Finding Your Path as a NALP Leader:
Moving Beyond the Barriers to Leadership

by Lisa Abrams

Whether you’re a long-standing member or a newcomer to NALP, you can reap rich personal and professional rewards by stepping into a NALP leadership role. NALP is an organization that allows you to increase your knowledge of the profession by learning from and sharing information with your peers. At the same time, NALP provides members with unparalleled opportunities to develop and polish new skills, expand leadership competencies, and take on challenges beyond the limits of their day-to-day job descriptions.

Lynne Traverse, Recruiting & Professional Development Manager for Bryan Cave LLP in Phoenix, says, “Through NALP I’ve had the chance to take on tasks and learn skills that would normally have been considered ‘out of the box’ within the firm, such as public speaking, coaching, and multiple opportunities for leadership. As a result, I’ve been able to bring those skills to my job, enhancing my value to the firm and my own work/life satisfaction.”

Skip Horne, a past NALP President who is the Director of Graduate Programs & Continuing Education for the University of San Diego School of Law, comments, “One of the best rewards of my NALP service has been the tremendous number of close friendships I’ve made along the way. I consider many of my NALP friends to be part of my extended family.”

Another former President, Bonnie Hurry, who is Chief Legal Personnel Officer for Willkie Farr & Gallagher, says, “The benefits of volunteering are numerous. First, you develop a much broader base of knowledge about the industry. Second, your network of colleagues on whom you can rely for helpful information expands. Finally, volunteering within your area of professional expertise pays off in ways that you cannot predict. Often you gain great recognition in your local area, you are sought out for more opportunities, and your employer recognizes and may reward the commitment.”

Barriers to NALP Leadership

With the rich rewards of leadership, why don’t more of us step onto the NALP leadership path? The unfortunate truth is that most of us face significant barriers to NALP leadership. Perhaps some of these barriers sound familiar:

It can be difficult to know where to start. You may want to step up, but don’t know where your talents, interests, and skills best fit. Or perhaps you’ve spoken to a NALP leader at a conference and offered to get involved but feel as if your offer to help got lost in a vacuum.

Maybe you’re discouraged by seeing the same names over and over in leadership positions. Perhaps you’ve come to think that NALP leadership is a popularity contest requiring you to know the “right” people. You don’t know how to make yourself someone whose name is familiar to the membership or how to position yourself to meet a wider range of NALP members. Perhaps you’re uncertain what leadership paths are likely to lead to an elected or appointed office in NALP.
Time commitments can be a huge barrier to leadership. In this economy, most school and employer members find their work has multiplied, with little relief in sight in terms of additional staff or resources. Taking on a NALP leadership position can seem like an overwhelming commitment on top of work, family, and community obligations. Perhaps the very limited amount of time you can dedicate to NALP makes you doubt your leadership contribution could make a difference.

Some of us face a lack of institutional support. You may have a dean or hiring partner who doesn’t see the value in NALP leadership, or who only encourages highly visible levels of involvement (such as an elected or appointed office). While your dean or hiring partner may see the value in involvement with the ABA or LSAC, he or she may question the value of NALP leadership unless it involves a prominent role such as the Board of Directors. Further, your dean or hiring partner may not realize that it’s typical for candidates for slated or elected office to experience a multi-year nomination process, in which they may be considered by the Nominating Committee three or more years before being selected for the Board of Directors or an officer position. You may be concerned that multiple nominations requiring institutional recommendations are using up your institutional capital.

Having been disappointed after a nomination for an elected or slated position can lead to a “what’s the use” feeling, and, as mentioned above, can leave you reluctant to consider nomination in a subsequent year.

Perhaps you’re an introvert who is overwhelmed by the seemingly extroverted nature of NALP’s membership. In the cacophony of voices during breaks at a NALP educational conference, even those who are sure they are extroverts may begin to question themselves. But the truth is that there are many introverts in our organization and there are numerous places where quiet or behind-the-scenes leadership is an asset.

Maybe you’re not confident in your level of knowledge or experience in the profession and feel that you’re still learning and not quite ready to step on the leadership path. (The truth here is that we’re ALL still learning, and that’s one of the best parts of our profession.)

The Key to Stepping onto the Path of Leadership: Taking a Broad View of Leadership Opportunities

By taking a broader look at the myriad leadership opportunities NALP offers, it becomes clear that there is a leadership opportunity appropriate for almost every member. This is true whether you are an experienced NALPer or a new member, an introvert or an extrovert, or someone with two hours to spare or a willingness to share countless hours. There is a place for your leadership, depending on your interests, your availability, and your skills.

For those who think they don’t have enough time to become involved, Marty Grenhart, Recruitment Manager for the University of California, Berkeley School of Law and Chair of NALP’s CSO Employer Outreach Interest Group, believes participating in conference calls is an excellent first step toward NALP leadership. “Join a conference call,” she advises. “Come prepared to speak up and contribute. Even an ‘environmental scan’ — talking about two or three things you’re hearing about or noticing in your area or in your work — can be very useful information to contribute on a call. People will remember you and you’ll ‘meet’ a wider range of NALP members.”

To those who believe they don’t know the right people to move into a leadership role, Kisha Nunez, Manager of Recruiting and Diversity for Wachtell, Lipton, Rosen & Katz, says, “Become involved in a meaningful way by raising your hand and volunteering for a task.” She adds that the NALP leadership path is not about whom you know but about the work you do. “It’s your work that shows your commitment to the organization.”
she notes, “and NALP members will recognize your level of engagement.”

When most of us think of NALP leadership, we think of the highly visible positions that are slated, elected, and appointed. These include Board of Directors and officer positions, committee chairs, Regional Coordinators, and Nominating Committee members. The size of the organization as well as the nature of the nomination process and the organization’s efforts to balance the needs of a diverse membership, however, impacts the nomination and election process. This can result in frustration for those nominated for leadership positions. It’s not unusual, for example, for a member to be nominated three or more times before being elected to a position such as Regional Coordinator, and it’s also not unusual for a member to be nominated for multiple years for slated positions (such as service on the Board of Directors) before actually being named to the slate.

This means that as members we have to understand the nominating/slating/election process and the reasoning behind the process, and we must take it upon ourselves to educate our employers about how the process works. Our supervisors at schools and legal employers need to understand that our first, second, or even third nomination may not result in our election, slating, or appointment. Nevertheless, we must persuade them there is value to the member and the member’s institution in the nomination process. Detailed information about the nominating process and the associated leadership offices is available at www.nalp.org/nominating and in Section VIII of NALP’s Bylaws (www.nalp.org/bylaws#sectionVIII).

It’s critically important for members and their employers to know that slated, elected, and appointed positions are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to NALP leadership opportunities. Viewed on the whole, and taking into account section chairs, vice-chairs, committee members, and other volunteer positions, NALP offers a vast number of leadership positions.

Five Points of Access: Excellent Places to Step on the NALP Leadership Path

Whether you’re just beginning your leadership journey or you’re renewing a long-standing commitment to NALP, you can further develop your professional skills and build rewarding new relationships by exploring the five leadership options listed below. These five opportunities are “access points” — excellent places to jump onto the leadership path. They are not intended as an exhaustive list of opportunities, but rather as a starting point in imagining yourself in a NALP leadership role beyond the elected/slated positions we typically think of.

1. **Consider becoming a vice-chair or member of a NALP section.**

NALP sections are a wonderful jumping on place in your leadership path, no matter which of the barriers to leadership you face. Sections have open membership and need volunteers. For 2010-2011, NALP has fourteen sections and interest groups with a wide range of subject matter areas appealing to both school and employer members.

If you’re new to NALP, the Newer Professionals Section is a natural place to begin to lead, as it is designed for NALP members who have been in the profession two years or less. The Experienced Professionals Section provides a welcoming place for experienced professionals to renew their commitment to NALP and to reenergize by spending time with others who have had at least eight years of experience in a lead role in the profession.

Jeff Becherer, Assistant Director of the career office at Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law, stepped into NALP leadership as a member of the GLBT Section last year and this year is chair of the section. “As an LGBT attorney,” he says, “I’ve always advised LGBT law students and lawyers. The activities of the NALP GLBT Section intersected with my interests.” Jeff adds that becoming involved in the section was an easy step to take because its members are “an extremely friendly and social group.”
Sections such as the Public Service Section provide an outstanding opportunity for NALP members at any level to learn more about public service opportunities available to law students and lawyers. Sections often have subsections that seek leaders, as well. For example, the Public Service Section has a work group overseeing the Public Service Mini-Conference. For a complete list of NALP sections, their work, and their chairs, see www.nalp.org/sections.

2. Write for the NALP Bulletin.

Writing for the NALP Bulletin is the ideal project for the introvert, the aspiring writer, or any member who wants to polish his or her writing skills. Writing for the NALP Bulletin provides tangible rewards. An article written for and published in the Bulletin is not only useful to the membership, it provides an impressive work product for you to share with your employer and becomes a valuable addition to your professional portfolio. A special bonus: NALP Bulletin editor Janet Smith is a marvelous editor. No matter how much writing experience you have, you’ll learn from her editing skills. Most of the articles featured in the Bulletin are proposed by and submitted through NALP sections and committees, so the best way to volunteer to write is through involvement in a section, but Janet Smith also welcomes hearing from members interested in writing and can be contacted at jsmith@nalp.org.

3. Become involved as an officer or chair for a city group or regional law school consortium.

A natural place to develop your professional knowledge and expertise is to become involved with NALP professionals from your own city or region. Though city groups and regional law school consortia are not formally a part of NALP, they are places where you’ll begin to meet NALP members and make a wide range of contacts. Serving as an officer of a city group or a chair of a consortium project such as a job fair is an excellent way to become known throughout your region. This is a particularly helpful way to build contacts if you hope to consider elected or slated positions in the future. Stacey Kielbasa, who is Director of Professional Development, Attorney Recruitment and Diversity for Chapman and Cutler LLP and serves on the current NALP Board of Directors, comments, “Serving my city group in a variety of officer positions allowed me to develop leadership skills and build a great network without an overwhelming time commitment (or prior experience). Also, my city group roles opened the door to greater involvement in NALP and additional leadership opportunities in the recruiting/PD/diversity community.”

You can learn more about city groups and law school consortia at www.nalp.org/city.

4. Submit a proposal to present a program at the Annual Educational Conference.

Putting your experience and creativity to work to develop a program proposal for the NALP Annual Education Conference is a leadership option that can be particularly appealing to experienced members. What better way to give back to NALP for the many educational conference programs that have influenced your career? The RFP for proposals is typically posted on NALP’s website in April for the next year’s conference (watch for announcements in NALPnow!). Participating in a section and collaborating with other section members on a program idea is an excellent way to develop a proposal, but you can also submit a proposal on your own (either as a solo presenter or in collaboration with colleagues).

A caveat for members interested in this option: NALP members are well known for their enthusiasm in submitting numerous proposals for the Annual Education Conference. The 2011 Conference Planning Committee was able to accept only 74 of the 175 proposals it received. This means that developers of proposals face a substantial risk of rejection. Ask any of us who have had proposals rejected (including this author, who has experienced numerous rejections, as have other members of the Leadership Advisory Group); it can be disappointing to develop and propose a program you are passionate about only to have it rejected. As a backup plan, you may want to consider using the proposal

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ideas as the basis for a NALP Bulletin article, re-shaping elements of the proposal that could be used by a city or consortium group or other audience, or revising it substantially to allow for submission to the Conference Planning Committee in a subsequent year. Those of us who have had our proposals passed over have found we invariably use at least some of the materials we developed in another context, often one we never anticipated.

5. Respond to NALP’s Call for Volunteers.

Explains NALP President Carol Sprague, “NALP is committed to providing opportunities to all of its members to further develop their knowledge and leadership skills, as well as affording them a vehicle to network.” With this charge in mind, NALP has developed a database of volunteers and their areas of interest. Whether you are interested in exercising your leadership skills on a micro or macro level, NALP values your skills in marketing, research, writing, finance, technology and other areas. NALP President-Elect Marcy Cox will be issuing an invitation to volunteers in early 2011; watch for this announcement to let her know where you might want to volunteer in 2011-2012. In the meantime, learn more about how you can become involved in NALP by visiting www.nalp.org/sections and joining one or more section e-mail discussion lists or by contacting a section or work group chair to indicate your interest in assisting.

A Place to Begin or Continue Building Your Leadership Path

“Membership participation is needed now more than ever,” says President Carol Sprague. Barriers to NALP leadership fade in light of the wide variety of opportunities for leadership at a level suited to your talents and interests. Begin or renew your NALP leadership path by considering one of the five points of access described above. Challenge yourself to discover the rewards of NALP leadership.

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