

How to Start (or Revive) a NLG Chapter at Your School

By Whitney Leeds, University of Colorado NLG Graduate and NLG National Student Vice-President, 2012-13

Many students stress the value of collaboration with like-minded peers during law school as both a vital coping mechanism as well as a tool to advance their social justice goals. While some law schools have more activists than others, even very conservative schools have a small group of people looking to use their legal skills to help people. Finding or starting an NLG chapter at your school is one way to create a community that will offer social support, introduce you to a network of legal activists within and beyond your law school, and help you organize for change at your law school.

Law students currently represent one-third of Guild membership and over 120 law schools have NLG chapters already established. Law students take part in every level of decision-making in the organization and are represented nationally by two elected student representatives. Students also serve on the steering committees of local chapters and as representatives on Guild committees and projects. Students meet annually at the student caucus of the NLG convention, where they work with the Student Coordinator and Student National Vice Presidents to set a national agenda for NLG students each year. Throughout the year, students from across the country collaborate to plan national campaigns and days of action.

To find out if your school has an active chapter, check the list of law schools and contacts on the NLG website. If you are uncertain of the status of the NLG at your school, contact the National Office for more information. If your school does not have a NLG chapter, or if the chapter has become defunct, the National Office can help you start or revive a chapter. We have numerous resources on our website, including a chapter start-up kit and checklist, an organizing guide for student chapters, sample bylaws and constitutions, sample budget applications, fliers to help with recruiting, and materials for tabling.

This section offers suggestions for starting/reviving a chapter based on the experiences of the University of Colorado chapter, as well as a list of best practices for chapter organizing drawn from the NLG “Beyond Disorientation” Guide written by previous Student Organizer Michel Martinez.¹ Remember that the NLG National Student Organizer is always available and ready to help!²

Lessons Learned at the University of Colorado

For many of us, especially those who entered a law school without an active Guild chapter, the process of indoctrination in legal education can be one of the more alienating and dehumanizing experiences of our lives. One of the aims in this section, and in starting a Guild chapter itself, is to equip students with a method of coping with legal education that allows them both to stay true to their principles and to exercise their social justice muscles.

Before reading this list of suggestions based on the revival of the University of Colorado NLG chapter, keep in mind that there are many ways to start or revive a student chapter, and this is merely one of them. The order of tasks listed is flexible, as is the composition of the list itself. In writing this section, we by no means intend to prescribe the method you choose; this is merely meant as a guidepost. And as always, if you have questions about starting or reviving your chapter,

get in touch with the Student Organizer in the National Office or with your Student National Vice Presidents. GOOD LUCK!

If you are starting or reviving a NLG chapter:

- **Find a faculty advisor and make sure to follow your school's procedures for starting a student organization.** Each school has its own unique policies and procedures for new student organizations, so make sure to visit the Dean's Office, the Head of Student Affairs, and the Student Bar Association to make sure you are following the correct steps. Additionally, if you are unable to pinpoint a faculty member who may be a good candidate for faculty advisor, reach out to the National Office or your local NLG chapter for help.
- **Get in touch with the student organizer at the National Office** and let them know you are interested in starting/reviving a chapter. The National Office will send you a package of materials to get started; it is also a great resource for navigating the complexities of building a student chapter. Contact information for the National Office as well as a number of resources are available on student page of the NLG website.
- **Reach out to the local NLG chapter near you.** NLG chapters are present in most cities and states, and students starting law school chapters should reach out to attorney and legal worker members nearby. Local NLG members are often great resources for students and can help move along the process of solidifying a new student chapter. They also may be able to help find a suitable faculty advisor, give presentations on Guild-related topics, and act as mentors for NLG students. NLG members are usually thrilled to get involved with the next generation of movement lawyers. If you are having trouble getting in touch with your local chapter, contact the National Office.
- **Hold a Disorientation at the beginning of the fall and/or spring semester.** Disorientation is an event the NLG has been putting on for decades to introduce new law students to the Guild, to educate them about "people's lawyering," and to impress upon them the importance of maintaining their values and critical analysis throughout law school. The materials for Disorientation can be obtained by contacting the Student Organizer, and the current *Disorientation Manual* can be downloaded for free on the NLG website. The National Office and your local chapter can help you organize Disorientation events with NLG speakers and materials.
- **Become a part of your local community.** One way to make your NLG chapter strong is to become a part of the local community. More specifically, it can be a great boon to the chapter to be connected to local grassroots organizations and movement leaders. By fostering bonds with local organizations and activists, the chapter can:
 - Use the opportunity to network within local movements
 - Learn from movement leaders
 - Hold speaking events with movement leaders on assorted topics
 - Carry out campaigns relevant to issues affecting the local community
 - Become part of the movement.³
- **Build relationships with movement movers and shakers.** This could have been included in the previous bullet, but it's important enough to warrant an individual listing. In many

instances, it is easy to identify the most outspoken and prominent leaders in different movements. These are often terrific individuals to bring to campus to talk with students about issues impacting local communities. They are also great resources if you are interested in starting a campaign. The important thing is to be open-minded about how you may use your relationships with these leaders to build the chapter and the movement.

- **Bring as many of your members as you can to regional and national NLG conferences.** It's difficult to get to know a national organization solely through local interaction. National and regional conferences help students better understand the Guild and its work, their opportunities as Guild members, and how to get involved. Additionally, it cannot be overstated the extent to which being surrounded by social justice-minded peers can hearten and re-energize one's work. It also allows a space to prepare national and regional campaigns, network with lawyers, law students, and legal workers who are working on similar issues, and get educated about new issues. And of course, it's a great avenue for networking!
- **Start a campaign.** Once the chapter has a solid core of dedicated students, the time may be ripe to begin a campaign. There are many methods to go about structuring a campaign, but the following is one (albeit skeletal) suggestion:
 - Meet with the chapter to discern what they are most interested in working on
 - From those areas of interest, identify goals of potential campaigns
 - Gauge whether and which of those goals are SMART – specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timely. It's often also helpful to come up with a timeline, like deciding to make the campaign last one semester, one year, two years, etc.
 - Decide on a campaign, and follow through with it
 - Celebrate your successes—even minor ones—with a happy hour, pot luck, sing-along, or other social event to re-energize the group and harness its energy into another successful campaign
 - There is also a wealth of resources on structuring and carrying out a successful campaign. For further guidance, check with the National Office or online.
- **Acknowledge the need for balance between school work and activism.** While it is beneficial to continue to organize and work for social justice causes while in law school, it is equally important to spend enough time focused on assigned work as well as applying for internships, fellowships, and jobs. To avoid burnout of NLG law school members, be sure to match the goals of the group with the people and resources available. Make sure that everyone has clear tasks that are within their capabilities and be careful not to let the bulk of work fall onto a few members. As a general rule, 1Ls should not be given a lot of responsibility until they have adjusted to law school.
- **Empower the next generation of students.** Oftentimes chapters are spearheaded by one exuberant personality, and after they graduate the chapter falls back into remission. Though enthusiasm should be encouraged, in the interest of sustainability, it's important to pass on that energy. This means educating newer students about the Guild, local social movements, and chapter building, as well as empowering them to take leadership roles within the

chapter. Get to know new students to the Guild, and when you find out their main areas of interest, make sure they know how to reach out to those Guild committees. If the students have difficulty connecting with members of the committee, advise them to reach out to the National Office.

- **Take concrete steps as a 2L and 3L to keep your chapter from becoming defunct upon your departure.** Identify 1Ls and 2Ls who might be potential leaders of the chapter and mentor them on chapter building. Introduce newer members to the contacts you've made both in the local Guild as well as in local social movements, in person if possible. Create a list of these contacts to give to newer members so that those connections aren't lost, making sure to alert individuals on the list to the fact that they may be contacted by other law students. Invite newer members to spearhead projects or campaigns. Make sure responsibilities are spread out among more experienced and newer members.
- **Join the NLG!** To become a member of the national organization, students are required to officially join and pay dues (\$20-50 sliding scale). It is very important to actually take the step of joining. Membership includes access to NLG committees and projects, fellowships, mentorship programs, publications, trainings, conventions, listservs, and more! You can join online through the NLG website or by sending in a hard copy of the membership form included in the back of the *Disorientation Manual*.⁴

Best Practices for NLG Student Chapter Organizing

By Michel Martinez, NLG Student Organizer (2009-11)

General Suggestions

- Have a kick-off party to start the year right and a farewell party to end it right
- Recruit constantly! Continually promote the Guild, your chapter, projects, and the idea of radical lawyering
- Find a good advisor: Someone who's communicative, supportive, resourceful, and politically active
- Be self-reliant and self-motivated as a chapter, but open to and supportive of coalition projects and events
- Where possible, include graduate and undergraduate students (especially pre-law society folks) to broaden your impact
- Carefully and realistically adapt the number of your activities to the size and resources of your chapter

Organizing, Networking, Recruiting

- Build a strong team of core members, student allies, and supporters in the school's administration
- Encourage diversity among chapter officers; encourage people of color to take leadership positions
- Be sure your chapter is officially recognized by campus administration
- Openly recognize solid efforts and congratulate successes of members

- Maintain a calendar of tasks, current contacts list, and open communication
- Plan a social event: Bar Review, Coffee Hour, Potluck, Bowling, Hiking, Snowboard Trip, Movie Night
- Generate funds for chapter activities, e.g. sending members to the NLG convention
- Maintain a webpage and/or Facebook page
- Submit an article about your work and chapter to *Guild Notes*, the national NLG Newsletter
- Interact with members and officers of other chapters through the listservs and blogs

Providing Radical Lawyering & Public Interest Law Training, Education, Exposure

- Set up a Radical Lawyering Public Interest Law Day or mini-conference
- Set up a mentorship program with the local Guild chapter or local radical lawyers
- Publicize internships, job openings, and fellowships with progressive organizations
- Organize Student Seminars, debates, awareness-weeks, symposia, or faculty research/clinical presentations
- Organize a Speaker Series around a theme, presenting practical and theoretical examinations of the issues
- Organize field trips to law offices, court arguments, government hearings, council sessions, etc.
- Invite NLG alumni or local chapter members to speak

Promoting Participation & Interaction with the NLG at large

- Encourage people to become official members of the NLG and its committees—this assures that they receive, at minimum, the latest NLG news, job openings, opportunities for involvement, and publications
- Participate in related conferences and community workshops as a Guild delegate/in the name of the NLG
- Take leadership roles in the Guild at the local, regional, national, or committee level
- Invite local Guild members to campus as speakers
- Hold a NLG membership drive at your law school

Promotion & Nomination for Student Awards

- NLG's *C.B. King Award* (AKA Law Student of the Year award)
- Create a *Law Student* or *Activist of the Year* award for your own campus

Service Activities

- As a group, fundraise for charity, volunteer in disaster areas, at women's shelters, or with Food Not Bombs
- Bring the NLG to local schools through Street Law, Know Your Rights, or Counter-Recruiting workshops

Further Resources

Law Student page of the NLG website: <http://www.nlg.org/student>

“Beyond Disorientation: An Organizing Guide for Guild Students.” Available at <http://www.nlg.org/sites/default/files/Beyond%20Disorientation--Radicalizing%20Your%20Campus%20with%20the%20National%20Lawyers%20Guild.pdf>.

Bill Quigley, “Letter to a Law Student Interested in Social Justice” and “Reflections of Community Organizers: Lawyering for Empowerment of Community Organizations.”

¹ This list is taken from the NLG’s “Beyond Disorientation: An Organizing Guide for Guild Students,” written by previous Student Organizer Michel Martinez. The full guide is available on the NLG website and includes detailed information on officers and chapter structure, recruitment, events and projects, publicity, fundraising, and ideas for chapter organizing. It also contains an organizing calendar to help you stay on track during the year.

² To contact the current NLG Student Organizer, Traci Yoder, send an email to traci@nlg.org.

³ Keep in mind that law students and lawyers are often given a level of authority within a movement based on their education that is undeserved and needs to be checked in order to avoid hampering the movement itself. To better understand this precarious position it may be helpful to read Bill Quigley’s, “Letter to a Law Student Interested in Social Justice” and “Reflections of Community Organizers: Lawyering for Empowerment of Community Organizations.”

⁴ Please note: Individuals who live in or around New York City, Los Angeles, the San Francisco Bay Area, or in Michigan or Massachusetts, must pay dues directly to their chapters. If you have any questions about your membership, contact the Student Organizer.