

Pathways to Leadership: NALP Involvement: Priceless!

by Deborah Cusumano Caldwell

As you start to think about your involvement in NALP and the different pathways to leadership, it's always rewarding — and humbling — to seek out and learn from those who have been real stars. Their success stories can be truly inspirational.

You'll find that there are so many ways to get involved: attending the NALP conference, joining a NALP Section, running for an elected NALP position, or being appointed by the Nominating Committee for a NALP Board position, for example. And NALP members are very willing to share advice and practical tips. Regardless of the path you take, be patient. Your time will come!

I spoke with Diane Downs during the 2012 NALP Annual Education Conference in Austin. Diane has had a remarkable career that makes her a role model for all of us. She has been the Director of Professional Development for Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld LLP (New York) since 2010, and has held previous positions as a career coach at Paul Hastings, Associate Dean for Career Planning and Placement at the University of Pennsylvania Law School, and Assistant Dean at the University of Chicago Law School. In her spare time, Diane is an avid runner and also sponsors a weekly knitting group called "Made by Mom."

Diane shared her thoughts about her NALP experiences and the benefits in volunteering, and the remainder of this article presents Diane's own words of experience and advice.

During the course of my career, I have had a variety of NALP positions. I've served on the NALP Nominating Committee, the Recruitment Practices Committee, the Public Service Committee (now the Public Service Section), the Board of Directors, and the Experienced Professionals Section. At the end of this year's NALP Annual Education Conference, I transitioned off of the Board of Directors, where I served a two-year term.

My boss was very amenable and supportive about my work with NALP. The firm considered my involvement as a professional development opportunity. This has been true even when I changed jobs during the middle of my two-year term. My new firm was committed to making sure I stayed involved in NALP.

Getting on the NALP Board did not happen overnight. I ran into some obstacles. In fact, I tried several times (five, to be exact) before finally making it onto the Board of Directors. Since the Board needs to represent a certain mix of schools, regions, and firms, not all candidates can be appointed. So, although you may be well qualified, it may take some time before all the puzzle pieces fall into place and all the stars align. Regardless, continue to try as long as it takes.

I remember my first Board meeting quite well. It was very nerve racking! It was an intensive meeting and I wasn't sure how to prepare. I wasn't sure what they would ask me to contribute. I spent many hours familiarizing myself with the binder that includes some of NALP's core documents like the strategic plan, the business plan, and all the director reports. Board members have a full

slate of responsibilities involving finances, education, public service, and programmatic issues — among other things — that need attention so that the association remains relevant to members. These duties generally come up on a quarterly basis and can take 10-20 hours in addition to the Board meeting itself.

In addition to these responsibilities, I faced several other challenges. Since I switched jobs between the second and third Board meeting, I wanted to make sure I was a good Board member while ending one job and starting a new one. And, I wanted to make sure that I proved myself at my new firm while having a Board leadership role that required a significant time commitment. I found I was able to make my outreach calls for NALP during the day. But I was aware of the importance of balancing my new job responsibilities with my active NALP Board role, which required traveling for two to three nights four times a year.

I also had two young children (ages 2 and 3 at the time) when I served on the Board. It was sometimes difficult to sleep through the night or eat a full meal. If you have a busy life outside of the office, be sure to spend time taking care of yourself and remain interwoven in your family life.

The positives of NALP involvement, however, make the juggling at the office and at home extremely worthwhile. For example, I was able to develop a professional network at a deeper level and I was better able to articulate the importance of NALP to others. Many times, when I am looking for ideas, feedback, or different perspectives on a recruitment or professional development issue, I can just pick up the phone or shoot an email to a NALP colleague and get a quick answer that helps me in my decision-making. I also developed some very concrete skills from serving on the Board, in-

cluding learning how to read a balance sheet, parse Board/policy decisions from factual questions, and view information from different perspectives. I've been able to use these skills in my role at the firm in budgeting for my department and in communicating about attorney development initiatives with attorneys at the firm. Being involved with NALP gave me opportunities to develop new personal and professional friendships, gain substantive experiences, and acquire meaningful skills. Priceless, as they say!

My parting advice to anyone who is considering more active NALP involvement: Go for it and continue to go for it. Don't take it personally if you don't get elected or selected. Ask for feedback from the Nominating Committee to learn why you didn't get the appointment. Ask the Nominating Committee for advice and feedback so your application can be concise and persuasive. Finally, educate your employer or recommenders as to why you might be asking for that recommendation two or more years in a row.

Once you are appointed to a NALP position, make yourself indispensable within the organization. Give your colleagues reason to reach out to you for advice. Be visible and be active. You will get so much out of your NALP experience. I encourage everyone to get involved.

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