

October 2021



Commentary

Leadership Development and Diversity in Cancer Centers

By Caryn Lerman, PhD

*Director, USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center
AACI President*



AACI President **Caryn Lerman, PhD**, is an elected member of the National Academy of Medicine. She is director of the University of Southern California Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center, and an internationally recognized cancer prevention scientist.

Commentary Overview

- My AACI presidential initiative will focus on leadership development and diversity in AACI cancer centers.
- Based on data collected from surveys and feedback from the upcoming AACI/CCAF annual meeting, we will draft a whitepaper establishing best practices for onboarding and developing a diverse pipeline of cancer center leaders.
- Additional activities for my initiative include peer mentorship programs for new cancer center directors, a primer on cancer centers for institutional leaders, a rotating career development curriculum for emerging leaders, and a leadership development toolkit that can be adapted by AACI cancer centers.

Fifty years after the introduction of the National Cancer Act, which established the National Cancer Institute (NCI) as we know it today, NCI-Designated Cancer Centers continue to evolve. Yet, the diversity and capacity of the workforce has not kept pace with the needs of our increasingly complex cancer centers. This, in turn, creates challenges for mission alignment, communication, and systems-level planning and oversight. Closing this gap requires leadership skills not acquired during traditional clinical or biomedical research training.

Recent studies also reveal the limited gender, ethnic, and racial diversity of the leadership teams of NCI-Designated Cancer Centers. **Developing a diverse pipeline** from within our centers may address these disparities, if implemented in tandem with deliberate leadership development as well as personalized mentoring and onboarding programs for new and emerging cancer center leaders.

To address this challenge, my **AACI presidential initiative** will focus on leadership development and diversity in AACI cancer centers. These efforts are guided by a **steering committee** of new and established center directors, associate directors, and leaders of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. To lay the foundation for this effort, AACI distributed a survey to AACI cancer center directors to assess leadership team diversity, search practices, leadership development activities, and interests in these areas. Notably, among the 59 centers responding to date, there is overwhelming interest in leadership development programming.

Based on the survey data and feedback received at the annual meeting, we will draft a whitepaper with best practices for building, onboarding, and developing a diverse pipeline of cancer center leaders. We will also develop a curriculum to foster the onboarding of new cancer center directors, addressing a range of topics, including business acumen; cancer service lines and funds flow models; and working with deans and CEOs.

Additional activities include peer mentorship programs for new cancer center directors, a primer on cancer centers for institutional leaders, and a rotating career development curriculum for emerging leaders that will address communication, collaboration, and negotiation.

At the 2022 AACI/CCAF Annual Meeting, we will launch an AACI Leadership Development Workshop featuring breakout sessions based on individual roles. The materials created throughout the initiative will be compiled in a leadership development toolkit to be adapted by AACI cancer centers and evaluated for their impact at the centers.

I am looking forward to sharing more details about my presidential initiative and answering questions from AACI members during the virtual **2021 AACI/CCAF Annual Meeting, October 19-21**.

The 2021 AACI/CCAF Annual Meeting will include panel discussions on telehealth and cancer care at home; the impact of COVID-19 on cancer centers; an overview of basic science cancer centers; data science and artificial intelligence; changes to the National Cancer Institute Cancer Center Support Grant; and reducing disparities in cancer research and care. The event will also include the presentation of AACI's Distinguished Scientist and Champion for Cures awards and the inaugural presentation of AACI's Cancer Health Equity Award.

[Register Today](#)

Our Mission

Representing 103 of North America's premier academic and freestanding cancer centers, the Association of American Cancer Institutes is accelerating progress against cancer by empowering North America's leading cancer centers in their shared mission to alleviate suffering.

About AACI Commentary

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

