



The Aspen Institute Names Semifinalists for \$1 Million Aspen Prize
25 Community Colleges Advance in National Prize Recognizing Excellent Student Outcomes

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WASHINGTON D.C., April 29, 2026 – Today, the Aspen Institute (Aspen) named 25 community colleges as semifinalists for the 2027 Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence. Rooted in deep research and backed by \$1 million in award money, the Aspen Prize is the nation’s signature recognition of community colleges that deliver value for their students.


The 25 semifinalists—which come from 20 states—were selected from nearly 1,000 institutions nationwide based on their outcomes data and collegewide practices aligned to achieving high and improving levels of student success. Aspen defines student success as achievement in learning and completion of a college credential, and by post-college success in the form of a good job or successful transfer and bachelor’s degree attainment.

“We start every cycle of the Aspen Prize with a simple question: Which community colleges are best at not just helping students graduate, but ensuring that what they learn and the credentials they earn actually help them meet their goals and have a better life?” said Josh Wyner, executive director of the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program. “In over 15 years of awarding the Aspen Prize, we have learned a lot about how top colleges ensure that more students obtain credentials that lead directly to good jobs or successful attainment of a bachelor’s degree through transfer. We congratulate the semifinalists for their strong and improving student outcomes and for prioritizing improvements in student success both during and after college.”

The Aspen Prize is awarded every two years and recognizes excellence across a wide range of institutions, from Florida’s large, multi-campus Valencia College in 2011 to rural Southwest Wisconsin Technical College in 2025. With each cycle, Aspen deepens its understanding of what value looks like. The top colleges—no matter their size or location—ensure students complete programs with strong regional labor market value and clear transfer pathways that lead to bachelor’s degrees.

The semifinalists are:

- Chippewa Valley Technical College (WI)
- Colorado Mountain College (CO)
- Forsyth Technical Community College (NC)

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- Harper College (IL)
 - LaGuardia Community College (NY)
 - Lorain County Community College (OH)
 - Mid-State Technical College (WI)
 - MiraCosta College (CA)
 - Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College (MS)
 - Moorpark College (CA)
 - North Iowa Area Community College (IA)
 - Northeast Community College (NE)
 - Northeast Wisconsin Technical College (WI)
 - Patrick & Henry Community College (VA)
 - San Jacinto College (TX)
 - Sinclair Community College (OH)
 - South Puget Sound Community College (WA)
 - Southeast Technical College (SD)
 - Stanly Community College (NC)
 - State Technical College of Missouri (MO)
 - Tallahassee State College (FL)
 - Tri-County Technical College (SC)
 - UCNJ Union College of Union County, New Jersey (NJ)
 - Wallace State Community College (AL)
 - West Kentucky Community and Technical College (KY)

The Aspen Prize selection process began in October 2025, when Aspen identified 200 community colleges based on data demonstrating strong and improving student outcomes in key areas—including learning, completion, transfer leading to bachelor’s attainment, and workforce success—and invited them to apply. From there, 170 colleges submitted applications, which were reviewed by a selection committee of 15 higher education experts who evaluated each submission using both extensive data and narrative responses. Aspen then interviewed the leadership teams from colleges receiving top scores, and 25 semifinalists were selected.

In the coming weeks, the 15-member panel of experts will continue its review and narrow the field to 10 finalists, which will be announced in June. In fall 2026, teams of experts will conduct in-depth site visits to those 10 finalist colleges and review extensive data, including actual wage data for graduates. The Aspen Prize winner will be announced in April 2027.



To read more about the selection process, visit as.pn/prize.

For community colleges that want to benchmark their outcomes against the Aspen Prize top 200 colleges or custom peer groups, Aspen provides a free-to-use benchmarking tool with all the metrics used to compare 1,000 community colleges at the outset of the selection process, including newly available data from the National Student Clearinghouse. Learn more and access the tool at as.pn/prizebenchmarking.

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The **Aspen Prize** is generously funded by the Ascendium Education Group and the Joyce Foundation.

Previous winners are:

- 2025: Southwest Wisconsin Technical College (WI)
- 2023: Amarillo College (TX) and Imperial Valley College (CA)
- 2021: San Antonio College (TX)
- 2019: Indian River State College (FL) and Miami Dade College (FL)
- 2017: Lake Area Technical Institute (SD)
- 2015: Santa Fe College (FL)
- 2013: Santa Barbara City College (CA) and Walla Walla Community College (WA)
- 2011: Valencia College (FL)

Note: Colleges that have won the Aspen Prize are not eligible to apply in subsequent years

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 www.highered.aspeninstitute.org.

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 www.aspeninstitute.org.