Lessons from the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence
Winners

Santa Barbara City College, Santa Barbara, CA (2013)
Valencia College, Orlando, FL (2011)
Walla Walla Community College, Walla Walla, WA (2013)

Finalists w/ Distinction

Kingsborough Community College, Brooklyn, NY (2013)
Lake Area Technical Institute, Watertown, SD (2011, 2013)
Miami-Dade College, Miami, FL (2011)
West Kentucky Community & Technical College, Paducah, KY (2011)

Finalists

Brazosport College, Lake Jackson, TX
Broward College, Ft. Lauderdale, FL
College of the Ouachitas, Malvern, AR
El Paso Community College, El Paso, TX
Hostos Community College, Bronx, NY
Indian River State College, Fort Pierce, FL
Kennedy-King College, Chicago, IL
Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College, Perkinston, MS
Mott Community College, Flint, MI
Northeast Iowa Community College, Calmar, IA
Olympic College, Bremerton, WA
Renton Technical College, Renton, WA
Santa Fe College, Gainesville, FL
Southeast Kentucky Community & Technical College, Cumberland, KY
Southwest Texas Junior College, Uvalde, TX
Four Measures of Community College Excellence

- **High absolute performance**
  - Learning outcomes
  - Completion outcomes
  - Labor market outcomes
  - Equity in outcomes

- **Improvement over time**
Outcomes of Prize Finalist Colleges

Completion/transfer rates that far surpass the national average

- National Average: 40%
- Finalist Average: 53%
- Top 3 Average: 64%
Outcomes of Prize Finalist Colleges

Exceptional improvements over time in completion

Increase in the number of credentials awarded at Valencia College, 2002-2011
AA, AS/AAS Degrees and Certificates/Diplomas Awarded
Outcomes of Prize Finalist Colleges

Far greater equity in outcomes than the national average

Three-year completion and/or transfer rates for underrepresented minority students compared to the national average

- National Average: 34%
- Finalist Average: 44%
- Top 3 Average: 49%

- Brazosport College (TX)
- Santa Barbara City College (CA)
- Santa Fe College (FL)
Outcomes of Prize Finalist Colleges

Exceptional short-term labor market outcomes for graduates

Average salaries of recent graduates compared to the average for all new-hires in the region (top three performers)

- **Lake Area Technical Institute (SD)**
  - Regional average: $22,540
  - 40% above avg.

- **Walla Walla Community College (WA)**
  - Regional average: $23,211
  - 79% above avg.

- **Brazosport College (TX)**
  - Regional average: $31,086
  - 82% above avg.

$20,540  
$23,211  
$31,086

$28,756  
$41,548  
$56,576
Outcomes of Prize Finalist Colleges

Exceptional long-term labor market outcomes

Average salaries of graduates 5 years after graduation compared to the average for all workers in the region (top three performers)

- **Walla Walla Community College (WA)**
  - Average salary: $57,044
  - 55% above avg.

- **Miami-Dade College (FL)**
  - Average salary: $63,016
  - 38% above avg.

- **Brazosport College (TX)**
  - Average salary: $46,832
  - Regional average: $77,272
  - 65% above avg.
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Themes characterizing the institutions that achieve exceptional outcomes for students:

1. Strong leadership and vision
2. Clear pathways to credentials and other intentional structures to support students
3. Intentional focus on improving teaching and learning
4. Consistent, systematic, and strategic use of data to improve practice
5. Integrated structures that link the college to the broader community for the benefit of students
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Theme 1

Strong Leadership and Vision
Findings: Five Qualities of Exceptional Leaders

1. Deep commitment to student access & success
2. Willingness to take risks
3. Excellent internal change management ability
4. Strong, broad vision for the college, reflected in external partnerships
5. Skill in fundraising and resource allocation tied to student success goals
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Theme 2

Clear pathways to credentials and other intentional structures to support students
Exceptional colleges have comprehensive student support systems that cross historic functional or curricular divisions:

Build new pathways to success, including narrowly defined course sequences, fully integrated learning communities, and block program structures.
Exceptional colleges have comprehensive student support systems that cross historic functional or curricular divisions:

**Embed high-impact support services within the classroom (e.g., advising, registration, tutoring, note-taking guidance, career counseling).**
Exceptional colleges have comprehensive student support systems that cross historic functional or curricular divisions:

**Redesign systems from scratch** (one-stop student service centers, new registration centers, etc.) and implement them college-wide rather than in small pilots.
Miami Dade College

Faculty and advisors were engaged to create new simple degree pathways for 60% of incoming students.

Result: New default curricula for five degree pathways that, together, serve 60 percent of all new students.
Structured, cohort-based, block-schedule programs ensure students stay on track.

Result: 76 percent graduation rate is among the nation’s highest.
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Santa Fe College

“My Academic Plan” online program builds guided course selection pathways for students based on their goals and lives, and creates alerts when students get off-track.

Result: Very high rates of four-year transfer and bachelor’s degree attainment.
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**Kennedy-King College**

New pathways built for all students (including those in developmental education) and reflected in new college catalogue.

**Result:** Doubling of graduation rates over five years.
Theme 3
Intentional focus on improving teaching and learning
Exceptional colleges set the expectation that faculty and staff will continually improve their own practices:

**Faculty engaged in self-assessment and eager to improve their instruction to better serve students.**
Exceptional colleges set the expectation that faculty and staff will continually improve their own practices:

**Explicit connections** between individual student learning and larger measures of course, program, and institution success.
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Exceptional colleges set the expectation that faculty and staff will continually improve their own practices:

A systematic use of evidence of students’ learning outcomes to drive improvements in instruction.
Exceptional colleges set the expectation that faculty and staff will continually improve their own practices:

**Tenure and promotion models supported by systematic collection and discussion of data on student learning outcomes.**
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Valencia College

Culture where faculty consistently invent new approaches to teaching and measure whether they improve student learning—part of the exceptional Teaching and Learning Academy and a new process of tenure and promotion.

Result: Graduation rates nearly double those of peer institutions; strong transfer and bachelor's completion rates.
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West Kentucky Community and Technical College

Widespread development and use of assessments to improve instruction, driven by leaders engaging in multiple strategies to create urgency around the need to improve student learning.

Result: Strong graduation rates and dramatically improved reading scores.
Driven by a strong, shared focus on transfer preparation and equitable outcomes, the college established strong hiring practices and tutoring centers aimed at delivering the rigorous education students need to succeed at the college and later in bachelor’s programs.

**Result:** Very strong transfer and bachelors’ degree attainment rates, including for Hispanic students.
Lake Area Technical Institute

Comprehensive course in teaching pedagogy required for new instructors, driven by the recognition that many instructors come from industry.

**Results:** Very strong employment and earnings rates, reflecting strong employer satisfaction with graduates’ skills.
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Theme 4

Consistent, systematic, and strategic use of data to improve practice

THE ASPEN INSTITUTE
COLLEGE EXCELLENCE PROGRAM
Exceptional colleges strategically use student data:

**Data are distributed consistently throughout the institution** that reflect the focus on student success.
Exceptional colleges strategically use student data:

Data help everyone understand students’ longer-term success—such as labor market outcomes and post-transfer academic success.
Exceptional colleges strategically use student data:

Faculty and staff are given structured time and space to meet, analyze, and discuss data on student outcomes.
Valencia College

Data are consistently used to focus everyone on common student success challenges that drive reform plans and to answer questions about which interventions work.

Result: Dramatic improvements in student graduation rates.
Theme 5

Partnerships: Integrated structures for the benefit of students
Exceptional colleges build new structures to link the college to its community:

**Build strong ties with regional industries to design curricula for the jobs that exist to anticipate growing industries and help students get good jobs.**
Exceptional colleges build new structures to link the college to its community:

**Work with K-12 districts to align academic requirements and implement early-warning and college-prep systems to reduce the need for remedial education.**
Exceptional colleges build new structures to link the college to its community:

Work with four-year colleges to develop collaborative programs, guaranteed transfer, and aligned academic requirements for transfer.
Exceptional colleges build new structures to link the college to its community:

**Make the college a vital community asset, building brand recognition and attracting new resources that benefit students.**
Lake Area Technical Institute

The college brings industry representatives into the classroom to advise students and instructors. The college has also built structural linkages to area businesses, which help develop curriculum, fund programs and scholarships, and help recruit students to the college.

Result: Strong employment and earnings outcomes for graduates; 76 percent graduation rate.
Walla Walla ties its workforce credentials, general education degrees, and its assets to specific community needs, building programs that ensure that the college effectively serves multiple elements of the community.

Result: Deep community support and ever-expanding opportunity for a diverse student population and the region at large.
Other Common Denominators

- Student success is the college’s core business.
- Faculty are engaged in students’ success within and beyond the classroom.
- Output measures are used as the paradigm of assessing success.
- Students are not blamed for gaps in success.
- Equity is a core value in every aspect of the college’s work.
- The college is perceived not as a destination but as an educational pathway and a community that must thrive and be engaged for students to succeed.
- College leaders share an understanding of the college’s best and highest purpose—as well as its weaknesses.
More information:

**Prize publications:**
- Lessons from the Aspen Prize
- Using Comparative Information to Improve Student Success
- What Excellent Community Colleges Do (Harvard Ed Press, 2014)
- Building a Faculty Culture of Student Success
- Using Labor Market Data to Improve Student Success

**Leadership publications:**
- Crisis & Opportunity: Aligning the Community College Presidency with Student Success  
  (executive summary and full report)
- Hiring Exceptional Community College Presidents: Tools for Hiring Leaders Who Advance Student Access and Success

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