



For the 20th anniversary, we look at how the NALC Leadership Academy was created and how it continues to evolve

For 20 years, NALC members from all over the country and with a range of experience have been coming to the Washington, DC, area to take part in three weeklong training sessions to hone their leadership abilities. The attendees—30 at a time—devote their energy and talents to making the lives of their fellow letter carriers better.

“I don’t know of any other union that has this kind of commitment to developing its leaders at every level,” NALC President Brian L. Renfroe said. While he graduated from Leadership Academy Class 6 in 2008, he is quick to point out that it isn’t a golden ticket to success in the union. “Hard work at the local level got you noticed and selected for the Leadership Academy. The Leadership Academy will provide you with tools to go home and better serve the membership. That is the No. 1 goal of the Leadership Academy—to better serve the membership.

“Some of our graduates go on to elected union office,” Renfroe added. “But there are so many more ways they become leaders. Leadership isn’t just about a title.

“Some are working on specific projects; some are leading grassroots efforts on legislation, or rallying the troops and keeping them informed through

their writing in union publications and online, or sticking up for their fellow letter carriers as stewards. There are so many different paths they take in serving their union and fellow members.”

Leadership Academy today

The current curriculum consists of three weeks in a classroom setting at the Maritime Institute in Linthicum Heights, MD, and a fourth week at the member’s national business agent’s (NBA) office.

Each week has a theme. Week 1 focuses on time management and teaching techniques. Week 2 focuses on public speaking and communication. Week 3 focuses on mentoring, negotiation and strategic planning. Between Weeks 1 and 2, and between Weeks 2 and 3, each student completes a project on a subject that they learned about during that week. Students are expected to spend 40 to 50 hours working on their projects and presenting them at the branch level.

Each national officer teaches a class that focuses on what their position entails at NALC Headquarters and how that affects the members at the branch and workroom floor levels. Each Headquarters letter carrier staff member, as well as some of the professional staff members, present on the projects, roles and responsibilities they work on regularly.

“These classes are aimed at giving a bird’s-eye view of what happens

Opposite page: Jim Williams leads a breakout session during the first Leadership Academy.

nationally,” explained Assistant to the President Ed Morgan, who currently handles the administrative functions for the Academy. “It is a peek behind the curtain at what happens at 100 Indiana Ave.”

Morgan (a Class 18 graduate) and the other Leadership Academy lead facilitators Troy Clark (retired Region 6 NBA), Chris Wittenburg (retired Region 7 NBA and a Class 1 graduate), Keisha Lewis (Region 1 NBA and a Class 11 graduate) and Larrissa Parde (Region 7 regional administrative assistant and a Class 11 graduate) teach classes on topics such as NALC and union history, ethical decision making, leadership approaches, managing branch records, recruiting union activists, and active listening.

The experience knocks some students out of their comfort zones, especially the requirement to do public speaking. They all must give speeches, not only to each other, but at an event with special guests.

Most students face plenty of challenges, along with getting the opportunity to improve their skills with the help of their fellow students.

“These classes are designed to make the students think about all aspects of leadership,” Morgan said.

Creating the Academy

The original idea for the Leadership Academy came from then-Region 2 National Business Agent Jim Williams (NBA from 1994 to 2002). “The idea for a national-level Leadership Academy was a long-term dream of mine,” he said. “As an NBA, I focused on education and saw that letter carriers thrived in an environment of intense learning.”

Williams worked with then-Washington State Director of Education Jamie Lumm—who would later go on

to become the national director of education—to create stewards colleges in each of the states he represented. “From weeklong teaching techniques classes to [Office of Workers’ Compensation Programs] training, I saw that if an educational system was built, letter carriers would come, and the challenge transformed them,” Williams said.

In 2002, Williams was elected by acclamation to become NALC’s executive vice president, serving with recently elected NALC President William H. Young. “Bill Young asked me to prepare a document listing ideas that we could accomplish in our first term,” Williams said. “The Leadership Academy was on that list.”

Not everyone thought a Leadership Academy was a good idea, but Williams convinced President Young. “My



Jim Korolowicz

Then-NALC President William H. Young (c) recounts NALC’s history of collective bargaining with the assistance of Chief of Staff Jim Sauber (r) and Associate Counsel Keith Secular in 2005.





Then-President Fredric V. Rolando answers questions from a Leadership Academy class during his tenure.

belief was that by training members, we would be strengthening the NALC and providing a deeper pool of leaders at the local level,” he said. “I believed then and now that knowledge is power, and the union is better served by having those in leadership be better trained. I wanted to shorten the learning curve for those coming up in our union and give them an accurate ‘10,000-foot view’ of the NALC and the overall labor movement.

“Bill came to see the benefit and gave me free rein to start putting the Academy together. I am grateful for Bill’s foresight. So are the over 900 letter carriers who have graduated from the Academy,” Williams said.

Working with then-Director of Education Ralph Goldstein, Williams put together a list of more than 100 subjects for possible inclusion in the curriculum. He also recruited then-Assistant Secretary-Treasurer Jim Korolowicz to help. “Jim had a rich background in training, and he shared our vision,” Williams said.

The curriculum was based on two ideas. “Most elected officers came into

their positions with little or no preparation. Most of what I found members to believe about the NALC were myths. Why shouldn’t we combine those needs in an intense learning environment?” Williams explained. “The development of a list of subjects was based on what I perceived to be the needs of future leaders.”

Every subject included in the curriculum was intended to meet those goals, Williams said.

After a year of preparing teaching outlines for each subject, they shared the concept with the national officers and then incorporated their feedback. A focus group of branch presidents was brought in to offer feedback from their perspective.

“My original idea was to have four consecutive weeks of training, with the last week focusing on arbitration advocacy,” Williams said. “The focus group convinced me that four consecutive weeks would be too much and that advocacy training in arbitration would rule out many who did not work in the grievance procedure.”

Then-NALC Vice President Gary Mullins suggested that the fourth week should be worked at the members’ NBA offices to give a real-world experience for each student. “We know the learning is about so much more than classroom work, so we get the students out there to do work in the field, doing the work they might do as union leaders,” Williams said.

As the structure of the Academy was coming into focus, the organizers decided to limit the class size to 30 members “due to the complexity of the material,” Williams explained. Each week of class would be separated by six weeks of work at home on a self-selected project to work on with their



NALC President Brian L. Renfroe leads a recent Leadership Academy class.

mentors. Their report would then be sent to the Academy to be reviewed for both content and writing.

It also was decided to have national officers conduct the training. “I wanted to have national officers provide their expertise in the subject being taught,” Williams said. “For example, I felt that the students should know what each officer did for the membership. If it was an issue of the union’s financial status, the national secretary-treasurer, along with staff, should present that material. This concept came to be a home run for the students and the officers.”

They also developed an application that required a named mentor and for the mentor to be part of the application process.

The first Leadership Academy class

President Young announced the Leadership Academy—then known as the “Next Generation Leadership Training”—in his President’s Message in the December 2004 issue of *The Postal Record*. “I must prepare the union for the future. If I do otherwise, I will have dishonored the sacrifices of all those who have gone before,” he wrote. “To me, part of preparing for the future means that each one of us privileged to hold a position of leadership in this union—whether it be at the national, regional or local level—must admit that we are neither immortal nor indispensable and that one of our major responsibilities is to recruit and train the next generation of leaders.”

By the time the first application period was held from March 15 to May 1, 2005, the name of the training had been settled as the “Leadership Academy.” It was announced that the training would be held at the George Meany Center for Labor Studies in Silver

Spring, MD, just outside Washington, DC, where it was held for many years before the campus closed in 2012.

NALC received more than 300 applications for that first Academy, from which President Young personally selected the members. “Each one had qualifications richer than I imagined we would attract,” he wrote in his President’s Message in the July 2005 edition of *The Postal Record*. He selected two members from each of NALC’s 15 regions.

One of them was Chris Wittenburg, a member of St. Paul, MN Branch 28. “When my application was accepted to attend Leadership Academy Class 1, I felt gratitude for the opportunity to experience this new training,” the retired Region 7 NBA and current Leadership Academy facilitator said.

The three weeks of training were held July 24-29, Oct. 2-7 and Dec. 11-16 in 2005. On the first day of the Academy, students were divided into learning teams of three with a staff mentor. Those teams were kept together for the whole Academy experience, and it’s become an integral part of each Academy since then.

“After the first few days I realized this was a unique training for the NALC,” Wittenburg said. “Attending and graduating would benefit me as a person and an NALC leader. One of the primary focuses was to better myself to be the best I could be when representing our members. It was the opportunity of a lifetime. It became clear the responsibility to absorb and learn was ultimately on me.”

Wittenburg would rely on the skills he learned in the Academy throughout his career. “As a national business agent, the skills and knowledge I [had] acquired guided me in assessing and making the right decisions that would benefit the members I represent,” he said.

Students participate in the first Leadership Academy.





President Renfroe (c) welcomes Jim Williams (r) and Jim Korolowicz as they visit a recent Leadership Academy.

The first class was an instant success, and a second class was announced to begin in January 2006. Since then, one or two classes

have typically been held each year, with Class 30 graduating in May.

The Leadership Academy evolves

Since the first class, the graduates have been the best advertising for recruiting new talent to the Academy.

"I had heard many great stories about how Leadership Academy was one of the most valuable experiences the NALC provided. I knew it was something I wanted to attend," said Region 6 Regional Grievance Assistant Anna Mudd, who attended Leadership Academy Class 22 in 2017.

"Leadership Academy was known as a 'special club' that only a few could attend," she said. "Once there, I learned it wasn't a special club, but a club of special people. It was amazing how quickly we all bonded together to build those relationships that would remain with us forever. I learned a lot about myself, both good and bad. However, in that setting with all of us encouraging each other to be their best, the constructive criticism went a long way to helping me improve."

One aspect that many attendees enjoy is the chance to work with members from all over the country.

"Leadership Academy is a great way to bring activists from different branches across the country together to share information, broaden their network and make contacts that will help them do their jobs as leaders," President Renfroe said.

Patrick Johnson attended the Academy in 2014 at the suggestion of the president of Milwaukee, WI Branch 2. "I decided to attend the Leadership Academy after talking to my mentor, Steve Erceg, who was at that time the president of my branch. Steve explained that he felt that I was a future leader within the branch and that the Leadership Academy would help me hone those skills," the Region 7 NBA said.

"The Leadership Academy helped me to fine-tune skills necessary to be an effective leader, such as public speaking, organization and time management, all of which helps me greatly in my current position as national business agent," he said.

Williams continued as the lead instructor through Class 20 in the fall of 2015. Other facilitators stepped in to fill the void as Williams and the other original facilitators retired or moved on. One of them was Wittenburg, who became an instructor for Class 23 in 2018.

"When asked by the NALC to assist in facilitating the Leadership Academy, immediately upon retirement from being NBA, I felt honored to serve my union in this capacity," he said. "It had been 13 years since graduating from the Leadership Academy, and to see the up-and-coming leaders excited and eager to enhance their leadership skill set was refreshing."

The curriculum has evolved over the years, with feedback both from instructors and from each attendee. "Some classes have been added and expanded based on input from the classes," Williams said. "The classes have changed to meet perceived needs. At the same time, a few subjects were dropped and others added. One example is the demographics class, which was added. An internal snapshot of our membership

A breakout session during the first Leadership Academy





Leadership Academy Class 1

has helped future leaders see trends. For the most part, the major subject headings are still there.”

Morgan agreed, explaining that the main facilitators hold a strategic planning session once a year, deciding whether each class is relevant and effective. “The Leadership Academy is a living and breathing training. It evolves with the times. The main tenants remain the same, but how they are presented changes from class to class,” he said.

“In the last strategic planning session, we talked about how to talk about artificial intelligence, critical thinking, and the movement toward paperless training,” Morgan said. “We don’t want the books of information to sit on a shelf. We want the students to be able to look back on what they learned in a place that is close to them.”

Looking back

For the 20th anniversary, Williams presided over the graduation ceremony of the most recent class on May 23. “Returning to see the quality of the students was gratifying to me,” he said. “Some critics said the Leadership Academy would stop after a few classes due to the fact the quality of the students would diminish over time. Just the opposite happened.”

He’s also glad to see that the training is having its desired effect. “Graduates are filling needed leadership roles at the local, state and national levels,” he said. “To see the current Executive Council with many graduates makes me see that the Leadership Academy continues to be an important formative place for future leaders.”

Wittenburg agrees. “The value to our members with educated and experienced leaders is immeasurable, and the Leadership Academy plays an important part in this goal,” he said.

Mudd used her experience with the Academy not to help herself, but to help others. “We all work for the members, and the Leadership Academy provided me with the skills to do so,” she said. “My career in the NALC has always been about helping letter carriers and mentoring them along the way. Leadership Academy helped me to be able to do that in whatever capacity I serve.”

Williams is modest about the accomplishment of creating the Leadership Academy, wanting to focus on the “pay-it-forward” mentality of mentorship. “I want to thank those who continue to be mentors at the local level, as well as the teachers and mentors at the Academy itself,” he said. “A goal of the Academy is that we model what we teach. The current and past mentors have done an incredible job continuing to maintain and raise the bar.”

Application period is open

Applications are currently being accepted for the next Leadership Academy. Applications will be accepted until Friday, Sept. 26. They are on the NALC website at nalc.org/leadership.

The application includes an essay of 300 to 500 words, in which potential students explain their interest in the NALC Leadership Academy and discuss their qualifications. It also requests an essay from the mentor about why the applicant should participate in the Academy and what they see in the student’s potential as a future union leader.

“I always tell potential applicants to go for it!” Mudd said. “Our union has too many people to count who are deserving and would be an asset to the Leadership Academy. I tell them to maintain their resolve and keep applying. In the end, it’s worth the wait.” **PR**

Scan this QR code to go to the Leadership Academy application.

