



UCA's Dr. Shaneil Ealy, far right, and the inaugural class of the Women's Leadership Academy.

Women's leadership development as economic development

By Halei Boyles

If one conclusion has emerged from the women's movement in the United States, it is that facilitating the social and economic empowerment of women benefits everyone. Historic women's rights movements such as women's suffrage ushered in substantial societal impacts, including decreases in child mortality and increased governmental investment in schools and public health programs. Women's economic advancement also creates growth. According to the Borgen Project, a nonprofit organization addressing global poverty and hunger, closing the labor force gap between men and women by just 25 percent would result in 100 million new jobs for women by 2025.

In Arkansas, these positive impacts are apparent. Since 1897, The Arkansas Federation of Women's Clubs has advocated for public libraries, historic preservation and social reform. Today, a variety of women's initiatives in Arkansas continue to foster women's social and economic empowerment while contributing to our state's overall prosperity. The Women's Leadership Network (WLN) is an example of a group in Arkansas dedicated to women's leadership development that has the potential to usher in lasting economic gains with women at the helm.

Dr. Shaneil Ealy, associate vice president for the Division of Outreach and Community Engagement and co-director of the Women's Leadership Network at the University of Central Arkansas, has a passion for developing women-centered programming. Ealy saw a need in central Arkansas for leadership training designed specifically for and by women leaders; in response, she and other local leaders rallied together to kick off the WLN in 2017.

Created for women, by women, the WLN provides growth, development and connection opportunities for diverse women in central Arkansas. The WLN offers a variety of training opportunities, including small business marketing workshops, mental health care during the pandemic and the Centering Equity Series focused on diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging. Mentorship is woven through all of WLN's programming as well.

"When we began WLN, we sent out an application for women who wanted to partner up, invest and give back to other women as mentors and for women who were interested in being a mentee," Ealy said. "Through the mentorship program we have about one hundred matches. I really think that showcases the need for women to connect with other women—and women who

want to invest and give back to other women leaders and their communities.”

The success and expansion of WLN over time has led to the development of a new program, the Women’s Leadership Academy (WLA). WLA is a six-month program to equip future women leaders for excellence in the workforce. It focuses on recruiting women from many fields, including business, education and public service. WLA’s mission is to elevate, empower and embrace women through speakers, hands-on experiences and community service. The first sessions will begin in January 2022 and end in July 2022.


The leadership skills developed and peer networks formed by the WLN, the WLA and other efforts in Arkansas coincide with promising new data on the rise of women’s leadership and women-owned small businesses in Arkansas and in the United States.

According to the 2019 State of Women-Owned Businesses Report, commissioned by American Express, the number of women-owned businesses in the United States increased by 21 percent between 2014 and 2019, outpacing the overall business growth rate (9 percent). Additionally, total employment by women-owned businesses rose by 8 percent, outpacing the employment rate for all businesses (1.8 percent). In Arkansas, small

businesses make up 99.3 percent of state businesses, and 43.1 percent of those businesses are owned by women.

These trends show that fostering women’s leadership and achievement is a prudent investment, because the success of women spurs on the overall growth of our state’s economy. With networks like the WLN and leadership development programs like the WLA, Arkansas is investing in our women and therefore investing in our future economic prosperity.

Continuing the recognition and mentorship of women who are changing and challenging the status quo, new generations of women will have opportunities that were once unattainable. Women’s leadership and development programs are combating inequities and disparities in the state and guiding future women in their own economic development.

You can learn more about the Women’s Leadership Network at www.uca.edu/outreach/women. 



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