

Aspen Institute Expands National Network Advancing High-Value Credentials That Lead to Good Jobs and Bachelor's Degrees

Expanded initiative adds 55 community colleges to a national network working to align their programs with good jobs and bachelor's pathways, addressing local talent needs and changing student lives

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WASHINGTON, D.C., August 19, 2025 – Today, the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program (Aspen) announced the 55 community colleges selected to join the expanded Unlocking Opportunity network—an initiative designed to reform community colleges in ways that fundamentally improve the lives of over 100,000 students—by ensuring that they earn degrees that lead to good paying jobs.

These colleges join 10 pilot institutions in a growing national effort to align their programs and student advising with the two most important goals of community college students: leaving college with a credential and a good job or transferring and completing a bachelor's degree. Through three years of focused reforms, these colleges will work with Aspen to assess current programs, set goals, and implement research-based reforms to increase student success.

“Every year, millions of students rely on community colleges for a low-cost pathway to what they assume will be a high-value credential,” said Josh Wyner, Executive Director of the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program. “They rightly assume that the degree and certificate programs their colleges offer will deliver a good job and fulfilling career either directly after community college or after transferring and earning a bachelor's degree. The leaders at each of the 55 colleges that have signed up for Unlocking Opportunity have made clear that they will spend the next three years working towards the kinds of reforms needed to make that assumption a reality for thousands more students.”

The multi-year initiative will engage college leaders and teams through a series of virtual and in-person sessions focused on scaling reforms that align their community college programs with available good jobs and bachelor's degree pathways in their regions. Guided by lessons from successful reforms implemented by the 10 Unlocking Opportunity pilot institutions, the new 55 colleges will set goals to increase student enrollment in and completion of high-value workforce and transfer programs, while reducing lower-opportunity pathways. Examples of their reforms include:

- **Strengthening programs to meet employer needs in rural Wisconsin.** When Southwest Wisconsin Technical College learned that agriculture students needed to know how to use GPS-guided tractors and drones to meet employer needs, it revised its curriculum to offer those skills and increase entry-level wages. The agronomy program has doubled enrollment since 2023. The college also strengthened its early childcare program to support students pursuing bachelor's degrees, which helps fill education shortages. And the college eliminated its highly enrolled dual credit culinary classes and its associates degree culinary programs after



determining that graduates earned low wages and employers could offer on-the-job training instead.

- **Addressing the nursing shortage in San Antonio, TX.** At San Antonio College, leaders realized that the college must increase clinical site capacity to grow their nursing program at a scale needed to help address a significant local nursing shortage. The college is working closely with nearby hospitals to increase the number of clinical slots for San Antonio students, is developing a state-of-the-art simulation lab to be used as a clinical site, and is partnering with other colleges in the region to share clinical sites. The college added staff to address these capacity issues and find additional clinical sites beyond hospitals. In 2021, San Antonio College also launched an accelerated RN-to-BSN program, which graduated 185 students to date and will increase capacity to 274 students in the 2025-26 academic year.
- **Creating pathways to bachelor's degree in Wyoming.** Recognizing how many good jobs in their region in management and other areas were available for bachelor's degree holders, leaders from Laramie County Community College worked to establish a dual admission and co-advising program with the University of Wyoming aimed at increasing the number of admitted transfer students and aligning the curricula between the two schools. Combined with the expansion of its own bachelor's degree program in health care administration and applied management, Laramie is on its way to delivering many more graduates with valuable bachelor's degrees that will benefit students and deliver needed talent to regional employers.

These are just a few of the reforms implemented by the 10 Unlocking Opportunity pilot institutions which, collectively, are on track to move over 20,000 students into high-value programs of study that lead to good jobs. With this expansion, Aspen will (for at least the next three years) track and support progress for 65 participating colleges, including those 55 just selected. Aspen will use insights from this work to inform the broader field through fellowship programs, publications, and state partnerships to provide professional development to college leaders and teams.

The full list of colleges joining the expanded network is available [here](#).

Unlocking Opportunity, developed in partnership with Community College Research Center, is supported by Arnold Ventures, the Ascendium Education Group, Bank of America, ECMC Foundation, and JPMorganChase. The expansion of the Unlocking Opportunity network is made possible by the support of JPMorganChase.

To learn more about the network, visit as.pn/UnlockingOpportunity.



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The **Aspen Institute College Excellence Program** aims to strengthen higher education leadership and practice to improve student outcomes—with the ultimate goal of advancing economic mobility and developing talent for the good of each individual and society as a whole. For more information, visit [our website](#) and follow us on [LinkedIn](#), [Bluesky](#), and [X](#).

The **Aspen Institute** is a global nonprofit organization whose purpose is to ignite human potential to build understanding and create new possibilities for a better world. Founded in 1949, the Institute drives change through dialogue, leadership, and action to help solve society's greatest challenges. It is headquartered in Washington, DC and has a campus in Aspen, Colorado, as well as an international network of partners. For more information, visit [aspeninstitute.org](https://www.aspeninstitute.org).