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Building the Next Generation of Cancer Center Leaders

By Brian D. Gonzalez, PhD; Thomas J. George, MD, FACP, FASCO; Anita L. Harrison, MPA; and Rebecca M. Peterson, PhD



Pictured clockwise from top left:

Brian D. Gonzalez, PhD, Moffitt Cancer Center, chairs the AACI Leadership Development Workshop (LDW) Steering Committee

Thomas J. George, MD, FACP, FASCO, University of Florida Health Cancer Institute, serves on the AACI LDW Steering Committee

Anita L. Harrison, MPA, UNC Lineberger Comprehensive Cancer Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, serves on the AACI LDW Steering Committee

Rebecca M. Peterson, PhD, BR Peterson Consulting Partners, serves on the AACI LDW Steering Committee

Commentary Overview

- Just 23 of 82 responding cancer centers (28%) reported having a formal leadership development program in a 2021 AACI survey, and most of those were not tailored to the specific demands of running a cancer center.
- AACI's two-day Leadership Development Workshop (LDW), launched in 2022, has sharpened its focus on cancer center-specific leadership skills, and the new, yearlong Leadership Advancement Program (LAP) will develop those skills and deepen participants' understanding of the National Cancer Institute Cancer Center Support Grant.
- Nominations for both the 2026 LDW and the inaugural LAP cohort are due by **Wednesday, September 30**.

Advances in science and technology, the growth of cancer center networks, expanding clinical research infrastructure, and efforts to extend services to more patients have

widened the scope and scale of cancer centers. That growth brings tremendous opportunities for cancer prevention, research, treatment, and outcomes, but it also raises the stakes for cancer center leadership, testing skills rarely provided through scientific or academic training alone.

Most of the physicians and scientists who move into a cancer center leadership pathway have never received formal training for the full scope of these responsibilities. Scientific and clinical expertise are essential for leading research programs and providing patient care, but running a large, complex cancer center requires an additional set of leadership skills and knowledge earned through tailored education, mentorship, dedicated training, and experience.

Today's cancer center leaders must navigate increasingly complex and matrixed organizational structures, build consensus across disciplines and departments, manage budgets and resources, communicate vision, support and develop the workforce, and adapt to a rapidly changing cancer care and research environment. Leaders seeking National Cancer Institute (NCI) designation must coordinate the adaptation of institutional processes and governance in support of a Cancer Center Support Grant (CCSG) application, while those leading NCI-Designated Cancer Centers face the ongoing demands of sustaining a CCSG, adding more layers to an already challenging role.

Despite these demands, in-house leadership training remains scarce. In a 2021 AACI survey, just 23 of 82 responding cancer centers (28%) reported their center offered formal leadership development programs. Of those, most were general leadership trainings leveraging institutional or university resources, not programs tailored to the specific demands of running a cancer center. That gap matters beyond individual institutions. Professional growth opportunities can boost job satisfaction and reduce burnout, helping organizations recruit and retain talented people. Research and clinical teams also benefit, as formally trained leaders are better equipped to facilitate increased productivity and improved coordination of patient care. Therefore, developing the next generation of leaders is both a strategy for strengthening individual careers and an investment in the long-term health of cancer centers.

AACI is helping its member centers close that gap with an expanding array of educational programming for new and emerging cancer center leaders.

Education and Training at AACI

Launched in 2022 as part of the [AACI presidential initiative](#) of Caryn Lerman, PhD, AACI's two-day [Leadership Development Workshop \(LDW\)](#) fosters core leadership skills while increasingly emphasizing competencies specific to cancer center leadership. Annual attendee feedback has shaped the curriculum, with topics now including personnel management, budgetary resource diversification, and collaborative partnership facilitation. In October, the LDW will welcome its fourth cohort of emerging cancer center leaders ahead of the 2026 AACI/CCAF Annual Meeting in Chicago.

Introducing the Leadership Advancement Program

The LDW was originally envisioned as a cohort-style development program with educational opportunities offered over the course of a year. AACI will launch the [Leadership Advancement Program \(LAP\)](#) this winter to fulfill that vision of a yearlong program. The LAP will serve as a companion program to the LDW and build on the foundation provided during the shorter workshop.

In the years following LDW's launch, AACI gathered feedback from participants and its cancer center network on leadership development needs and considered various mechanisms to enhance leadership skills and deepen understanding of what it takes to obtain and sustain NCI designation. AACI developed LAP's yearlong hybrid curriculum for a near-peer professional cohort. In addition to exploring leadership methodologies, the program will focus heavily on the CCSG, including its purpose, structure, and key components, along with practical guidance on running a CCSG-funded center.

The hybrid format pairs virtual learning sessions with in-person networking at the AACI Clinical Research Innovation Annual Meeting and AACI/CCAF Annual Meeting, balancing convenience

with real relationship building.

In addition to applying best practices in leadership, strategic planning, clinical research infrastructure, and shared-resource management, participants will build a multidisciplinary network of peers to support collaboration and professional development across cancer centers. Beyond 2027, participants will remain connected through an alumni network offering invitations to networking events, leadership discussions, and mentorship opportunities.

All LDW alumni, including those enrolled in the 2026 workshop, are eligible for nomination by their directors for the inaugural LAP cohort. Nominations for both the 2026 LDW and the LAP are due by **Wednesday, September 30**. We encourage cancer center directors to identify emerging leaders in their centers who are ready for this investment and give them the opportunity to build the skills that will shape the next generation of cancer center leadership.

[Submit a Leadership Development Workshop Nomination](#)

[Submit a Leadership Advancement Program Nomination](#)

Leadership Development Workshop Steering Committee

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Our Mission

The Association of American Cancer Institutes (AACI) represents over 100 premier academic and freestanding cancer centers in the United States and Canada. AACI is accelerating progress against cancer by enhancing the impact of academic cancer centers and promoting cancer health equity.

About AACI Commentary

To promote the work of its members, AACI publishes *Commentary*, an editorial series focusing on major issues of common interest to North American cancer centers, authored by cancer center leaders and subject matter experts.

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