

Class of 2000 Keeps the IBEW Out Front As New Era Dawns for Labor's College

“The nation is full of colleges teaching how to kick unions,” says Ken Anderson, 40, a business representative for Local 134 in Chicago, Illinois. “I’m proud to be part of a program that equips us to kick back.”

Anderson earned a college degree last year through the unique AFL-CIO program of The National Labor College. Anderson says the difference in being able to hold your own with management is the intangible of confidence—“the confidence to bargain against lawyers.”

There were 12 IBEW members in Anderson’s class of 1999, and 10 more received degrees in the class of 2000. That brings the total of IBEW graduates to 63, by far the most from any one union among the 304 union members who have graduated since the program awarded its first degree in 1975.

The bachelor’s degree program in labor studies, with credit for work expe-



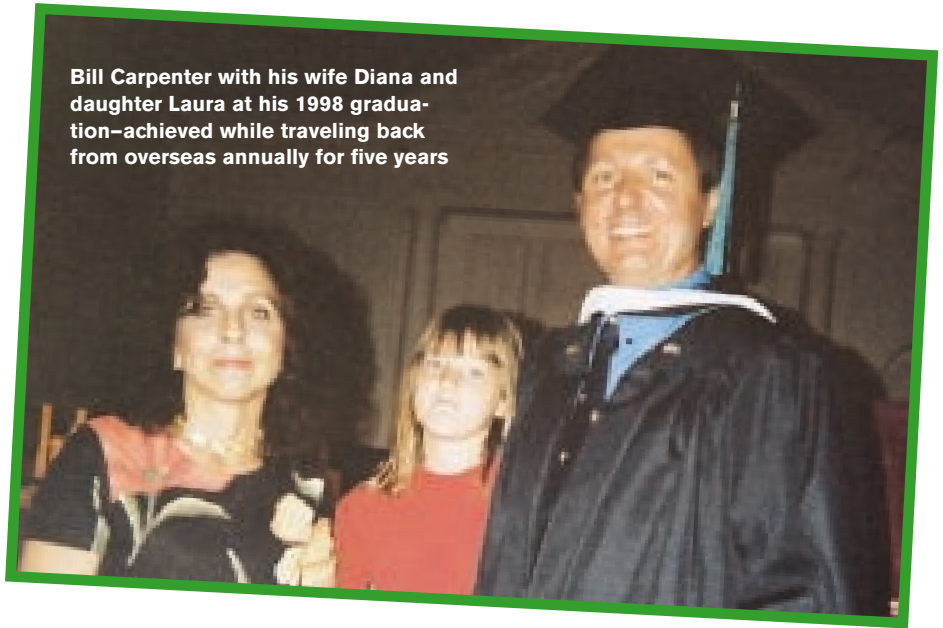
Ken Anderson says a degree brings the confidence to hold your own against those who would beat up unions.

rience, is well established at the AFL-CIO George Meany Center for Labor Studies, but dramatic changes have come since 1997, when the name National Labor College was born. It is now a college accredited on its own, offering a wider curriculum and poised to take advantage of Internet-based distance learning that will potentially change education of all types in the new century.

Notable among the coming changes will be the chance to turn a union apprenticeship into a bachelor’s degree. Nancy Gentile, vice president for student



Bill Carpenter with his wife Diana and daughter Laura at his 1998 graduation—achieved while traveling back from overseas annually for five years



services at The National Labor College, says 13 courses in English, social services and the humanities will be offered to fill in what's needed to go with math and science credits accepted from the apprenticeship programs. Also on the drawing board are satellite campuses, which will cut down on the treks to the Meany Center for future students.

"We are very proud of our members' involvement in the college degree program because they have displayed the desire for improvement that is a characteristic of our union," said International President J. J. Barry. "The program brings together much of what our members seek—personal fulfillment, academic achievement, a lifetime of advancement and a level of skills that is second to none."

The Labor Studies Center started almost 30 years ago in a suite of basement rooms in a downtown Washington apartment building. It moved to its spacious campus in suburban Silver Spring, Maryland, when AFL-CIO President George Meany engineered the purchase of the grounds of a seminary being closed by an order of Catholic priests. The campus has the convenience of a location bordering on the Capital Beltway and has undergone dozens of additions and renovations, including the modern new building that houses labor's archives.

But none of that change can rival the innovations ahead for the degree program or the change already achieved by having trade unionists take their degrees home to put them to work for working people.

Clearly, several years of settling grievances is superior to theorizing about the process from an industrial relations textbook in a big-name university. Even the strictest among the academics would admit that—but how do you prove it? Fortunately, the U.S. military services long ago developed a system for match-

ing academic hours to job experience that has been useful to winning accreditation for labor education.

Also expediting the accreditation process was the fact that in a quarter of a century of offering a bachelor's degree in labor studies, the teaching was done exclusively on campus at the Meany Center, even though the degree was from Antioch College. This experience enabled the National Labor College to become accredited on an expedited basis. In July of this year, the last Antioch students graduated, and by that time the National Labor College was graduating its second class.

Bill Carpenter, 49, a journeyman wireman in Local 683, Columbus, Ohio, thinks he may have set a record with his eight years of study to reach the degree. But he made it, and was speaker of the Class of 1998 despite spending five of those years overseas, working in project management for ARAMCO in Saudi Arabia. His case proves flexibility is one of the great advantages of the labor studies program.

"E-mail came along at the right time to cut down on the phone and fax bill,"

he says of his time in staying in touch with professors spread out in places as far flung as Texas, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Maryland and Missouri. He had two weeks of vacation in the job overseas and used one week of it every year from 1993 through 1998 for his on-campus visits—one-half as often as other students, but enough to get the job done and the degree won.



Andrew Cuvo

This year brings retirement for the first IBEW member to earn a degree, Andrew Cuvo of Local 102 in Paterson, New Jersey, who is 66 and graduated in 1979. He was business manager of his pre-merger Local 367 for 22 years and a business agent of Local 102 from 1994 to his retirement. The program had one graduate in 1975 and

Brother Cuvo was one of five in 1979. That start contrasts with the 88 who graduated last year, 42 from the National Labor College and 46 from the final Antioch class.

Brother Anderson says one of his first impressions of the program was that IBEW members consistently get more credit for their apprenticeship classes than any other trade. That was a

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Jim Underwood
Local 146
Decatur, Illinois

major point of pride to this third generation IBEW member whose grandfather Rocky Anderson was president of Local 134 in the 1960s. The network of his fellow IBEW members in the degree program will continue to help him, he says, and now he's back at it, starting work on a master's degree.

"Full employment is a good time to be a referral agent," according to Randolph Scott, who got his degree in 1997. Scott, 53, a business representative for Local 26, Washington, D.C., remembers his classes in labor history and labor law as being particularly intense, but also that the legal study has proven very practical. He remembers when there were calls for electricians only once or twice a week, "but 1999 and 2000 have been crazy, giving members a choice among jobs."

Sharing experiences with members of other unions is mentioned as a valuable side benefit by several graduates, including Mary Foley, also a business representative for Local 134 who has used e-mail to stay in touch with a dozen classmates. She completed her degree this year, cul-

minating an effort that saw her return to the classroom for the first time since 1974.

Sister Foley, 44, says she was told she was the third woman from IBEW to complete the course, which was expedited in her case because she got credit for her five years of work on negotiating and enforcing contracts for Local 134.

She journeyed to the labor studies center four times a year to complete the classes, where she found the course on political economy to be of particular interest.

Kirk Belsford of Local 1547, Anchorage, Alaska, who earned his degree in 1997, got an immediate payoff from his work on a labor studies degree. The classes and contacts he made in Washington, D.C., made him aware of

the federal law on plant closing notification and he rallied the labor movement to make it stick when management at a Lockheed-Martin plant was seeking to ignore the law. The result was a transition period of 90 days to six months to help the Lockheed-Martin employees adjust, not just an abrupt job loss.

Brother Belsford, a maintenance electrician for many years at Lockheed, has



Randolph Scott says Labor College classes helped him in his role as business agent.

Nine of the 10 IBEW members who graduated from the National Labor College in the Class of 2000. The class included Kevin Bennett, John Cunningham, Brent Donohue, Robert Dow, Mary Ellen Foley, Joseph Martin, Terry McNerney, Richard Murphy, Robert Smith and James Underwood.



since moved on to a master's degree in telecommunications and an MBA in international business. He recites a list of Meany Center professors and classes—in topics like the future of work, the history of labor, and union films—that made a lasting impression.

"It's the educational opportunity of a lifetime," says Jim Underwood of Local 146 in Decatur, Illinois. A former organizer and assistant business manager, Brother Underwood, 44, says he got interested in the chance at a degree from listening at conventions and conferences to other IBEW members who had been through the program.

He was particularly impressed with the depth and ability of his professors. After the periodic one-week stints on campus, "you're turning in work and getting assignments from professors at colleges all across the country. I thought they were the best."

The new opportunities opened up by a bachelor's degree are reflected in what has happened to four IBEW alumni who are now on varied career paths.

The career direction experienced by Richard Heffernan of Local 2222, Boston, Massachusetts, is one of the easiest to relate directly to the doors opened by a college degree. Heffernan is now an administrative judge for the state agency handling workers' compensation. Heffernan, 63, earned his degree in 1984 and assumed his current position in 1986 after an IBEW career in which he served terms as president and business agent of Local 2222 and was also elected a vice president of the Massachusetts AFL-CIO.

Heffernan is one of multiple graduates who recalls with pleasure the camaraderie and excellent living conditions of his twice a year visits. Heffernan has formed lifetime associations from the experience and says there's no doubt the program "had a whole lot to do" with his subsequent appointments.

Statistics showing America does not lead the world



HOW TO GET MORE INFORMATION

IBEW members interested in gaining a degree under any of the multiple programs of the National Labor College are encouraged to call the college at 301-431-6400, write the National Labor College at 10000 New Hampshire Ave., Silver Spring, MD, 20903, or visit the website at www.georgemeany.org.

To earn a bachelor's degree, a student must earn a total of 120 semester credit hours. But credit can be earned in a variety of ways:

- up to 90 semester hours from another institution;
- up to 24 hours through examination;
- up to 60 hours through assessment of life experience;
- credits for military training, apprenticeships, union training programs and/or job training programs.

in measures like infant mortality "woke me up," says Hank McGuire, 55, of Local 46 in Seattle, Washington. Brother McGuire got his degree in 1988 and has since become an independent investor and real estate owner, leaving active IBEW membership in 1992.

"There's no question about how much the program broadens your perspective and leaves you much less provincial," he says, equating the constant union struggles he learned in the labor history classes with the decline in U.S. quality of life, "now that the nation is not as heavily unionized."

"Are you really an electrician?" is a question heard constantly by Virgil Barber, who delights in showing his fellow investment counselors his membership card in Local 481, Indianapolis, Indiana. Barber, 50, completed his degree in 1989, became a specialist on Taft-Hartley funds as business manager of Local 481, finished the years needed for his pension and launched his current career. He's vice president of an investment firm whose promotional material notes that he has brought in \$960 million in pension fund assets in the past three years.

One IBEW member who got political on campus stayed that way—Kevin O'Sullivan of Local 164 in Jersey City,

New Jersey. After two terms as the youngest member ever elected to his local's examining board, he enrolled in the college degree program, got elected student union president and has remained in politics ever since.

Brother O'Sullivan, now 30, is director of grass-roots political action for the AFL-CIO Building and Construction Trades Department. That position flowed from his successful work against Proposition 226 in California and a stint in Indiana coordinating building trades efforts in a targeted congressional district. He, too, is a third-generation IBEW member.

"I think it's a toss-up whether you learn more in the degree program from your professors or from your association with your fellow students," says Brother O'Sullivan. Those fellow students, particularly the IBEW members, formed a successful caucus to elect him to campus office—and should know they'll be hearing from him as he seeks building

trades activists for the 2000 election campaign.

Like the elections, the future of the labor studies degree program animates Brother O'Sullivan, who expects the new training center at his home Local 164 to be one of the future satellite campuses as The National Labor College continues its phenomenal growth.



Virgil Barber uses different tools now.