**National Models of   
Community College Excellence**

*Introduction*

Since 2010, Aspen has researched community colleges that achieve high and improving levels of student success for all students, a process that has culminated every two years in naming winners of the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence. This document profiles models of excellence from the Aspen Prize: colleges that have implemented scaled and systemic reform strategies and achieved high levels of student success. These profiles are rooted in Aspen’s research from the Aspen Prize, Playbook research, and from Josh Wyner’s book, *What Excellent Community Colleges Do*.

The leaders of these colleges engaged in a combination of student-facing and institutional capacity reforms that not only substantially increased student success but also laid a strong foundation for future reforms. It took time to achieve the scaled and systemic changes reflected in these profiles but, at the same time, each institution consistently and measurably advanced student success in substantial ways. And while each institution followed a unique path to excellence, they all focused their reform efforts on a few big things (rather than trying to incrementally reform everything at once).

Our hope is that these models demonstrate that excellent student outcomes are possible at scale. We provide these models as concrete examples of how the frameworks we discuss can be applied to achieve strong outcomes. These profiles will serve as both specific illustrations of the learning and frameworks offered in the Aspen curriculum and inspiration for college leaders to develop and enact a bold vision for institutional reform in their own context.

**Alamo Colleges District**  
*San Antonio, Texas*

Alamo Colleges District consists of five colleges in the greater San Antonio area that collectively educate about 90,000 students annually.[[1]](#footnote-1) Three of the colleges have been recognized by Aspen: Northwest Vista College was named a finalist in 2025, San Antonio College won the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence in 2021, and Palo Alto was a finalist and Rising Star in 2019.

**Completion and Transfer**

Alamo is a national exemplar in the development and implementation of guided pathways. The system’s strong pathways work was initiated after Chancellor Bruce Leslie came to understand that students' inability to graduate was, in substantial part, the result of inadequate program structure and advising. Part of the problem was the same at other colleges—a cafeteria approach to course offerings plus an inadequate number of advisors to get students on a path and help them stay there. Complicating matters was the complexity of five colleges that offered different courses, degree programs, and advising services.

So, in 2015, the district eliminated majors and began designing clearer degree pathways with courses organized into clear sequences. The result was AlamoINSTITUTES, credential programs clustered into five areas of interest: business, creative and communications arts, health and biosciences, public service, and science and technology. Each institute contains programs with course sequences aligned largely to bachelor’s programs at one of the seven area universities to which Alamo students most frequently transfer.[[2]](#footnote-2) That alignment enables students to successfully transfer in a state where four-year universities don’t cooperate to create aligned bachelor’s degree pathways in particular programs.

The next year, the system rolled out a new district-wide case-management advising model, AlamoADVISE. Students have six mandatory touchpoints with advisors, who are trained on what they are expected to accomplish at each milestone. At entry and at 15 credits, advisors focus (among other things) on making sure students have selected a program of study. By 30 credits, students who are in associate degree programs are expected to have chosen a pre-major and four-year university destination. And so on. These touchpoints and specific expectations have effectively focused the attention of advising staff. Whereas, other colleges leave it to advisors to figure out which of the many strategies aimed at improving retention and completion each student needs—which can result in a dispersion of focus and effort, and thus less positive impact—Alamo has prioritized specific milestones and student outcomes to guide the work of advisors and others.

To ensure AlamoADVISE was effective, leaders realized they needed many more advisors. When the reform work began, the advisor-to-student ratio stood at 1:800. Leaders made the controversial decision to reduce the amount of time faculty were paid for advising, freeing up enough resources for 46 new advisors, bringing the ratio down to 1:380.[[3]](#footnote-3) With this new structure, the college could design a system that maximized the likelihood each student would stay with an assigned advisor throughout their tenure.

While reforming programs and the advising system, leaders also tackled a complex transfer situation. The seven nearby colleges are independently governed, so program leaders built program maps tailored to each institution—250 program maps in all. This means students have clear pathways to each bachelor’s degree, and advisors have the information they need to support students along that path. Students who follow detailed transfer advising guides—which advisors work to ensure students do at each of the sophomore-year mandatory touchpoints—lose no more than three of their 60 credit hours after transferring, far below the national average of 13 credits.[[4]](#footnote-4)

These reforms have contributed to significantly improved student outcomes. Palo Alto College, for example, has seen a 68 percent increase in the graduation and transfer rate over five years, with almost no completion gap for students of color. Half of students who transfer complete a bachelor’s within six years, compared to 42 percent nationally.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**Board Engagement**

Statewide efforts to train community college trustees in Texas, which began more than a decade ago, brought the Alamo board into student success work. Sustained engagement resulted in many of the state’s community college boards—including those at Alamo—understanding that *status quo* student success rates were inadequate. In 2010, Alamo’s graduation rates were in the single digits.

Even with such training, some boards in Texas have not embraced guided pathways reforms, particularly in places where there was substantial faculty and staff opposition. Such opposition was present at Alamo, but rather than slowing down or choosing other reform strategies, Chancellor Leslie and his team stayed the course, understanding that every day that passed under the old structure was another day that students would unnecessarily struggle to persist.

A veteran of other community colleges, Leslie understood that reforms could be sidetracked if the board got worried that leaders were moving too fast or, even worse, that their reform efforts were too disruptive. So, he engaged the board deeply in both understanding the unacceptable student outcomes and passing policies aligned to the guided pathways approach for improving those outcomes.

The result was the passage of policies at the board level that made clear to everyone what the priorities of the college were. Here is an example of a policy from 2017:

*The success of the Alamo Colleges District will be measured by the success of its students… The Alamo Colleges District has adopted a guided pathways model … with two components, AlamoINSTITUTES and AlamoADVISE. The AlamoINSTITUTES … provides intentionally designed, clear, coherent and structured educational experiences that guide each student effectively and efficiently from point of entry through to attainment of high-quality postsecondary credentials and careers with value in the labor market. Programs, support services, and instructional approaches shall help students clarify their goals, choose and enter pathways that will achieve those goals, stay on pathways, and master knowledge and skills that will enable them to advance in the labor market and successfully pursue further education.[[6]](#footnote-6)*

This board policy—and many other board actions—made clear to everyone on every campus that guided pathways (and other) changes being instituted were systemic, designed to outlast any system or campus leader. Because he kept the board informed and engaged in data review and policy adoption, Leslie survived a vote of no confidence—in fact, the board gave him a raise and extended his contract in the wake of the vote. And board engagement set the stage for the reform work to continue after Leslie retired: His successor, Mike Flores, was hired from the ranks of Alamo college presidents (he was previously president of Palo Alto, one of the five system colleges).

**Access and K-12 Partnerships**

Located in San Antonio, Alamo Colleges District leaders serve a community with low college attainment rates, and Alamo leaders understand that improving student outcomes will not happen without a robust access strategy. Leaders developed model K-12 partnerships so Alamo can connect with students and show them the possibility of college before graduating from high school.

Alamo employs enrollment coaches who are responsible for, and supported in, carrying out multiple engagement, outreach, and recruitment activities. Trained to work specifically with high school seniors—including those least likely to go to college—coaches understand their job is not just to advertise Alamo as an option, but to sustain student engagement through group and individual meetings. During the senior year, coaches help students complete Alamo enrollment requirements, monitor their progress, and help them select a field of interest.[[7]](#footnote-7) By connecting advising to Alamo Institutes, the college goes beyond traditional access strategies that aim simply to get students to take any college course, and instead set students on a path to complete a credential of value.

Because of these efforts, Alamo has impressive results:

* 10,227 students participated in dual credit in spring 2021
* 3,740 students participated across 14 early college high schools in spring 2021
* 567 students attained an associate degree before graduating high school in 2021[[8]](#footnote-8)

**Culture of Improvement**

Over the past half-dozen years, Alamo leaders have developed a strong culture of data use. Advisors use data to assess whether their students in their caseload are meeting goals connected to each of the six mandatory touchpoints. Faculty (including adjuncts) consistently review student course success rates from their own and their colleagues’ course sections, broken down by student characteristics such as race and ethnicity. Faculty with relatively low success rates develop action plans for improvement, mentored by a faculty member with a high success rate along the way.

This approach to collecting and using actionable data, analyzing it meticulously, and following that with action—begins with system leadership. After Aspen visited the Alamo Colleges for the 2019 Prize cycle, site visitors shared with leaders that labor market outcomes and practices were weaker at Alamo than at many other exemplary colleges. Rather than shying away from the challenge, Chancellor Flores understood that improving workforce programs was necessary to move the colleges toward his goal of “ending poverty in the region.” Since then, the college has pursued impressive reforms.

Alamo hired a new head of workforce programs for the system and engaged teams from every college in examining their data and considering which research-based practices they might adopt to make improvements. Seeing opportunity to strengthen employer ties across many industries, Chancellor Flores realized the system could not tackle all programs in all sectors at once. So, he and his team developed a sector-based strategy to convene industry leaders—first in IT, then manufacturing, then healthcare, and so on—to define the jobs and skills in highest demand and partner with the college to strengthen existing programs and start new ones. While it is too soon to assess the impact of this work, it reflects the kind of focus on results and continuous improvement that is a hallmark of Aspen Prize-winning colleges.

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Alamo Colleges represent a remarkable turnaround story, from a college with very low graduation rates to one of the fastest-improving systems in the nation. Once five separate colleges where the student experience varied depending on which college offered a course or program, the system now boasts shared, scaled structures that have dramatically increased the chances students will earn a degree of value. Far from satisfied with past successes, leaders are turning their attention to areas where the college can improve, such as workforce programs, and pursuing Chancellor Flores’ bold goal of ending poverty in San Antonio.

# **Amarillo College** *Amarillo, Texas*

Amarillo college educates 12,000 students in a mid-size city in the Texas panhandle, surrounded by a large agricultural region. Amarillo was recognized as a Rising Star among Aspen Prize finalists in 2021 and was named a co-winner of the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence in 2023.

During a period of scaled, structural reforms prior to winning the Aspen Prize, Amarillo College was guided by President Russell Lowery-Hart, a lifelong resident of the area who served as president for nine years before his departure in 2023. Lowery-Hart is known nationally for his unrelenting focus on creating a community of care—a culture built through structured reforms targeting barriers to student success, uncovered through persistent data analysis. “For me, the most powerful thing we can do at Amarillo College—and any higher education entity—is to uncover the why. If you uncover the why, you’ll figure out the what,” said Lowery-Hart.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In the fall of 2011, Amarillo College leaders held a college-wide summit for faculty and staff to analyze data, which, at the time, included a 13 percent graduation rate and 10 percent transfer rate. Following the summit, leaders held student focus groups to learn more about the challenges they were experiencing. As Lowery-Hart puts it, “I asked our students to design the perfect college for them, and the two things they kept identifying were people who would help them and people who would care for them. What our students need from us is strong academics, but wrapped in the personal. And there is nothing more personal than love. As a college, we’ve committed to loving our students, because that is what they need most from us.”

From those conversations, college leaders developed a persona named “Maria,” who embodies a typical Amarillo student: Maria is a single mother working two jobs while attending school. The idea is not that all students face these exact challenges, but rather that consistently paying attention to the experiences of a student like Maria will help everyone at the college engage in conversation about diverse student needs and maintain focus on the student experience as they consider how to advance student success.

With students placed squarely at the center of reforms, college leaders developed five reforms that, together, led to dramatically better student outcomes.

**Improving Learning through Mandatory Tutoring**

One of the college’s most impactful reforms was making tutoring pervasive and unavoidable. College data showed that among academic supports, tutoring had the highest return on mission (e.g., course and program completion) and return on investment (e.g., tuition revenue through retention). Specifically, the institutional research office found that spending more than seven hours in the math outreach center was the number one predictor of success in those classes. Amarillo leaders recognized the opportunity to invest in a proven predictor of student success—one that was within their immediate locus of control—and reformed tutoring structures at scale.

Amarillo requires all students to use tutoring services at least once a semester. Any student taking a course essential for graduation (including required math and English courses) who scores below a faculty-determined cutoff on an exam is referred to mandatory tutoring. Tutoring center hours and services are studied by institutional researchers to better understand what works and adjusted to meet the real-time needs of students. As a result, the tutoring center is open Monday through Saturday until 8 pm and until 11 pm during crunch times in the semester.

College leaders systematically use data to monitor progress. The college tracks entry and exit times for all students who utilize tutoring services, and institutional research analyzes those data to determine the effectiveness of tutoring in different contexts. Faculty also monitor whether students have followed up with their tutoring referral through the student engagement software and review any notes to the faculty from the tutor.

**Improving Completion**

One of the conclusions from Amarillo’s deep work to understand the student experiences was a pervasive understanding that poverty stood in the way of success for far too many students. With a goal of eliminating at least one poverty-based barrier for every student, the college does some of the nation’s best work removing the life barriers that threaten student success. The college has invested heavily in a food pantry, emergency aid, and mental health counseling, which continues even after students transfer to the nearby university. According to Lowery-Hart: “We’ve hired social workers; we have robust emergency aid systems. We have physical and mental health connections for our students—and for their dependents.”

One of Amarillo’s earliest reforms was moving to a corequisite model for developmental education. Amarillo leaders knew from national research that traditional developmental education is a pathway to attrition, especially for low-income students and students of color. They also knew that three-year completion was correlated with full-time enrollment. By eliminating all front-loaded, noncredit developmental education courses in favor of corequisite supplemental instruction and tutoring, Amarillo could increase full-time enrollment while maintaining course success rates.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Another example of data-informed change with the aim of stronger completion outcomes for all students: program clarity and course scheduling. When college data revealed that the two programs with the highest rates of completion had clear course sequences, Amarillo engaged in creating clear program maps and course plans for every student as part of their guided pathways work.

When college data revealed that most students who fail to complete a course struggle most around the halfway point in a 16-week semester, Amarillo decided to shift to eight-week terms. Learning from Odessa College, which had moved to an eight-week model in 2014. Amarillo began implementation in the spring of 2016 with volunteer early adopters. These faculty members measured learning outcomes, and Amarillo offered yearlong professional development and compensated faculty for redesigning their courses.[[11]](#footnote-11)

According to Lowery-Hart, “We made a lot of implementation mistakes at the outset. But students in the 25 percent or so of classes that voluntarily moved to an eight-week schedule showed about a 12 percent better completion rate. So, we decided to go all-in, and it’s had a tremendous impact on acceleration.”

Moreover, the move to eight-week courses allowed nearly 20 percent of Amarillo’s total student population to move from part-time to full-time status, reducing part-time enrollment from 75 percent to 57 percent in three years.

Other completion innovations have begun to take hold. A student engagement platform was rolled out successfully and is now used regularly by students, faculty, and advisors. Student:advisor ratios have been cut from 900:1 to below 500:1, and advisors now specialize in a specific set of majors and career pathways. The college uses attendance as an early indicator of student difficulties, with absences triggering automatic notifications to advisors to reach out and offer help.

## Workforce

Efforts to improve completion at Amarillo have a broader purpose: to get students into and through strong programs of study aligned to good post-graduation opportunities. Through structured employer engagement, Amarillo leaders identified a need to equip students with in-demand technical skills. In response to the need, Amarillo launched Innovation Outpost in 2021, an impressive new workforce initiative designed to move students quickly into high-demand jobs in the region. Hosted at a new satellite campus, Innovation Outpost prepares students through 10-week sprints for high-wage jobs in fields such as cybersecurity, software development, data analytics, and technical project management.

Additionally, the college has been pivotal in expanding a rural nursing collaborative with Frank Phillips College, about 50 miles north of Amarillo. This collaborative is designed to meet critical nursing needs in the college’s expansive service area and expand access to the nursing profession. It enrolls about 100 students a year and places them at short-staffed hospitals across the region. The partnership also helps fund scholarships for many students and faculty salaries to draw them to rural areas.

These services and on-ramps to good jobs are especially important, given Amarillo’s service area, which includes both a city with many low-wage, low-skill service and transportation jobs and a largely agricultural area that extends into 26 counties. The college student body is just about half students of color, and 39 percent of first-time, full-time students are Pell Grant recipients.

Programs like Innovation Outpost and the rural nursing collaborative build on a strong baseline of excellent workforce programs that deliver jobs with good salaries: Amarillo College graduates earn, on average, $11,000 more one year after graduation than all new hires in the region.

## Culture of Improvement

Amarillo’s completion efforts have led to extraordinary improvements in graduation rates. But Amarillo leaders, faculty, and staff have not taken that as a sign to slow down. When leaders realized improved success rates in credit programs didn’t translate into better outcomes for many of the working adult students who entered the college in Adult Basic Education (ABE), they took bold steps to align the college’s credit programs and noncredit offerings, including ABE. With this shift, adult students get the support they need to advance quickly and successfully to for-credit courses and employment. Atypical for a community college, Amarillo ABE students have full access to campus resources and services. Likewise atypical, about 18 percent of students enrolled in noncredit ABE at the college transition to for-credit courses, far greater than most colleges’ conversion rate.

Amarillo is known for its pervasive culture of care, and perhaps nothing reflects its leaders’ deep care for students more than their disciplined approach to evidence-based structural reforms—creating a culture of identifying barriers, disrupting them, and ensuring the conditions are in place for students to succeed. As a result, the college has achieved a substantial and consistent level of improvement in student outcomes. Over four years, the overall graduation and transfer rate rose 8 percentage points; the rate for students of color rose 9 percentage points.

**Imperial Valley College**  
*Imperial, California*

Imperial Valley College educates more than 10,000 students, drawn from a large rural service area in California that borders Mexico and Arizona. Imperial Valley College was named a co-winner of the Aspen Prize in 2023, also the first year the college was named a finalist.

For nearly a decade, Imperial Valley College leaders have been on a journey to better the lives of their students—and their community. The college serves a 4,500-square-mile area with some of the nation’s highest rates of poverty and unemployment and lowest rates of college attainment. Over half of Imperial Valley students receive Pell Grants, and about three in four have family earnings low enough to be eligible for tuition-free enrollment through a California College Promise Grant. Against this challenging backdrop, Imperial Valley’s leaders have succeeded in strengthening the college-going culture for an entire region.

## Access

College attainment in IVC’s service area is low, with residents holding bachelor’s degrees at less than half the statewide average. Imperial Valley College leaders take a multigenerational, multipronged approach to fostering the college-going mindset in the community, building partnerships with K-12 schools, students, and families; community-based organizations; and local prisons.

Imperial Valley has created one of the nation’s most effective partnerships with local K-12 systems. “Quite frankly, for many years, the perception of the college among K-12 personnel and in the community was not good,” according to Victor Torres, Imperial Valley’s associate dean of workforce development and non-traditional instruction. Torres asked: “How could we change that perception? First, we said, ‘We need you to come to our campus and see for yourselves what goes on here.’ We started bringing educators on-site—counselors, administrators, superintendents, teachers, career education instructors.” These visits gave college leaders the chance to show their K-12 counterparts the quality of college instruction, the high expectations of students and faculty, and the commitment to completion and success after graduation. Those visits have evolved into two entire weeks of outreach funded by the school districts and organized by the Imperial County Office of Education in partnership with Imperial Valley and San Diego State University. The goal: to connect families and students to the college as well as transfer opportunities.

Over time, the partnership grew stronger. The college included K-12 partners in strategic conversations about access to higher education, and teachers at the high schools began to build college-going programming into their curriculum. Now, students in the 10 area high schools are not just made aware of college but make plans to attain a college degree. In 11th grade, students hear presentations from college counselors about different program pathways that center on attainment of a bachelor’s degree; in 12th grade, they complete an application and the FAFSA; and in the spring of their senior year, they meet with a college counselor to create an initial educational plan. Through these sustained engagements, students increasingly see themselves as college students and start to develop a sense of belonging at Imperial Valley long before they enroll.

By the time they graduate high school, many students have already attended an orientation and registered for Imperial Valley classes in the fall. The results are remarkable: Between 60 percent and 70 percent of students who attend the local school district go on to matriculate at Imperial Valley—and that number is even higher for dual enrollment students.

Due to these multifaceted outreach and recruitment efforts, the college has seen large enrollment increases over the past three years, including an 18 percent increase in spring 2022, a 38 percent increase in summer 2022, and a 13 percent increase in fall 2022. And approximately 250 incarcerated students are currently enrolled. This stands in contrast to what has happened at community colleges nationally.

## Completion

Of course, expanding college access without ensuring college success would not move many people out of poverty. Imperial Valley has worked hard to improve student success and achieved some of the fastest-rising completion rates in the country. To build on the planning students do during high school, the college has scaled efforts to ensure students solidify their direction and sense of purpose after entry. Onboarding for new students includes creating a first-semester plan, which 80 percent of students complete. During the first semester, counselors help students develop a full education plan designed not just to get students through an associate degree program, but to make sure the degree they earn prepares them for a specific four-year university degree or for direct entry to a career. After several years of effort, 60 percent of Imperial Valley students now complete full education plans in the first semester.

Robust tutoring helps ensure students remain on these plans. Fifty trained students work in the Teaching and Learning Center, tutoring their peers in all subjects. Tutors also are embedded in nearly 100 classes, an investment the college decided to fully fund in the budget after a grant-funded pilot program found that success rates rose an average of 10 to 15 percentage points in classes with embedded tutors.

The college also works hard to make sure students get the courses they need to graduate. A few years ago, college leaders recognized the traditional approach to setting course schedules, which began with faculty preferences, was not working. Too many students were having trouble finding courses at times that fit with their work or family responsibilities—a challenge that, in some cases, was leading them to leave college. In response, the college pivoted to a student-centered model for setting schedules that are more accommodating to working adults. Now, the college centrally creates a schedule that includes many more evening and weekend classes. Once the course schedule is set, faculty choose the courses and times they want to teach, based on seniority.

## Transfer

Imperial Valley knows that most of its degrees are designed as a first step toward a bachelor’s. However, Imperial Valley’s geographic isolation and high rates of poverty make four-year transfer a challenge for many students. To advance transfer students’ success in a challenging context, leaders and faculty have developed strong transfer partnerships with several four-year institutions, some in California and others in neighboring states.

For many years, Imperial Valley students have transferred to San Diego State University’s Imperial Valley campus, following a transfer pathway focused mainly on teacher preparation. Imperial Valley recognized a need to create more opportunities for students to transfer in other fields, so it established transfer partnerships with the University of Arizona-Yuma and Northern Arizona University-Yuma to provides paths to four-year degrees in program areas that lead to living-wage jobs in the region, including programs in science, technology, and math-related fields (as well as agriculture, food, and nutrition). Because each university specializes in degrees in certain areas, they don’t compete for Imperial Valley transfer students. Each partnership has additional advantages, too: Because of an Arizona state policy, California students attending NAU-Yuma or AU-Yuma pay in-state tuition.

To help students understand the requirements for transfer and completion of a bachelor’s degree, Imperial Valley and its main transfer partners developed full program maps in some of the most common areas of study that show all the courses students need to complete a bachelor’s degree. The transfer center at Imperial Valley has a coordinator, a full-time counselor, a part-time counselor, and an administrative assistant. It also offers opportunities for students to meet with four-year university representatives and attend workshops to get help completing CSU and UC applications.

Imperial Valley saw a 12 percentage point increase in its three-year graduation and transfer rates between 2015 and 2019, and its six-year bachelor’s completion rate among transfer students improved four percentage points between 2019 and 2021, surpassing the national average.

**Lake Area Technical College**  
*Watertown, South Dakota*

Lake Area Technical College (formerly Lake Area Technical Institute) educates more than 2,600 students in 31 workforce programs of study in Watertown, South Dakota.[[12]](#footnote-12) Lake Area won the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence in 2017 and was a finalist with distinction in 2011, 2013, and 2015.

**Completion**

Lake Area is a national leader in student completion outcomes, a school where more than three-quarters of students succeed. Specifically, within three years of entry, 67 percent of students complete an associate degree and another 9 percent transfer to a university before completing their associate degree.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Every student at Lake Area has a clear pathway to success. They are directly admitted into a program, so they are immediately working toward their credential. Programs are highly structured with prescribed courses and set daily schedules, and the vast majority of students attend full time. While this may limit flexibility, the value proposition is compelling: Every student has a clear timeline, anticipated costs, and a predictable course schedule, which allows them to work part-time jobs in the afternoon and evening. Most importantly, the clear success of past students helps each current student have confidence they will gain skills that result in strong employment outcomes.

Lake Area’s highly structured programs provide built-in learning communities. Each student is part of an assigned cohort of 20 to 100 students, so they have a network of support among peers as they navigate academic courses and broader life challenges.[[14]](#footnote-14) Faculty serve as advisors and meet with every student, take attendance, follow up on absences, and are held responsible for connecting students to work-based learning opportunities. And when a student is struggling, someone notices—either the instructor or a fellow student—and every instructor is trained on how to follow up.

**Teaching and Learning**

Lake Area has established a culture of delivering hands-on applied learning, which is built into every program of study. The expectation set for faculty—who come from industry and are trained in pedagogy by the college—is that students will spend no more than 20 minutes on theoretical work before applying what they learn, using the same sophisticated equipment they will encounter after graduation. The college has scaled work-based learning in every program of study through a plan rooted in universal accountability and ubiquitous availability.

Lake Area has moved responsibility for engaging in work-based learning from students—who, at other colleges, are expected to take advantage of optional internships—to faculty, who are responsible for ensuring that every student engages in substantial work-based learning aligned to their program of study. To meet that goal, every program has developed and maintained a robust set of both employer-based and on-campus work-based learning opportunities. So, while some agriculture students are working afternoons at the John Deere tractor facility to develop job-critical skills, others are meeting on campus with employers to build custom-made cattle guards. Students interact with industry partners in a variety of other ways as well: employer-led specialized training, field demonstrations, and presentations at career events. This combined system of accountability and availability ensures that Lake Area students—37 percent of whom are Pell-eligible—don’t have to figure out how to fit work-based learning into their otherwise busy schedules.

In addition to training students in job-aligned technical skills, Lake Area is focused on developing interpersonal skills that students need for a successful career. Lake Area leaders have named “character” as one of their five quality standards, and faculty and staff are responsible for developing and sharing work ethic and habits, etiquette, and professional behaviors.[[15]](#footnote-15) Employees from workforce partners visit classrooms to reinforce faculty messages about the importance of good attendance and study habits.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Finally, instruction is regularly informed by a rigorous annual program review process grounded in data and honest feedback from employers (more on the next page). Program leaders and faculty are expected to consider how to strengthen teaching when employers are dissatisfied, or when students' post-graduation employment outcomes are weakening.[[17]](#footnote-17)

**Workforce**

Lake Area provides excellent workforce training, as evidenced by the exceptional labor market outcomes the college achieves: 99 percent employment for graduates, who earn 40 percent more than other new hires in the region. Quality is ensured through systems, such as advisory boards populated with line-managers, and regular visits from employers to the college’s training sites.

Perhaps most impressive is the college’s annual program review process. Every year, program leaders assess data on employer satisfaction, student satisfaction, graduation rates, wages of college graduates, and other information (see one-page data report below). These data reports ensure that every program leader is attuned to changes in the labor markets so they can stay the course where outcomes are strong and adjust when weaknesses emerge.

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*Example Lake Area Technical College data report*

President Deb Shepherd prioritized getting the critical feedback necessary for continuous improvement. When she saw breakdowns in that feedback loop, she acted. For example, when relationships between industry advisory board members and program leads were too close for honest feedback, Shepherd recruited new employer advisory board members for that program. She also noted how important it was for her to monitor every program herself in some way, by walking through training labs, talking to employers, or asking students in the cafeteria how things were going in their programs.

Lake Area has developed meaningful partnerships and proactively involved employers to ensure students are prepared for careers and employers have the trained workforce they need. For example, in partnership with Caterpillar for the two-year diesel mechanic program, Lake Area instructors routinely go into the workplace to check on students doing field work, and, in turn, Caterpillar managers ask for feedback from instructors on students they are thinking about hiring. Lake Area has a large, rural service area and employs regionally based partner specialists, who recruit and manage relationships with workforce partners. The specialists identify workforce development challenges and, because they are assigned geographically and not programmatically, are able to think creatively about cross-college solutions.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Lake Area also works with employers to develop internships and scholarships. When South Dakota launched a statewide scholarship program for technical schools, the college saw an opportunity to create even more value for students and employers. Lake Area leaders encouraged regional employers to provide matching scholarship donations for its students and branded the initiative “Stretch the Million,” publicized with a campaign that appealed to employers’ desire for skilled workers. Employers could donate money for scholarships in a particular field, or even allocate dollars to a specific student. Students who received scholarships were then committed to work in that particular industry for three years or, if they were sponsored by a specific employer, for that employer after graduation. Employers with existing relationships with the college encouraged other employers to join, and Lake Area made it easy for them to join in. More than 100 businesses have participated, including large national corporations and smaller local enterprises.[[19]](#footnote-19)

**Continuous Improvement**

In 2011, after the Aspen Prize site visit, Lake Area leaders became aware of two substantial challenges they have since worked to resolve. First, students receiving Pell Grants had a graduation rate eight percentage points lower than other students.[[20]](#footnote-20) An intentional focus on strong outcomes for all students eliminated that gap, and in 2015, Pell students had a graduation/transfer rate of 84 percent, compared to 79 percent for non-Pell students. [[21]](#footnote-21) Working with professors to understand student challenges—which they knew well due to the cohort nature of programs—the college devised a plan that centered on additional financial support for Pell students. As noted above, this strategy included expanding paid internships, enhancing scholarship funds, and creating incentives to complete—including more job guarantees for graduates.

Second, leaders had not realized that about a quarter of students transferred from the college’s technical programs to universities. Seeing that there was room to improve their bachelor’s attainment rates, college leaders came to understand that general education courses needed to go beyond delivering skills needed for jobs to also build student competencies aligned to the expectations of universities. So, leaders strengthened basic skills in general education, focusing on increasing quantitative skills in programs of study such as nursing and diesel technology from which students tended to transfer to bachelor’s degrees in STEM fields.

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The story of Lake Area is one of structured success: The college has developed systems that ensure strong graduation and workforce outcomes for students, high levels of accountability for faculty and program leaders, and exceptional relationships with employers. Whereas many other small colleges rely on the informal relationships that can be built to advance student success, Lake Area relies on structures—cohort-based programs, universal expectations for work-based learning, annual program reviews—that ensure no student falls through the cracks.

**Valencia College**   
*Orlando, Florida*

Valencia College educates more than 70,000 students across 11 locations in the Orlando, Florida, area.[[22]](#footnote-22) With high and improving outcomes in multiple student success domains, Valencia has been featured in many Aspen research guides: Valencia won the inaugural Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence in 2011 and has been featured in Prize publications, Aspen’s guide to teaching and learning, and Aspen’s playbooks on workforce preparation and dual enrollment.

Valencia’s reforms are distinctive for their scale and focus. Rather than relying on many small initiatives that each help a few hundred (or a few dozen) students—a frequent occurrence at other colleges nationally—Valencia leaders focus on a limited set of big reforms. And those reforms clearly reflect a commitment to “community college 3.0,” meaning the goal is to improve students’ success in transfer and the labor market in addition to access and graduation rates.

When Aspen first learned about Valencia in 2010, the college was best known for completion efforts, including LifeMap, a program that helped students create pathways to credentials; Start Right, a scaled effort to help students complete their first five courses; and creative incentives for underprepared students to do the things most aligned to completing degrees.[[23]](#footnote-23) Those reforms contributed to the college’s high completion/transfer rate, which is still above 50 percent—much higher than the national average and even further above the rate at colleges with similar student bodies. (Valencia’s student population is 17 percent Black and 39 percent Hispanic.)[[24]](#footnote-24) While its efforts to advance and close equity gaps in completion continue, Valencia also stands out for efforts in four other domains: teaching and learning, transfer, workforce, and dual enrollment.

**Teaching and Learning**

In 2004, Valencia began a process of reforming teaching and learning that has resulted in an exemplary model. Seeds of reform sprouted from three factors: a group of innovative faculty dedicated to action research, faculty dissatisfaction with the tenure process, and a new president who believed that strong teaching and student learning must be at the center of any successful student success reform strategy.[[25]](#footnote-25)

President Sandy Shugart began the reform process by changing the conversation. He shared evidence that learning needed to be improved, showing, for example, that students who failed a course did worse the second time they took it. He then charged a group of innovative faculty with leading a process to develop a definition of excellence in teaching practice, resulting in an enduring institutional definition that sets forth seven essential instructor competencies: Assessment, Inclusion & Diversity, Learning-Centered Teaching Strategies, LifeMap, Outcomes-Based Practice, Professional Commitment, and Scholarship of Teaching & Learning.[[26]](#footnote-26)

That faculty definition was adopted by leadership, serving as the foundation for scaled and systemic teaching reforms. A new tenure process centers around each faculty member (1) developing an Individual Learning Plan (ILP) to improve on the seven essential competencies, and (2) conducting classroom-based action research projects, assessing the impact of those projects, and presenting findings to other faculty. A very strong teaching and learning academy (TLA) was established, which, among other things, supports tenure-track faculty members completing their ILPs and trains tenure review panel members, exposing both newer and longer-tenured faculty members to the process of action research and the growing culture of innovation around student learning outcomes at Valencia.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Over time, the seven competencies have been incorporated into all aspects of faculty-facing efforts: Hiring is aimed at finding faculty who have some of the competencies and are committed to developing all of them; the TLA includes a robust catalog of professional development courses, with faculty/staff completing four courses a year on average; and faculty are periodically reviewed after receiving tenure, with expectations of continued growth.[[28]](#footnote-28)

**Transfer and Bachelor’s Attainment**

At about the same time the teaching and learning efforts began, Valencia inaugurated its partnership with the University of Central Florida. The partnership began when the Florida legislature passed a law enabling Valencia to offer bachelor’s degrees. Seeing an opportunity to turn the threat of competition into collaboration, Shugart initiated conversations with UCF President John Hitt. Together, they crafted a program called DirectConnect designed to enable the two colleges to compete together to grow enrollments, improve graduation rates, and deliver talent to a growing region projected to need more well-trained professionals in multiple fields.

Under DirectConnect, students who earn an associate degree at Valencia are guaranteed admission to UCF, a selective university, which will not accept transfers who have not completed an associate degree. UCF advisors have a presence on Valencia’s campus, and students can complete their bachelor’s from UCF on-campus at Valencia or at UCF’s main campus. Valencia and UCF’s faculty and administrators meet regularly to work toward shared goals and align all facets of their work that affect student success, from curriculum and course rigor to academic calendars.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Another key to DirectConnect’s success has been data sharing between the institutions. UCF sends regular feedback reports to Valencia that contain data on transfer students—disaggregated by race, income, gender, and income status—including enrollment, average GPA, number of terms taken to complete a bachelor’s, whether students changed their major, and degree attainment rates. This allows stakeholders from both colleges to assess student outcomes, then adjust their approaches and supports to advance student success.

Each year, about one quarter of UCF upper-division students are transfers from Valencia, providing the kind of scale that incentivizes students to complete.[[30]](#footnote-30) Valencia achieved not only strong improvements in associate degree outcomes after DirectConnect was established, but also increases in enrollment as students saw that a Valencia associate degree meant an increased chance at earning a UCF bachelor’s degree. Those enrollment increases continued for a decade after the 2008 recession, a time when other community colleges saw steady enrollment declines. And the partnership has been instrumental in advancing student success: Valencia’s graduates who transfer do just as well as UCF’s incoming freshman, who have a 70 percent six-year graduation rate.[[31]](#footnote-31)

**Dual Enrollment**

Featured in *The Dual Enrollment Playbook*, published by Aspen and the Community College Research Center, Valencia does exemplary work with the Osceola school district—its main K-12 feeder system. Seeing an opportunity to address Osceola County’s low college-going rate (which, at 40 percent, was among the lowest in Florida), college leaders sharpened the focus of their dual enrollment strategy. In 2010, Valencia leaders approached the school district and, after several conversations, set a shared goal of improving the college-going rate to 50 percent by 2021.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Valencia and Osceola identified which high school students were least likely to attend college and decided to focus their partnership on schools with high numbers of Black, Hispanic, and lower-income students. The partnership’s success was built on clear goals, targeted recruiting and advising efforts in those schools, plus shared investments in student access and success. For example, Valencia and Osceola jointly hired eight instructors who teach college-level math at the high school because the school district could not fill those critical roles.[[33]](#footnote-33) Meanwhile, the district buses students during the middle of each day to classes on Valencia's campuses, and both schools coordinate schedules to ensure that students can take classes at times the buses operate. The results: The 50 percent college-going goal was met in 2016, and over half of all of Valencia’s dual enrollment students go to Valencia after finishing high school.[[34]](#footnote-34)

**Workforce**

In the 2010s, Valencia established strong foundational practices across its workforce programs. The college embedded professional advisors in workforce programs, each specializing in the industries their students were studying to enter. Spending some days with industry and others with students allowed advisors to become experts in exactly what kind of talent employers needed, information they then shared with instructors and students.

Valencia leaders looked at industry sectors with shortages and increasingly played a regional role in closing gaps. For example, the college was central in organizing a coalition committed to closing nursing shortages at large hospitals, collecting needed data, hiring an industry specialist to lead the effort, and helping convene all the actors needed, including employers and university partners. And, Valencia established a model annual program review process that includes disaggregated data about enrollment, completion, and post-graduation student outcomes in employment and wages. As part of that process, program leaders hold structured conversations about what quantitative data and qualitative reflections suggested was working and what needed to be improved, with everyone at the table, including faculty and program heads, employers, and advisors, to ensure a common understanding of the student experience and outcomes.

Recently, Valencia’s workforce reforms have turned to expanding opportunities for students and adult community members disconnected from stable employment. Their accelerated skills programs are described in the next section.

**Continuous Improvement**

The story of Valencia is one of focused reform: accomplishing a few big things, then moving to the next big challenges. To define those challenges, leaders are always looking to assess who in the region can use help most, whether populations that could benefit from a Valencia education or employers who need workers.

That inquiry led college leaders to recognize that too many adults in the Orlando area were in low-wage work (including hotel workers and day laborers) and that the college was not well designed to train them. Moreover, the college’s data showed that when students enrolled with very low academic skills, they were highly unlikely to complete longer-term programs. Leaders concluded that many people in the region who could benefit from a college credential were unlikely to forgo wages for long enough to complete a longer workforce credential or an associate degree.

So, Valencia turned its attention to expanding its accelerated skills training offerings—8-to-12-week programs that result in industry-recognized credentials in five areas: advanced manufacturing, construction, transportation and logistics, healthcare, and information technology. To be approved, these credentials must have real value in the labor market; they all deliver wages averaging more than $15 an hour (and up to $21.25 an hour) and have clear ladders to higher earnings.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Recognizing that low-wage workers needed these programs most and that most of these noncredit programs are ineligible for federal aid, college leaders secured financial aid so that 94 percent of these programs are free to students.[[36]](#footnote-36) With enrollment steadily increasing, the program boasts a 95 percent completion rate and is approaching 1,000 certificates granted annually, with a goal of increasing that number substantially. And the job-placement rate is also impressive: In 2020-2021, it was 82 percent.[[37]](#footnote-37)

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In large part, Valencia’s success has been driven by the vision of, in the words of former President Shugart, “serving the whole ladder” of income and opportunity in the Orlando region. Today, that vision translates into expanded opportunities for economic mobility through many programs, spanning high-skills pathways that lead students through associate degrees into bachelor’s programs; middle-skills pathways that include technical associate degree programs aligned to high-demand jobs with strong wages; and entry-level pathways through short-term training that move central Floridians out of low-wage work into better-paid, full-time skilled jobs in a matter of months or even weeks.[[38]](#footnote-38)

The reforms at Valencia did not happen at the same time, enabling college leaders to focus at any given time on just a few scaled, systemic solutions to pressing challenges facing residents, students, and the community. That intense focus on a limited number of reforms has enabled Valencia to remain one of the nation's leading colleges, showing what’s possible for excellent student success outcomes both in college and after graduating.

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