



2021 ASPEN PRIZE FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGE EXCELLENCE AWARDED TO SAN ANTONIO COLLEGE

\$1 Million Prize Recognizes Excellence in Equitable Outcomes for Students During and After College

*Broward College, San Jacinto College, and West Kentucky Community and Technical College
Named Finalists with Distinction; Amarillo College named Rising Star*

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WASHINGTON, D.C., May 18, 2021—The Aspen Institute College Excellence Program announced at [a virtual award ceremony](#) today that Texas’s San Antonio College, one of five colleges in the Alamo Colleges District, is the winner of the 2021 Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence, the nation’s signature recognition of high achievement and performance among America’s community colleges.

The \$1 million Aspen Prize, awarded every two years since 2011, recognizes outstanding institutions selected from more than 1,000 community colleges nationwide. The Aspen Prize assesses performance in six areas: teaching and learning, certificate and degree completion, transfer and bachelor’s attainment, workforce success, equity for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds, and leadership and institutional culture.

San Antonio College, a first-time finalist for the Aspen Prize, serves 35,000 students, two-thirds of whom are Hispanic, Black, or Native American—a far more diverse population than community colleges on average. Its graduation and transfer rate improved nearly 20 points over four years, to 48 percent, 2 points above the national average.

“At San Antonio College, there’s a family feeling, a pervasive understanding that it’s everyone’s job to make sure students succeed,” said Linda Perlstein, a director at the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program. “The college has built extraordinary systems to advance this culture—constantly analyzing whether students are getting what they need to learn, progress, and achieve their goals after graduation, and adapting accordingly as an institution. San Antonio College is truly an exemplar for continuous improvement in higher education.”

As winner of the 2021 Aspen Prize, San Antonio College will receive \$600,000.

Aspen also recognized three community colleges as Finalists with Distinction: Broward College (Florida), San Jacinto College (Texas), and West Kentucky Community and Technical College (Kentucky). Amarillo College (Texas) received the Rising Star award for rapid improvement. Each will receive \$100,000.

Rounding out the Aspen Prize top 10, named in spring 2020, are Borough of Manhattan Community College (New York), Odessa College (Texas), Pasadena City College (California), Pierce College (Washington), and Tallahassee Community College (Florida). The finalists—located in rural and urban areas with demographically different student bodies and a varied mix of technical workforce and academic transfer programs—prove that community colleges can achieve strong and improving student success rates in very different contexts.

Speaking at the ceremony, First Lady Jill Biden offered congratulations and commended the Aspen Prize finalists for “remarkable achievements.” According to Biden, “The best institutions don’t just teach, they empower, they meet students where they are and help them to get to where they want to go. That’s what the Aspen Prize is all about, recognizing the schools that are leading the way, showing us that all students can learn, achieve, and thrive, if only they have the opportunities and support they need.”

Also speaking at the ceremony was U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona, who said, “This year’s finalists are an impressive roster of innovative and inclusive institutions that put student success at the core of all they do.”

The 18-month Aspen Prize review process includes the examination of extensive data on performance and improvements, along with site visits to each finalist college. The jury of education, business, and nonprofit leaders who chose the winner and runners-up and allocated the prize purse was co-chaired by Freeman Hrabowski, president of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, and Ruth Williams-Brinkley, president of Kaiser Foundation Health Plan of the Mid-Atlantic States.

“More than ever, this pandemic has taught us that we all need to be continuously learning, and evolving, and pushing forward—on public health, on race, on the economy and technology,” Hrabowski said at the award ceremony. “The community colleges we honor today are at the forefront of that evolution.”

“The Aspen Prize recognizes the important role our community colleges play, not just in helping individuals pursue the American dream, but also in ensuring the health of American communities,” Williams-Brinkley said. “They are building the workforce that enables our nation’s prosperity—and contributing to a more equitable society.”

Additional San Antonio College outcomes

- The graduation and transfer rate for students of color in 2018 was 45 percent, 8 points above the national average.
- The transfer rate to a four-year institution was 41 percent, compared to the national average of 33 percent.
- The six-year bachelor’s completion rate among transfer students was 53 percent, compared to a national average of 44 percent.

Finalists with Distinction

Broward College, one of the nation’s largest colleges, grants nearly 13,000 degrees and credentials each year, including more than 8,000 to students of color. “The college has been a national exemplar in guided pathways, designing clear, structured paths for students through to a bachelor’s degree, and

aligning advising and other systems to make it hard to fall through the cracks,” Williams-Brinkley said at the ceremony. Broward College was a Finalist with Distinction in 2017 and a finalist in 2019.

San Jacinto College “has been through a decade of innovation, growth, and steady improvement,” Williams-Brinkley said. “The institution has been rigorously self-reflective about where it can do better, ambitious about scaling reform, and wholeheartedly committed to owning graduates’ success after transfer and in the workforce.” Within five years of completing an associate of applied science degree, graduates outearn all new hires in the county by nearly \$17,000. San Jacinto College was a Rising Star in 2017 and a finalist in 2019.

West Kentucky Community and Technical College “has long been a proactive leader in rebuilding the local economy and creating paths to good jobs,” Hrabowski said. “In recent years it has built exemplary systems for student onboarding, academic planning, and advising.” Its graduation and transfer rate is nearly 10 points above the national average; the graduation rate for low-income students is 14 points above average. WKCTC was a finalist in 2013 and 2017 and a Finalist with Distinction in 2011 and 2015.

Rising Star

At **Amarillo College**, Hrabowski said, “Every employee knows that it’s their job to help students surmount the real-life barriers of poverty, and there’s an unusually robust and coordinated system of social services. The college has done an excellent job scaling up student success reforms with a sense of urgency.” The graduation and transfer rate at the first-time Aspen Prize finalist increased by two-thirds over four years.

Previous winners and finalists can be found [on the Aspen Prize website](#).

The Aspen Prize is generously funded by Ascendium Education Group, Joyce Foundation, and Siemens Foundation.

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The Aspen Institute College Excellence Program aims to advance higher education practices, policies, and leadership that significantly improve student outcomes, especially for the growing population of students of color and students from low-income backgrounds on American campuses. For more information, visit higher.aspeninstitute.org.

The Aspen Institute is a global nonprofit organization committed to realizing a free, just, and equitable society. Founded in 1949, the Institute drives change through dialogue, leadership, and action to help solve the most important challenges facing the United States and the world. Headquartered in Washington, DC, the Institute has a campus in Aspen, Colorado, and an international network of partners. For more information, visit www.aspeninstitute.org.