

Founded 2005 • 20+ Years Serving Central Ohio • 400+ Leaders Developed • 40 Fellows Per Year

The African American Leadership Academy (AALA) prepares African American professionals in Central Ohio to lead at higher levels - in their careers, their organizations, and their communities. With nearly 450 alumni and a track record of measurable advancement, AALA builds the leadership bench that Central Ohio's future depends on.

AALA cultivates a community of belonging, respect and fairness by equipping diverse professionals with the leadership skills and networks to shape a more inclusive and equitable central Ohio. Individuals accepted into the Academy come with demonstrated excellence in their profession, a commitment to community service, and the desire to grow.

“To become a leader, you must first become who you are.” - Warren Bennis

Why does our mission matter?

We cannot “hope” that capable African American leaders will continue to emerge in our community. Invested individuals and organizations must work deliberately to ensure a continuous pipeline of high-quality leaders for an increasingly diverse community.

The leadership gap is real across every sector. Black Americans make up 13% of the U.S. workforce yet hold just 2% of Fortune 500 CEO seats. In Ohio, the most recent data shows African Americans held only 4.5% of C-suite positions at Fortune 500 companies, with Black women holding just 1.13%. This is not a talent gap - it is an access and opportunity gap.

The gap extends to civic and nonprofit leadership as well. According to United Way of Central Ohio's 2026 Voices at the Table report, Black and African American individuals make up only 21.8% of central Ohio nonprofit board members - even as Black residents represent 22.6% of Franklin County's population. Young adults, lower-income residents, and other underrepresented groups face similar barriers to board service, limiting the diversity of perspectives that shape our community's institutions.

Economic disparities compound these challenges. Fewer than 9% of nonprofit board members in central Ohio earn less than the area's median household income, while 64% report incomes of \$200,000 or more - a stark contrast to the communities many of these organizations serve. When leadership does not reflect the community, the community's needs go unmet.

AALA's vision is to ensure that capable African American professionals have the development, network, and opportunity to lead at every level - in corporations, nonprofits, government, and civic life.

**Sources: Fortune (February 2026); Pew Research Center / BLS (2023); Columbus Dispatch (2022); United Way of Central Ohio, Voices at the Table (March 2026).*

Facts about the Academy

- Founded in 2005 by a group of Columbus African American leaders
- 40 Fellows per year across two cohorts, drawn from the corporate, nonprofit, government, education, and entrepreneurial sectors
- 10-month program running January through September
- Strengths-based curriculum built around four tracks: The Power of Choice, Leadership Agility, Strengths-Based Leadership, and Executive Coaching
- Nearly 450 alumni Fellows across 25 graduating classes
- Celebrated 20th Anniversary in 2025
- Applications receive 4–5 times more interest than available slots annually

How is the Academy governed?

AALA is governed by an Advisory Board of prominent community leaders and representatives from sponsoring organizations and is fiscally sponsored by United Way of Central Ohio, which provides administrative and financial infrastructure to support the program.

The Academy is operated under the leadership of its Executive Director along with a team of learning and development and program management practitioners who oversee the day-to-day operations of the Academy.

How is the Leadership Development Program structured?

Each year, the Advisory Board, current Fellows, and alumni seek out and nominate emerging leaders from across sectors who demonstrate potential for top leadership roles in both their professional and civic life. Applications open in July, with successful applicants notified in October. Fellows attend a Cohort Kick-off in December and begin sessions in January.

AALA develops leaders using research-based and proven tools and methods, centered on the belief that authentic, effective leadership begins from within. The program includes Korn Ferry leadership assessments and executive coaching alongside a structured curriculum. Unlike many professional development programs, AALA does not ask participants to work on a community project. Each Fellow is the project - nurtured, strengthened, and prepared for influential service. The curriculum is grounded in three core principles - efficacy, leadership agility, and leadership interaction - and is delivered through four development tracks:

The Power of Choice

A research-based curriculum designed for professionals of color that builds the right mindset, confidence, and competence in political, social, and relational arenas. Fellows identify and overcome barriers to their most effective self.

Leadership Agility

Tools and a four-step technique (Aware, Reflect, Target, Try) to align a distinctive leadership approach with personal values, beliefs, and goals.

Strengths-Based Leadership

Identifying and maximizing the attributes, skills, and talents that make each Fellow a distinctive and effective leader.

Executive Coaching & Network

Individual coaching, faculty-mentors, and guest speakers from central Ohio's most influential leadership community. Peer cohort bonds that last beyond graduation.

Each Fellow also completes individual presentations using the Five C's framework: Clarity, Challenges, Career, Connections, and Community - synthesizing their self-learning, leadership voice, and vision for the future. AALA also hosts quarterly intensives beyond the fellowship year. These sessions are open to Fellows, alumni, and central Ohio professionals.

What do Fellows Achieve?

The goal is for each Fellow to graduate with a clearer sense of personal and professional strengths, greater confidence to pursue their goals, and a deeper commitment to shaping our community. By the end of the program, Fellows have the skills and confidence to:

- Become more self-aware of their personal leadership style and strengths
- Identify their most and least effective leadership attributes and skills
- Develop personal strategies for career advancement, community impact, and civic engagement
- Understand the difference between - and the role of - talent, knowledge, and skill
- Navigate complex workplace and community leadership challenges with confidence
- Build and leverage a peer network of values-aligned professionals across sectors
- Foster belonging, respect, and fairness in their organizations and communities
- Develop a lasting commitment to giving back and strengthening central Ohio

What is the long-term impact?

ALA's impact extends well beyond the fellowship year. Alumni go on to lead nonprofit organizations, launch businesses, serve on influential boards, hold elected office, and mentor the next generation of leaders across central Ohio.

CAREER ADVANCEMENT

- 77%** higher compensation after AALA
- 47%** are now senior executives (VP, C-Suite, ED, or President)
- 38%** received a promotion or new leadership role by program's end

CIVIC LEADERSHIP

- 60%** serve on boards, commissions, or committees
- 59%** mentor or coach others formally or informally
- 97%** made personal charitable contributions last year

ALUMNI VOICE

"AALA has been the most influential leadership development program I've ever completed and has shaped how I move in the world for the last 11 years."

- AALA Alumni

"AALA reinforced that I deserve to be in the room and at the head of the table."

- AALA Alumni

**2026
Strategic
Priorities**

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01

**LEADERSHIP
PIPELINE**

Sustaining and expanding the two-cohort fellowship model, delivering curriculum, coaching, and leadership assessments to 40 Fellows per year.

02

**COMMUNITY &
CIVIC IMPACT**

Deepening alumni engagement through the Ascension Conference, quarterly intensives, board service, and civic leadership across central Ohio.

03

**CAPACITY &
CONTINUITY**

Building the infrastructure for AALA's next 20 years - technology, alumni engagement systems, relationship development, and a legacy endowment.

**Academy
Contact**

For more information on the program, sponsorship opportunities, or how to nominate a candidate, email: manager@aalacademy.org