



Request for Applications

The Aspen Institute [Economic Opportunities Program](#) (EOP) seeks local partners to implement Workforce Leadership Academies in three cities or regions. EOP will support local partner organizations that will be responsible for all local strategic and operational delivery and facilitation of the Academy. Organizations eligible to apply include nonprofits, city or state entities, community colleges, and intermediaries. Independent consultants and for-profits are not eligible. Local partners should be committed to developing and sharing lessons learned about skills-first talent strategies within their own organizations, their local Academy participant cohorts, and their workforce ecosystems.

What Are Skills-First Talent Strategies? The growing movement toward skills-based mobility seeks to frame talent development around defined skills, ultimately reducing disparities in career opportunities and increasing productivity and agility in business operations. For-profit businesses, nonprofit organizations, and public agencies can incorporate, for example, job description qualifications that are defined by actual skills and knowledge related to roles rather than defaulted only to degrees obtained; candidate sourcing from a broad base of talent pools that extend beyond customary channels; selection and hiring processes that eliminate biases that might exist in traditional practices; consistent employee support and training with well-defined learning outcomes that advance careers; and a culture that reflects organization-wide demonstration of commitment to racial equity, job quality, and mobility. For a comprehensive guide to skills-first talent strategies, see Jobs for the Future's [Skills-Based Practices: An Employer Journey Map](#).

Since 2014, EOP has worked with local organizations to deliver 22 Workforce Leadership Academies in 17 cities with more than 370 participants. [Workforce Leadership Academies \(WLA\)](#) bring together leaders—known as Fellows within the EOP Fellows' Network—from across local workforce ecosystems into a 10-month Fellowship to deepen networks, strengthen systems leadership skills, apply race equity and systems change frameworks to leaders' work, and deepen understanding of effective strategies and programs. WLAs provide a forum for local leaders to work collaboratively to identify local and regional systems-based challenges and create shared solutions.

Local partners will position the Academy within the local workforce ecosystem, develop an advisory council, facilitate all in-person and virtual Academy sessions and activities, and position Fellows' proposed systems recommendations for maximum chances of gaining traction. These partners will also contribute to the Aspen Institute's learning agenda for the growing field of practice in skills-first talent strategies, answering questions about the role of workforce systems in the skills-first movement, how capacity among workforce systems can be assessed and built to do this work, and how progress and impact can be evaluated. As part of the Academy sessions and activities, partners will be expected to facilitate Fellows' learning and adoption of skills-first strategies within their own organizations and with employer partners.

Selected partners will receive a challenge grant of \$50,000 toward total local Academy costs (typically averaging \$160,000 of financial and in-kind resources) and will be responsible for raising the remainder of their total local budgets. Partners will be given curriculum and administrative resources developed through prior Academies under a Creative Commons licensing agreement.

EOP will provide partners with the WLA curriculum and tools, biweekly coaching, monthly virtual facilitator forums, and an in-person 3-day training retreat for local facilitation teams.

Application Process

The application process includes two steps: an Intent to Apply form to be submitted (via [this link](#)), followed by an invitation to selected organizations to submit a full proposal.

Key Dates

- July 9 (2:00 – 3:00 EDT): Informational webinar. [Register here](#) for this informational session.
- July 30: Intent to Apply form due
- August 9: Invitations for full proposals issued
- August 26: Full proposals due
- September 13: Selected partners notified
- September-January: Establishment of local Advisory Councils and recruitment and selection of Fellows
- March 2025: Partners' facilitation teams in-person train-the-trainer retreat
- February-December 2025: Academies operate with retreats, topical sessions and lab workshops, networking events, and community stakeholder event for presentation of Fellows' systems change recommendations.
- January-March 2025: Partners and Advisory Councils identify priorities to advance Fellows' systems change recommendations.

Informational Webinar

The webinar will be recorded, but we encourage you to join for questions and discussion. [Click here to register.](#)

This initiative is made possible by the generous support of Walmart.

Workforce Leadership Academy Overview

What is a Workforce Leadership Academy?

A high-capacity, responsive, agile workforce ecosystem is critical for sustainable, equitable economic growth in a region. The workforce ecosystem is inherently interdisciplinary, involving many fields of practice, types of organizations, and government policies across various industries, firms, educational institutions, nonprofits, and public sector agencies.

Workforce Leadership Academies bring together leaders from across local workforce ecosystems. Academies are targeted to experienced senior-level managers of nonprofit organizations, public agencies, businesses and business associations, union-based training efforts, and community colleges and universities. By investing in leaders' knowledge, skills, and relationships, the Workforce Leadership Academies are well-positioned to build nimble collaboration so important to the ecosystem's success.



Workforce Leadership Academies strengthen the capacity of participating local workforce leaders, called "Fellows," to develop and sustain effective workforce strategies, collaborate more deeply with employers and other organizations, and expand the number and quality of leaders who advance opportunities for workers while also meeting the talent needs of employers. Participants in local academies work with leading practitioners from around the country, are introduced to practical planning tools, and have the rare opportunity to reflect on and strategize about how to apply principles that underlie effective workforce strategies to their local economic and social context. Fellows bring systems thinking and racial equity to all aspects of their work including their own organizations, the labor market, and the local ecosystem. Participants also engage in leadership development activities, including a 360-degree leadership assessment. Through Collaborative Learning Labs (CoLabs), local academies provide a forum for local leaders to work collaboratively to identify local and regional systems-based challenges and create shared solutions. In 2024-26 in order to advance adoption of skills-first talent strategies that increase equity and mobility in the labor market, Fellows will examine the role of workforce organizations in the skills-first movement, how to effectively engage employers in change, and how to develop their own talent development infrastructure to support that work.

Participants are recognized as Fellows of the Workforce Leadership Academy, and upon completion, become part of the Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Fellows Network.

Academy Design

The Academy engages leaders in a ten-month peer learning cohort to:

- Expand and deepen professional **networks and partnerships**;
- Strengthen **leadership practices** for organizational and systems change efforts;

- Apply a **race equity lens** to assess and improve workforce systems and strategies;
- Apply systems change framework to their work;
- Understand and apply elements of effective **organizational strategies**; and
- Work collaboratively to identify local and regional systems-based challenges and create shared solutions.

Academy Structure

Local Partners facilitate all aspects of Academy activities for Fellows. Local partners provide:

- An opening three-day retreat (two overnights)
- Five Academy sessions (5 hours) and 5 Academy labs (3 hours) held during the same week approximately every 4-6 weeks, conducted virtually and in person
- A networking reception
- One leadership 360 assessment debrief workshop
- A closing three-day retreat (two overnight stays)
- Collaborative Learning Lab presentations at an in-person stakeholder event
- Local partners may also decide to offer additional networking and social events.
- Fellows will also participate in EOP-conducted all-Academies virtual events, including skills-first practices webinars and national exchanges

Recent Academies

Since 2014, EOP has worked with local organizations to deliver 22 Workforce Leadership Academies in 17 cities with more than 370 participants. In 2022, in an evolution of the historical model of EOP co-delivery of services, EOP issued an open Request for Applications to build a network of local partners, shown below, to deliver Academies and advance the systems changes identified by Fellows.

Location	2022-2023 Local Partners
Baltimore	United Way of Central Maryland
Buffalo Niagara	New York Association of Training & Employment Professionals
Cleveland Cuyahoga	Ohio Workforce Coalition/Towards Employment
Detroit Southeast Michigan	Corporation for a Skilled Workforce
Memphis	Greater Memphis Chamber
San Antonio Alamo	Workforce Solutions Alamo
Scranton Northeastern Pennsylvania	Scranton Area Community Foundation
Tucson Southern Arizona	Center for the Future of Arizona/Pima Community College

In evaluation surveys, Fellows indicate that the Academy supported their development as organizational and systems leaders to collaborate with other strategic partners, lead programmatic and organizational change within their organizations, and lead workforce systems-change strategies within the region. Fellows described gaining new knowledge from each other about existing resources in the system, which facilitated opportunities for engaging more practically and immediately in systems and organizational changes. In one region, Fellows reported joint effort to

train staff together across their system (“This helped improved service delivery by increasing understanding of new interventions and better understanding the roots of poverty in the community.”). In another community, Fellows worked together “to provide a clearer pathway for folks looking for employment in healthcare”—with one Fellow acknowledging his peers in the cohort who “have been excellent with transparency in healthcare issues including retention and onboarding. They are not afraid to take on the tough issues in hiring and have shown a flexibility in changing things up that best works for the job seeker.” Fellows describe organizational practice changes (“If it had not been for the academy our organization would not have pursued implementing an apprenticeship program. I can honestly say it could have been years before it even got on our radar.”) as well as impacts on their individual perspectives (“As a funder, I opened myself up to understand what nonprofits are actually requesting for clients as opposed to what we think they need.”) and their leadership voice (“I have also spoken more in my leadership circle at work on using an increased racial equity lens, especially when hiring, increased wages, and looking at who we promote internally.”).

[Visit our website](#) to see local Academies and Fellows’ bios to date.

2024-2026 Workforce Leaders Academies

EOP will support three local partner organizations that will be fully responsible for local strategic positioning and day-to-day facilitation of the Academy with centralized support from EOP. EOP will also leverage the Aspen Institute’s communications support to raise local partners’ voices around critical systems issues and the role of ongoing leadership and staff development for the field, as well as the experience of applying skills-first approaches within their organizations and local ecosystems. Partners will receive:

- A \$50,000 challenge grant toward the estimated total local costs (typical average \$160,000). Challenge grant funds will be disbursed in two installments of \$30,000 and \$20,000.¹ A budget worksheet designed to help applicants estimate costs can be downloaded [here](#).
- WLA application platform for review and selection of Fellows with local advisors.
- Annotated agendas, slide decks, and materials for all sessions, labs, 360 leadership assessment process, Collaborative Learning Lab working groups, and Advisory Council planning meetings.
- Centralized session evaluations administered by EOP for ongoing local program monitoring and improvement as well as enrollment, midpoint, and final surveys.
- Templates for external communications related to the Academy.
- Support in identifying and preparing national guest faculty.
- Training and technical assistance for the local facilitation team in the use of all materials and methods, including a three-day intensive training retreat, monthly virtual workshops with the network of local partners, and individual biweekly local partner coaching.
- The Academy curriculum will be available to partners under the Creative Commons licensing agreement # CC BY-NC 4.0 Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0 International at the conclusion of their Academies.

¹ Second year disbursement contingent on continued project funding.

Timeline

The time from the decision to offer an Academy to the completion of the final activity is approximately 18 months (not including post-Academy actions to advance CoLab recommendations). The overall timeframe for Academy activities is as follows:

2024				2025												2026		
Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Advisory councils		Fellows outreach and recruitment		Fellows selected	Orientation		Opening retreat	5 sessions 5 labs 360 leadership debrief Networking reception						Closing retreat	Stakeholder event	CoLab Stakeholder Event All-Academy Assembly		
Monthly facilitator forums and biweekly TA						Train the trainer retreat	Monthly facilitator forums and biweekly TA											

September to December 2024

- Launch of local advisory councils; development of local outreach and recruitment plan
- Launch of Facilitator Forum with virtual sessions focusing on positioning academies locally

January to March 2025

- Selection and orientation of Fellows
- Monthly Facilitator Forum virtual sessions continue
- Local partners' three-day retreat intensive in-person training on Academy curriculum materials

April to December 2025

- Local academies operate in 3 US cities/regions
- Local stakeholder events for Fellows to share their recommendations for local workforce ecosystem changes
- Monthly Facilitator Forum virtual sessions continue

January to March 2026

- Virtual all-Academy alumni assembly celebrating Fellows from each cohort
- Partners and Advisors prioritize systems change recommendations

Local Partner Responsibilities

Partners are responsible for all aspects of local delivery: position the Academy within the local workforce ecosystem context and dynamics, guide recruitment and outreach, provide links to local innovation, policymakers and workforce leaders.

- Develop an advisory council made up of local workforce ecosystem stakeholders who serve as Academy advocates. Advisors recruit and select Fellows, connect Fellows to local innovation, attend a Fellows reception and the Collaborative Learning Lab (CoLab) presentation, and assist the partner organization in positioning Fellow's recommendations.
- Facilitate all in-person and virtual Academy sessions and activities.
- Lead communication and community care with Fellows before, during, and between sessions.
- Secure and prepare all local guest faculty, and, with EOP support, secure and prepare national guest faculty.
- Work with CoLab teams to position their proposed recommendations for maximum chances of gaining traction.
- Coordinate logistics for all in-person events and virtual events.
- Administer all travel and honoraria expenses for national guest faculty.

Academy Roles and Staffing

Partners will be expected to designate a facilitation team of two to three individuals who are responsible for strategic engagement with the local community and co-facilitation of each session and event, supported in logistics and administration by other organizational staff as needed. Depending on partners' staff configurations, the following core tasks might overlap within positions or be divided across two or three people; these are estimates of time needed over an approximate eighteen-month period:

- Strategic Positioning (senior staff): position the Academy within the local workforce ecosystem context and dynamics, develop Advisory Council of stakeholders, guide recruitment and outreach, provide links to local innovation, policymakers and workforce leaders, co-facilitate activities and CoLab teams. Approximate time: 1/3 to 1/2 FTE
- Session Facilitation and Peer Community Care: customize curriculum to local context and cohort, facilitate all aspects of in-person and virtual Academy sessions and activities, including cohort communications and guest faculty preparation, coach CoLab teams to position proposed recommendations for maximum chances of gaining traction. Approximate time: 1/3 to 1/2 FTE
- Project Management and Logistics: support logistics and records management for all events and activities, including Advisory Council meetings, Fellows' application process, and evaluation surveys. Approximate time: 1/3 to 1/2 FTE

Academy Expenses

The local budget for an Academy varies based upon several factors; budgets have averaged \$160,000. Retreats and staffing costs make up significant portions of the overall budget. Opening and closing retreats include three days and two nights at a hotel or conference center. Staff costs vary widely depending on factors such as the extent to which staff positions assigned to the Academy are already partially or fully funded or if roles for facilitation or logistics are externally contracted. Selected partners will receive a challenge grant of \$50,000 toward their total budget.

Criteria for Partner Selection

Potential partners will be considered using the following criteria:

- **Strategic Alignment:** The local partner has knowledge of the city or region's workforce development ecosystem as well as connections to senior workforce stakeholders. Effecting change in the workforce ecosystem is aligned with the partner's strategic priorities. The partner is explicitly committed to racial equity and inclusion. The partner is committed to advancing skills-based mobility in the local ecosystem.
- **Credible Convening Capacity:** The local partner has strong connection to the workforce and business community. The partner and its advisory council can attract leaders from a mix of organizations that make up the local ecosystem, including nonprofit organizations, public agencies, business associations, union-based training efforts, intermediaries, and community colleges and universities. The local partner operates as a neutral stakeholder working on behalf of common interests of the workforce ecosystem and local area. The partner has the ability to support coalitions to set agendas and meet goals.
- **Facilitation Capability:** The local partner can organize and facilitate in-person and virtual events and support a robust cohort-based learning experience. The local partner has identified a team and the needed organizational administrative supports to ensure Academy success. This facilitator team has the capacity to customize session agendas, identify and prepare local and national guest faculty, lead all sessions, coach CoLab working groups, and administer 360 leadership assessment process.
- **Financial Capability:** The local partner is able to secure local funding and in-kind match for the challenge grant.

Final selection of partners will also include consideration of diversity of geography and organizational type, as well as capacity and interest in replicating or adapting Academies over multiple years or across local regions beyond the grant year.

Application Process

The application process will consist of two steps: an Intent to Apply form to be submitted (via [this link](#)), followed by an invitation to selected organizations to submit a full proposal.

- July 9 (2:00 – 3:00 EST): Informational webinar. [Register here](#) for this informational session.
- July 30: Intent to Apply form due
- August 9: Invitations for full proposals issued
- August 26: Full proposals due
- September 13: Selected partners notified

Informational Webinar

An information session on Zoom will be held on July 9, 2:00-3:00 ET. During this session, participants will learn about the Academy experience and the application process, including both the Intent to Apply form and the full application. Register for the information session [here](#). The event will be recorded, but we encourage participation so that interested parties can ask questions and engage in discussion.

This initiative is made possible by the generous support of Walmart.

Intent To Apply Form Information

EOP invites interested organizations to complete the online [Intent to Apply Form](#). We provide a preview of the questions below, which are crafted to provide an understanding of your organization and its work.

Eligibility

Organizations eligible to apply include nonprofits, city, county, or state entities, community colleges, and intermediaries or associations. Independent consultants and for-profits are not eligible.

Organizational Overview

1. Organization name
2. Organization contact information
3. Organization web site link
4. Organizational type
5. Number of employees
6. Organization's overall geographic focus
7. What geographic area (city, county, region) would this Academy serve?
8. Please provide a short overview of your organization.
9. How many years have you been in operation?
10. Who are your primary constituents and/or audiences?
11. Organizational chart

Strategic Alignment

12. How does your organization engage with workforce development in your city/region?
13. In what ways has your organization worked to advance racial equity and inclusion internally as an institution? Externally in relation to program service delivery, community collaborations, or other efforts?

Skills-first Talent Strategies Self-Assessment

The following elements address interest and maturity in advancing skills-first talent strategies. We are interested in learning about the range of interest and maturity across systems in order to put together a diverse peer learning community of local partners and facilitation teams, so there is no "best" answer! These practices are from the [Skills-Based Practices: An Employer Journey Map](#) from Jobs for the Future:

1. Job requirements
2. Sourcing strategies
3. Candidate assessment
4. Hiring protocols
5. Post-hire support
6. Advancement opportunities
7. Organizational culture

Please refer to the descriptions of these strategies on the table below to answer the following four questions.

14. Organizational maturity - rate your own organization's maturity in each of these elements from 1 to 3. We recognize that the descriptions might not perfectly describe the status of your practices, but please assess as possible from a low of 1 to a high of 3.
15. Ecosystem maturity - rate your workforce ecosystem's (industry, employment programs, workforce boards, community colleges, public agencies, etc.) maturity in these elements from 1-3.
16. Organizational interest - which three of these seven elements are most compelling for your own organization to further explore and advance? Choose your top three.
17. Ecosystem urgency - which three of these seven practices are most urgent for your workforce ecosystem to address or further develop? Choose your top three.

Credible Convening Capacity

18. Workforce development ecosystems typically include nonprofit organizations, public agencies, business associations, union-based training efforts, intermediaries, and community colleges and universities. Among the mix of institutional types in your community, where does your organization have strong connections? Weak? Whom might you engage on your advisory council to offset that weakness?
19. Provide the names and titles of three workforce ecosystems leaders outside of your organization who are interested in bringing an Academy to your city/region.

Facilitation Capability

20. Describe two examples of convenings, meetings, or other events your organization has hosted or facilitated that engaged multiple stakeholders or partners in your city or region.

Financial Capability

21. Identify potential match funding sources.

Other

22. Please share any other information, including questions, that might help in this application process.

Skills-Based Talent Practices

These practices and assessment are from the [Skills-Based Practices: An Employer Journey Map](#) from [Jobs for the Future](#).

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Job Requirements	Documented job requirements, if they exist, are focused primarily on degrees, and fixed years of work experience. Job requirements do not articulate skills-based equivalencies for degrees and fixed years of work experience.	Documented job requirements mostly include skills-based equivalencies for degrees and work experience.	Documented job requirements are focused exclusively on necessary and desired candidate skills. Job requirements include similar skills that position candidates to quickly and efficiently acquire required skills through on-the-job training.
Sourcing Strategies	Company sources candidates exclusively from postings on major job boards, the company website, or four-year colleges.	Company sources candidates from diverse talent pools through ad hoc or inconsistent arrangements with diversity sourcing specialists, community colleges, boot camps, company employee resource groups (ERG), existing employees with related skills, etc.	Company sources candidates from diverse talent pools through formalized, long-term partnerships with sourcing specialists, community colleges, historically Black colleges and universities, company ERGs, credential providers, community-based organizations, etc. Outcomes from these relationships are measured and analyzed over time to ensure desired results.

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Candidate Assessment	<p>Candidates are primarily screened based on the prior acquisition of degrees, years of experience, or titles. Job skill assessment tools are informally defined, lack objective scoring criteria, and are minimally or inconsistently implemented across the enterprise. Managers have significant independence in candidate selection and focus primarily on intuition or informal selection criteria.</p>	<p>Candidates are assessed through a combination of subjective and objective measures, with some focus on degrees, credentials, and work experience and some focus on required job skills. Job skill assessment tools are formally defined with objective scoring criteria but are inconsistently used. Assessment tools include some of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Behavioral-based interviews (with objectively defined criteria) • Diverse hiring panels • Written or online tests • Portfolio evaluations 	<p>Candidate fit is determined by using a formal and consistent set of objective skill assessments. Assessment tools include all or most of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Behavioral-based interviews (with objectively defined criteria) • Diverse hiring panels • Written or online skills tests • Portfolio evaluations
Hiring Protocols	<p>Hiring staff members have received little or no unconscious bias training. If job skill assessment tools are in use, they have received little or no formal assessment tool training. There are no systems in place to ensure compliance with established hiring protocols.</p>	<p>Hiring staff members have received one but not both of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal unconscious bias training • Training on the use of the company's job- skill assessment tools <p>There are few if any systems in place for ensuring compliance with established protocols.</p>	<p>All hiring staff members receive ongoing unconscious bias training and training on the use of the company's job- skill assessment tools. Compliance systems are in place to ensure that hiring staff members follow established protocols.</p>

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Post-hire Support	Recently hired employees without four-year degrees receive no differentiated post-hire coaching, mentoring, or training to support them and their unique needs.	Recently hired employees without four-year degrees receive access to coaching, mentoring, and training, but the support is either not differentiated or not consistently provided.	Recently hired employees without four-year degrees consistently receive dedicated and differentiated post-hire coaching, mentoring, and training.
Advancement opportunities	Few, if any, opportunities for professional development and career advancement exist for people without four-year degrees, and there is no system in place for tracking employee skills. Managers do not often support direct reports in reaching career goals, and internal candidates are not frequently considered for open positions.	Professional development opportunities that teach skills required for advancement are available for some roles, and employee skill development is tracked and factored into promotion decisions to some extent. Skills-based career pathways may be available but are inconsistently used by managers for career discussions.	All employees have access to professional development opportunities that teach skills required for advancement, and employee skill development is consistently tracked and factored into promotion decisions. Skills-based career pathways are available and consistently used by managers as part of career discussions.
Organizational Culture	Organization has little to no awareness or acceptance of the benefits of skills-based talent practices. There is no formal organizational commitment to learning and development, racial equity, job quality, and equitable economic advancement for workers. Employees with four-year degrees are given preferential treatment. There may even be distrust of the capabilities of individuals without four-year degrees.	Employees in some areas of the organization (e.g., HR) have awareness and acceptance of the benefits of skills-based talent practices. There is some degree of organizational commitment to learning and development, racial equity, job quality, and equitable economic advancement opportunities for workers, but that commitment is expressed through separate, uncoordinated business unit initiatives.	Organization has broad-based awareness and acceptance of the benefits of skills-based talent practices. There is company-wide commitment to learning and development, racial equity, job quality, and equitable economic advancement for workers as expressed through C-suite-level support and company-wide initiatives and programs.

Full Proposal

If your organization is invited to submit a full proposal, the following additional information will complete your application (provided here for your information only).

Organizational Overview

1. Please name the organization executive who, if selected, will authorize the Agreement.

Strategic Alignment

2. How would you describe your community/region's current commitment to advancing economic mobility and building an inclusive economy? Describe current strategies and approaches across your ecosystem and specify any roles that your organization has played in these efforts. Please feel free to include links to relevant websites or reports to describe your region's priorities and activities.

Credible Convening Capacity

3. List advisory council members (including names, titles, and organizations) that you have approached or that you will pursue.

Facilitation Capability

4. Identify the facilitation team members who will deliver the Academy and participate in the partner network, including attending the three-day intensive training event. Provide link to their bios (LinkedIn or organization website). Provide a two to three sentence description of each person's role and relevant experience.
5. Describe your organization's prior experience in facilitating cohort- based learning communities and include any relevant examples.

Financial Capability

6. Submit the [budget template](#) with confirmed sources described.
7. Provide organization's W-9.

For more information about the Workforce Leadership Academy, contact EOP at eop.program@aspeninstitute.org.