretary-Treasurer Nicole Rhine and retired Assistant Secretary-Treasurer Jim Korolowicz co-teach the students of Class 16 about the *NALC Constitution*. This is just the second day of a week where, along with learning about the history of the NALC and how the union is structured, the students will learn about the history of the labor movement, leadership styles, ethical decision-making, and teaching techniques, along with several other subjects. Also, each student will have to prepare a teaching session and present it to his or her classmates. Once this week is over,

they have three more to go through over the next five months.

Sound like a lot of work? It is. The Leadership Academy is no cakewalk. Students are expected to put in 16 hours or more each day at the Academy and at least 80 hours of their own time working on learning projects during their time home between sessions. The students are put on notice in our very first meeting that to whom much is given, much is expected.

We set a very high bar, for good reason. We believe that being selected to attend the Leadership Academy is an honor and privilege. We know of no other union that has a program anything like it. A leadership program to which any member can apply, no matter how large their branch, how long they've worked as a letter carrier or how much experience they have in the union. And it's entirely free; the only limit is the number of seats we can fill. The NALC picks up all of the costs of the Leadership Academy, including the students' rooms, meals, transportation and lost time from work. The NALC also pays for all the costs associated with the instruction materials, the equipment and the instructors. Speaking of instructors, can you name any other union that has every one of its top officers, including its current and former national presidents, on the faculty of a training program that is open to any member? I can't. That is why I consider the Leadership Academy to be one of the greatest accomplishments of the NALC in the last decade. I am proud of our union for making this investment in its future and am honored to be a part of it. I know that the rest of the Academy staff, which includes retired Executive Vice President Jim Williams, retired Assistant Secretary Jim Korolowicz and NALC Information Center Director Nancy Dysart, feels the same way.

Still there are some who believe the Academy is not a good use of the union's money. They point to the handful of graduates who have dropped out of union activity or have applied for postal management jobs as evidence of the ineffectiveness of the Academy and the wastefulness of its cost. And it's true—some graduates don't pan out. But for every disappointment, we have a hundred examples of success stories. Currently, Academy graduates account for nearly a third of the regional administrative assistants, more than half of the NALC Headquarters letter carrier staff, at least 15 current or former state presidents and one national business agent. Additionally, across the country, Academy graduates have been elected to leadership positions in their local branches, small and large, many becoming full-time union officers. And just as important, hundreds of graduates have gone on to serve the union in various other capacities, such as arbitration advocates, Dispute Resolution Team members, OWCP representatives, shop stewards, route adjustment team members, as well as food drive, MDA and community service coordinators.

Although we have seen graduates move into leadership positions in their branches, state associations and in the regional and headquarters offices, that is a by-product, not the goal of the Academy. The Academy is not a shortcut to leadership positions, nor is it a training ground for future regional or national officers. Its goal is to provide students with some tools and information and return them to their branches better equipped to assist the local leadership in accomplishing the goals of the branch.

And the Academy is not just for newer activists. It was also intended to enhance and strengthen the skills of those already in leadership positions in their branches or state associations. We've had state presidents or full-time branch officers in almost every one of our classes sitting alongside brand-new activists. Stronger branches and stronger state associations mean a stronger NALC.

There's something admirable about those who are not afraid to admit they don't know it all and who remain teachable even after many years of service. They send an important message to all of us that learning is a lifelong experience, and that leadership is about humility and service, not power and control. Probably more than anything else, the Academy seeks to inspire those who attend to continue to grow in knowledge and experience for the betterment of themselves and the union.

The return on the union's investment has been far greater than the founders of the Academy ever imagined it could be. By the end of this year, nearly 500 students will have struggled through the four weeks of the Academy and graduated. Some of these will be our future national leaders. Others will be the foundation of strong local branches. And sadly, a few will go into management or just fade away. Not every seed takes root and grows. But those few who don't are quickly forgotten when the crop comes in. Behold the harvest.