

The Aspen Institute Announces Finalists for 2027 \$1 Million Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence

Ten Colleges Advance Due to Their Work to Deliver High Completion, Strong Wages, and Successful Transfer and Bachelor's Attainment at Scale

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WASHINGTON, D.C., June 9, 2026 – Today, the Aspen Institute (Aspen) named 10 community colleges as finalists for the 2027 Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence, the nation's signature recognition for community colleges. Backed by \$1 million in award funds, the Aspen Prize honors colleges that achieve strong outcomes, focusing on whether students complete credentials that lead to bachelor's attainment and jobs that pay family-sustaining wages.

The United States relies on community colleges to help millions of students improve their lives and economic standing while preparing the skilled workforce employers need. Long known for access and affordability, the sector today enrolls 40% of all undergraduates nationally, some in programs that prepare students for specific jobs and others designed for transfer and bachelor's attainment at a four-year college or university.

Over the past 25 years, the focus of reforms nationally has been moving from access to success, and as a result, graduation rates have improved by over 13 percentage points. But post-graduation outcomes still need improvement: [More than a third of community college credentials do not lead to strong workforce outcomes or successful transfer and bachelor's attainment](#) after graduation. To this end, the Aspen Prize finalists have adopted reforms and practices to improve both completion and post-completion outcomes.

The 10 finalists for the 2027 Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence are:

- Chippewa Valley Technical College (WI)
- Forsyth Technical Community College (NC)
- Lorain County Community College (OH)
- Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College (MS)
- Patrick & Henry Community College (VA)
- South Puget Sound Community College (WA)
- Stanly Community College (NC)
- Tallahassee State College (FL)
- Tri-County Technical College (SC)
- Wallace State Community College-Hanceville (AL)



“Student outcomes like those we see at the 10 finalists cannot be achieved without major reforms to programs of study, student advising systems, and other college practices that we know make a difference,” said Josh Wyner, executive director of the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program. “We’re excited to dive in and learn more about how these colleges accomplished these outcomes so that we can elevate their work and enable 1,000 community colleges nationally to achieve similar success.”

Over nearly two years, the Aspen Prize selection process examines data and reviews applications that reveal which colleges achieve strong and improving student outcomes in several areas, including student learning, credential completion, labor market success, and transfer/bachelor’s attainment. Here are some of the outcomes that contributed to this year’s finalists being selected.

High and Improving Completion Outcomes

Nationally, 37% of students complete a community college credential within four years.

- **Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College (MS):** 47% completion rate
- **Patrick & Henry Community College (VA):** 47% completion rate
- **Stanly Community College (NC):** 49% completion rate

Strong Labor Market Outcomes

- **Chippewa Valley Technical College (WI):** Median earnings for graduates are 21% (\$9,000) more per year than the living wage in the college’s service area.
- **Wallace State Community College (AL):** Median earnings for graduates are 11% (\$5,000) more per year than the living wage in the college’s service area.

High and Improving Transfer and Bachelor’s Completion Outcomes

About 35% of community college students transfer to a four-year college or university within four years of first enrolling. Of those, 54% complete a bachelor’s degree within six years of first enrolling in community college.

- **Forsyth Technical College (NC):** From 2020 to 2025, the percentage of transfer students completing a bachelor’s degree increased by 11 percentage points, from 47% to 58%.
- **Lorain County Community College (OH):** 53% of students transfer, and 68% of transfer students complete bachelor’s degrees within six years of first enrolling.
- **South Puget Sound Community College (WA):** 43% of students transfer, and 61% of transfer students complete a bachelor’s degree within six years of first enrolling.

- **Tallahassee State College (FL):** 49% of students transfer, and 65% of transfer students complete a bachelor’s degree within six years.
- **Tri-County Technical College (SC):** 58% of students transfer, and 77% of transfer students complete a bachelor’s degree within six years of first enrolling.

The Aspen Prize selection process began in October 2025, when Aspen applied a formula assessing student outcomes to select 200 colleges and invite them to apply for the Prize. From the 170 that applied, a 15-member independent selection committee chose 25 semifinalists—and now 10 finalists—based on comprehensive outcomes data and evidence of the practices that led to those outcomes. In fall 2026, teams of experts will conduct in-depth site visits to each finalist institution and review additional data. The Aspen Prize winner will be selected by an independent Aspen Prize Jury and announced in April 2027.

“I remember what it meant to all of us at Miami Dade College to be named a finalist and ultimately a winner of the Aspen Prize,” said Pascale Charlot, managing director of the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program and former campus president at Miami Dade College. “It not only affirmed the hard work we had done to enact reforms that helped thousands more students succeed, but more broadly recognized the incredible things community colleges could achieve for students and communities in Miami and across the country. I congratulate this year’s finalists and look forward to not just learning from their work, but partnering with my colleagues at Aspen to bring these practices to other institutions trying to strengthen outcomes for their students and communities.”


To read more about the selection process and see a list of past winners, visit as.pn/prize.

To support community colleges in assessing their student outcomes, Aspen has developed a free benchmarking tool that includes the full set of metrics used to evaluate nearly 1,000 community colleges. The tool allows institutions to compare outcomes with top-performing peers, incorporating both data from federal sources and from the National Student Clearinghouse. Learn more at as.pn/prizebenchmarking.

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

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.