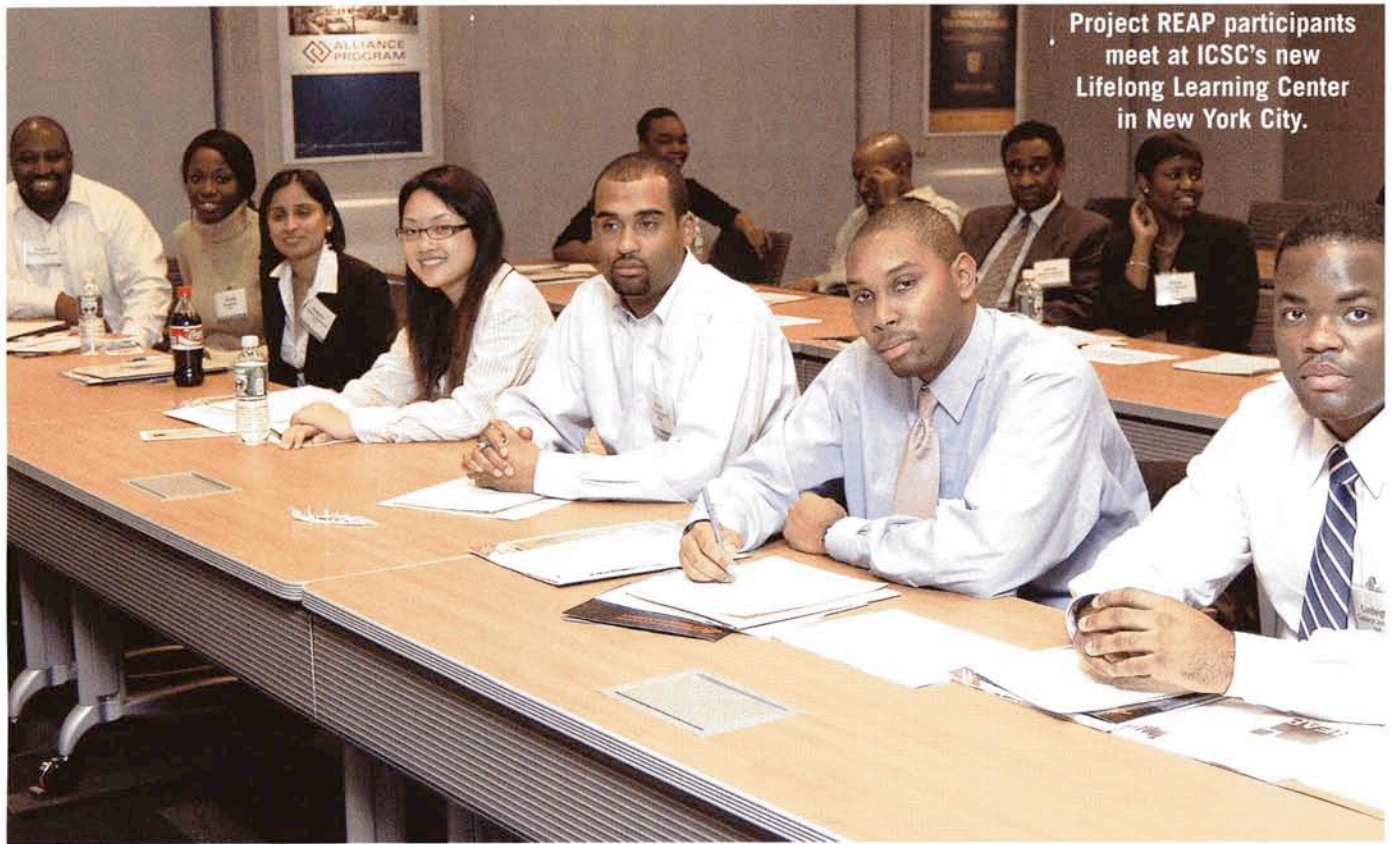


SHOPPING CENTERS TODAY



Project REAP participants meet at ICSC's new Lifelong Learning Center in New York City.

A FOOT IN THE DOOR

Project REAP helps minorities jump-start their real estate careers

By Sascha Brodsky

Trenna Ross dreams of owning a shopping center. But being a black woman, the idea of breaking into the retail real estate world once seemed to her an exercise in frustration. "I just didn't know anyone who could help me get into this field," she said.

She applied to Project REAP, a nonprofit organization dedicated to boosting the participation of racial and ethnic minorities in retail real estate. REAP (Real Estate Associate Program) trains minorities for professional careers in commercial real estate through education, networking and professional training at leading firms. "Minorities are under-represented in the shopping center industry," said Michael P.

Kercheval, president of ICSC, one of REAP's sponsors. "While we cannot go back and right the wrongs of the past, the future is ours to change."

Many graduates of the program have taken permanent positions at firms that develop, lease and manage shopping centers. Ten graduates from each class serve one year at a participating firm.

Mike Bush, a former vice president of real estate at Washington, D.C.-based Giant Food, started the program in 1997. He retired from the company in 2000 to run REAP full time.

The program is based on the premise that there is a dearth of minorities in commercial real estate because the business is not accessible through for-

mal schooling, Bush says. People tend to gain access to the industry through family, friends and colleagues, he says.

Each year about 1,200 people apply for 120 slots in Washington, Atlanta and New York City. ICSC provides funding and expertise, as well as a space for the New York program. Besides Giant Food, other sponsors include Charles E. Smith Commercial Realty; First Washington Realty; Greenhoot-Cohen Co.; Horning Bros.; Jenco Group; Rippeteau Architects; and Washington Real Estate Investment Trust.

Bush says the program has generated tremendous interest among companies. These companies (about 30 currently) offer financial and other kinds of support. They agree to send representatives to teach three evenings per semester, to attend three networking events and to provide a 12-month paid associate position to a REAP graduate.

REAP is no high school dropout program. The typical student is between 25 and 35 years old with a bachelor's degree and several years of business experience under the belt. Ross, 47, has had plenty of experience. She was a residential real estate broker for about 15 years. "I always wanted to do commercial real estate, but I didn't know how to break in," she said.

Ross, who grew up in a small town in North Carolina, took a roundabout route into the real estate world. After graduating from the University of North Carolina with a degree in business administration, she went to work as a branch manager at Liberty Mutual Insurance. She moved on to IBM but then took a buyout. With plenty of time on her hands, she went into business for herself, operating a tour bus company in Atlanta. "I learned all about cultural differences, because many of my clients were from overseas," she said.

When Ross entered REAP last year, she, like all the program's associates, attended class once a week for 20 weeks. The course covers basic financial concepts, budgeting, maintenance for office buildings, leasing strategies and the like. But classroom training is only the beginning. There are three mandatory networking receptions during the semester. The associates are also invited to educational and networking events sponsored by ICSC

and other professional associations. Graduates get career planning advice from industry veterans.

REAP's top five graduates in each city are awarded associate positions at sponsoring firms. Their responsibilities can include budget preparation and variance analysis, vendor contract supervision, tenant retention during renovation, market research, lease proposals and abstracts, database maintenance, rent collection and risk management.

Ross was placed with Ackerman & Co., where as an associate broker she handles leasing for some 30,000 square feet of retail space in a mixed-use development in Dekalb County, near Atlanta. She says she produced over \$3 million in sales and lease transactions last year.

"It's been a great opportunity to see how a terrific retail brokerage works," Ross said. Among the challenging tasks assigned to her was market analysis of the area.

REAP associate salaries range between \$55,000 and \$60,000. Sponsors do not guarantee a job after the 12 months are ended, but many associates do get permanent offers from their sponsors; others find permanent jobs through REAP contacts.

REAP graduate Carla Merrit accepted a full-time position as a leasing representative at The Rappaport Cos. "Before REAP I never considered commercial real estate as a career," she said.

James Morrow, class of 1998 and now a property manager at Jones Lang LaSalle, is another beneficiary. "Without REAP I wouldn't even have gotten an interview," Morrow said. "If you're not in the industry already, it's hard to break in. It's a catch-22."

Ross says she hopes to stay at Ackerman after the program. "It's been a fantastic learning experience," she said. Her ultimate goal is to develop a neighborhood shopping center of her own. "It will be a great way to generate wealth and have some residual income," she said.

Ross says lessons she learned from her father have been instrumental in helping her reach her goals. Thurman Ross was a self-employed contractor who encountered racism and was often not paid the amounts he was promised.

"He was able to overcome these obstacles by believing in himself," Ross said. "And that's what he taught us." ■