

THE 2025 ASPEN PRIZE

FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGE EXCELLENCE

COLLEGE
EXCELLENCE
PROGRAM
◆ aspen institute

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.

The \$1 million Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence, awarded every two years, is the nation's signature recognition for America's community colleges—one former U.S. president called it “basically the Oscars for great community colleges.” The Aspen Prize recognizes excellent community colleges that achieve high and improving levels of student success in several areas, including teaching and learning; certificate and degree completion; transfer and bachelor's attainment; workforce success; and college and program access.

By lifting up models that help students succeed both during and after college, the Aspen Prize aims to celebrate exceptional colleges; advance a comprehensive definition of excellence in student success; and stimulate replication of effective, scalable, and systemic reforms.

To learn more about the College Excellence Program's work, visit higher.ed.aspeninstitute.org

To explore some of the research the Aspen Prize has informed, see our ***Transfer Playbook 2.0***, ***Dual Enrollment Playbook***, and ***Workforce Playbook***.

The Aspen Institute gratefully acknowledges the following charitable institutions' leadership and support for the 2025 Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence:

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**THE ASPEN INSTITUTE
CONGRATULATES THE WINNER AND FINALISTS FOR
THE 2025 ASPEN PRIZE FOR
COMMUNITY COLLEGE EXCELLENCE**

WINNER:

Southwest Wisconsin Technical College

FINALISTS WITH DISTINCTION:

San Jacinto College (Texas)

South Puget Sound Community College (Washington)

RISING STAR:

Wallace State Community College-Hanceville (Alabama)

FINALISTS:

Georgia Highlands College


Moorpark College (California)

Northeast Wisconsin Technical College

Northwest Vista College (Texas)

Seminole State College of Florida

UCNJ Union College of Union County, NJ

 *To learn more about the Aspen Prize selection process, past winners, and more, visit:*
higherred.aspeninstitute.org/aspen-prize

INTRODUCTION

Josh Wyner

Founder and Executive
Director of the College
Excellence Program at
the Aspen Institute

For over a decade, the Aspen Prize has served as a means of deeply understanding—and broadly publicizing—community colleges that deliver high and improving levels of student success. Our 20-month process of examining multiple data sources and researching college practices culminates in a singular moment: the announcement and celebration of the Aspen Prize Winner, Finalists with Distinction, and Rising Star. Profiles of each can be found later in this publication.

In another sense, awarding the \$1 million Aspen Prize purse is just a beginning. The awards ceremony kicks off Aspen's efforts to engage the field in replicating lessons from a set of exemplary colleges on how to achieve strong learning and completion rates for students, as well as robust bachelor's attainment and workforce outcomes for graduates. Over the 14 years since Aspen awarded the first Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence, we have embedded such lessons into multiple Aspen programs, including intensive Presidents Fellowships, Unlocking Opportunity, the Aspen-AASCU Transfer Student Success Intensive, and more. All are designed to help community college leaders and teams get better at their craft so more students can graduate with brighter futures.

This work matters. Community colleges educate over 6 million students—about 40 percent of our nation's undergraduates—including much larger shares of lower-income and diverse students than other sectors of higher education. These students depend on community colleges to increase their chances of securing well-paid jobs, fulfilling careers, and a better life for themselves and (often) their families. And employers depend on community colleges to develop the talents of community college students so they can be set on a path to become nurses and doctors, welders and solar panel installers, lawyers and accountants, truck drivers and auto mechanics, teachers and professors, and more.

At a time of economic uncertainty for students and businesses, this year's Aspen Prize finalists offer inspiring lessons for the field on how to ensure that students are prepared for good jobs in a variety of communities, from rural to urban.

- Aspen Prize Winner **Southwest Wisconsin Technical College** demonstrates what it means to ensure that no student graduates into poverty, revamping curricula in programs ranging from auto tech to early childhood education to precision agriculture so that what students learn and the degrees they complete are tied to jobs that offer good wages and benefits.

This work matters... Students depend on community colleges to increase their chances of securing well-paid jobs, fulfilling careers, and a better life for themselves and (often) their families.

- Finalist with Distinction **San Jacinto College** (TX) has redefined employer partnerships, deeply and consistently listening to employers to understand their needs and then responding in ways that have led to sustained employer investments in curriculum development and state-of-the-art facilities in maritime tech, health care, petrochemical processing, and other fields.
- Finalist with Distinction **South Puget Sound Community College** (WA) is deeply responsive to its local employers—including health care providers who benefit from the college's efforts to expand clinical placement so it can graduate more nurses—and has worked to increase the value of many of its workforce programs by shortening their length and asking employers to pay higher wages.
- Rising Star **Wallace State Community College-Hanceville** (AL) has consistently graduated well-prepared students to fill in-demand jobs across multiple sectors—welding, health care, manufacturing, and trucking—inspiring employers to invest so that talented students from the college service area, including Appalachian communities, have the equipment and work-based experiences needed to enter one of a growing number of good jobs.
- Finalist **Northeast Wisconsin Technical College** has partnered with employers to scale work-based learning opportunities in health care, manufacturing, and other fields by demonstrating—over many years—that the college cared as much about developing the talents of students as their employer partners cared about hiring highly skilled workers.

At the same time, this year's finalists reflect a growing focus on transfer and bachelor's attainment across the community college sector. Understanding their labor markets, leaders at finalist colleges recognized the need to strengthen on-ramps to bachelor's degrees so that students could help fill shortages of nurses, teachers, software engineers, and financial analysts.

For some—including **South Puget Sound** and finalists **Moorpark College** (CA) and **Northwest Vista College** (TX)—that means intensifying work with four-year partners to ensure that every credit earned by every transfer student applies to their bachelor's degree program. For others, it means creating more of their own applied bachelor's degree programs aligned to jobs in health care (**Georgia Highlands College**); biotechnology



(**Moorpark**); and both construction and elementary education (**Seminole State College of Florida**).

No matter the strategy, the reasoning was the same: College leaders understood that the success of their students and region hinged on delivering the growing number of bachelor's degrees required by employers for many good jobs in their service area.

In addition, every 2025 Aspen Prize finalist worked hard to help more students graduate, understanding that finishing a college credential dramatically increases the chances that a student will land a good job and/or transfer and earn a bachelor's degree. Here are three trends we saw reflected in this year's Aspen Prize finalist completion practices:

- Co-requisite developmental education is moving to scale. Community colleges such as **Wallace State**, **Moorpark**, and **Georgia Highlands** have shifted away from freestanding developmental education courses because the evidence is clear: Greater numbers of underprepared students succeed when put directly into credit courses with just-in-time supports.
- Community college program plans are increasingly started in high school. At finalist colleges, as elsewhere, the fastest-growing student population is dually enrolled high school students. Colleges such as **Southwest Wisconsin Tech**, **Northeast Wisconsin**, and **San Jacinto** are using the opportunity of dual enrollment to not only expose high school students to college courses, but also to counsel students to begin programs of study aligned to regional jobs and careers.
- Increasing numbers of colleges are aiming to help every student develop a clear individualized program plan in their first year. At **Wallace State**, building an individualized plan is required as part of a mandatory freshman-level success course. **South Puget Sound** and **Seminole State** students develop individualized plans in a college success course as well. And **San Jacinto** and **Southwest Wisconsin Tech** are currently working to make this the norm.

None of these impressive, scaled reforms would have happened without sustained, exceptional leaders at the finalist colleges, starting with the presidents. Building student-centered cultures and accomplishing successive reforms take time. So, it's no surprise that



the average tenure of this year's finalist presidents—9.4 years—is about four years longer than the average across all community colleges.

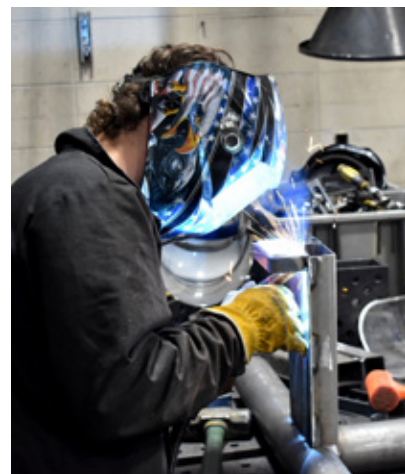
We are grateful for the sustained, highly effective reform efforts of leaders, faculty, and staff across this year's finalist community colleges. We trust that other colleges nationwide will find as much inspiration and as many important lessons in their work as did those of us who had the privilege of researching them over the past 20 months.

Best,

Josh Wyner

At a time of economic uncertainty for students and businesses, this year's Aspen Prize finalists offer inspiring lessons for the field on how to ensure that students are prepared for good jobs in a variety of communities.

WINNER OF THE 2025 ASPEN PRIZE SOUTHWEST WISCONSIN TECHNICAL COLLEGE



Fennimore, Wisconsin

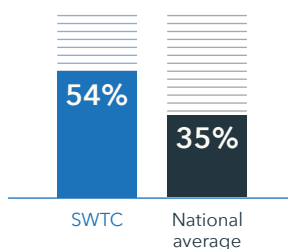
Highlights

Located in rural Wisconsin,
70 miles west of Madison

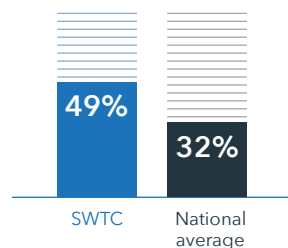
3,700

students, who come
from five counties and
30 school districts

THREE-YEAR GRADUATION RATE (2023)



THREE-YEAR PELL GRADUATION RATE (2023)



From the president to faculty to staff, everyone at **Southwest Wisconsin Technical College** is clear about its mission: to do everything possible to help every student make a better life for themselves and their families and, through that, strengthen their community.

“Our obligation is not to graduate anyone into poverty,” President Jason Wood says.

It sounds obvious: One of the top reasons most students enroll in community college is to improve their lives by being prepared for a good-paying job, either directly after community college or following transfer and bachelor’s attainment. But the reality is more complex: Far too many college students across America either don’t graduate or complete a program that costs them time and money but doesn’t effectively prepare them for a good-paying job or a bachelor’s degree.

That’s why Southwest Wisconsin Tech has placed so much emphasis on ensuring students’ post-graduate success—preparing them for what comes next through robust teaching and learning practices, strong relationships with employers and four-year university partners, effective advising, and programs that include work-based learning and other high-impact practices. Southwest Tech demonstrates how a rural college with a small budget can establish systems to ensure success in each of those domains.

Because of their exemplary practices and excellent student outcomes, Southwest Wisconsin Technical College is the winner of the 2025 Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence. The college was also a finalist in 2023.

Southwest Wisconsin Tech has strengthened its workforce offerings to ensure that every program leads to a good job. To do this, the college identified programs where only some students graduated into good-paying jobs and then revamped them to ensure that every student’s education is aligned to strong employment results. For example, in the automotive tech program, the college heard from employers that students were arriving with too much generalized knowledge and not enough specialized knowledge on how to handle common automotive challenges. So, the program added internships with local auto shops and changed the curriculum to focus on specialties, so every student learns what they need to land a good auto technician job.



Nearly ↑\$14,000

The difference in earnings
for graduates five years out
compared to all new hires in
the service area

In agronomy, program leaders realized their graduates could earn higher wages if every student learned precision agronomy. The college updated their curriculum and is set to start teaching precision agronomy this fall. To boost student wages in the meantime, the program added an eight-week pesticide applicator course which typically increases internship wages by \$1-\$2 per hour.

And for early childhood education, a pathway that many colleges grapple with because it typically leads to lower-wage jobs, Southwest Wisconsin Tech saw there was big demand for elementary education in the region and connected the program to a transfer pathway. In addition, college leaders committed to practicing what they preached, raising the minimum salary to \$40,000 plus benefits (what Southwest Wisconsin Tech identified as a living wage) for those working in the college's childcare center, which is now the highest paying in the region.

Where low-wage or low-employment programs could not be strengthened, the college eliminated them. That included culinary arts, a profitable program for many colleges but one that does not prepare students for good-paying jobs in most regional labor markets. Southwest Wisconsin Tech is also adding new high-value programs for students like radiology tech and advanced manufacturing, with plans to offer AI data analytics, cybersecurity, and respiratory therapy in the future.

Many rural community colleges struggle to provide students with work-based learning opportunities because their service areas have relatively few employer sites where students can train. Southwest Wisconsin Tech has devised a solution—creating work-based learning opportunities where they didn't exist. So, students in the construction program help build the new college dorm; students in early education work at the campus childcare center; and graphic design students participate in competitions to design college billboards and marketing materials for public display.

The work to strengthen programs is paying off for Southwest Wisconsin Tech students. Within five years of completing a credential, graduates earn nearly \$14,000 more than all newly hired workers in the college's service area.

WINNER SOUTHWEST WISCONSIN TECHNICAL COLLEGE



That impressive outcome is not just the result of strong programs but faculty working to continuously improve instruction in each course. Southwest Wisconsin Tech has developed a collegewide process of course evaluation and improvement that supports faculty getting better at their craft each semester, so each subsequent group of students benefits.

The college revamped its teaching and learning improvement process after being cited by their accreditor in 2016 for failing to meet standards for using evidence to advance student learning. The college used that crisis to reimagine what a stronger teaching and learning system could and should look like for students' sake. Now, every semester, every faculty member looks to see if students have met course-based learning goals. In areas where they didn't, faculty members devise plans to improve the course, enter that plan into a system that everyone can see, and then evaluate whether the plans worked at the end of the course.

When plans are successful, the college celebrates them and the faculty who achieved them. When plans do not improve student learning outcomes, faculty must create a new plan.

That kind of visibility and collegewide accountability for teaching and learning is unusual. It's also effective. It has helped build a faculty culture of using student learning outcome assessments to improve teaching practices at both the program and course levels. Faculty and staff have embraced the system and understand how it contributes to student success in the classroom and after graduation.

The goal of continuous improvement is deeply ingrained into the campus culture. It is also present through the system to annually review every program. Southwest Wisconsin Tech tracks what it calls "College Health Indicators," and as part of its communication strategy, it issues an annual health report card that sets high goals for not just access and completion, but also for post-graduation success. This is measured by successful placement of graduates into jobs with living wages—either directly after college or after successful transfer and bachelor's degree attainment.



Southwest Wisconsin Tech is not done getting better. For example, it has set a goal in its “health indicators” to raise its already high graduation rate to 70 percent for all students. To support that goal, the college introduced a new advising system to help every student build an individualized program plan. Based on students’ career choices, the plans include specific classes, work-based learning and other high-impact learning experiences, and an innovative financial section that includes a budget. Students receive help from college staff on understanding college costs and developing the budget; the college then works to identify resources to make up the difference between their budget and the total cost of college. The success plans also include pathways for job placement or transfer.

To ensure the college can continue to get better for many years to come, President Wood, who has led the college for 10 years, has invested in succession planning. One example: Wood recently timed a sabbatical so his vice president could be acting president immediately after completing a year-long professional development program for aspiring presidents. That way, the successes of the college—and the improvements in students’ lives and futures—will continue.

The work to strengthen programs is paying off for Southwest Wisconsin Tech students. Within five years of completing a credential, graduates earn nearly \$14,000 more than all newly hired workers in the college’s service area.

FINALIST WITH DISTINCTION

SAN JACINTO COLLEGE



Pasadena, Texas

Highlights

Serves the metro Houston area

45,000

students, one
of the nation's largest
community colleges

ANNUAL EARNINGS FIVE
YEARS AFTER COMPLETION
(MEDIAN)

\$54,500

NEARLY
2X
THE NATIONAL
AVERAGE
FOR DEGREES
AWARDED
(AS A PERCENTAGE OF
STUDENTS ENROLLED)

San Jacinto College has long been a leader in workforce excellence. The Texas community college, one of the largest in the country, serves a diverse student body within a rapidly growing economy anchored by the petrochemical, maritime, and health care industries. The college's career and technical programs are among the most impressive nationally: highly sophisticated, closely aligned with regional employment opportunities, and delivered at scale so all students can access them.

At the helm is Chancellor Brenda Hellyer, who has led San Jacinto for the last 15 years. Hellyer and her senior team have positioned the college as a hub within the region's education-to-workforce ecosystem, building and driving strong relationships among K-12 districts, local universities, and large-scale, high-paying employers. As a result, San Jacinto is seen as a go-to partner for talent development in the Greater Houston area, which is also home to several other large community colleges.

The chancellor and her top leaders are focused on excellence in student outcomes for all groups of students. The college was one of the first nationally to create clear program maps for every program, which advisors use to guide students onto and through pathways to completion. More recently, it has added mandatory advising, an early alert system, and a requirement that students build individual plans for their first year in college—all practices that research has shown can increase graduation rates.

The strong outcomes that have resulted in not just student success but economic mobility and talent development in their region have led San Jacinto to be recognized as a 2025 Aspen Prize Finalist with Distinction. This is San Jacinto's fifth time as an Aspen Prize finalist.

San Jacinto's facilities for Career and Technical Education (CTE) are state of the art. The maritime program, for example, features a boat simulator lab that enables students to practice the skills they will need after graduating without taking a full day away from their otherwise busy lives. The welding lab contains over 100 welding bays, and facilities for petrochemicals, electrical, HVAC, plumbing, and other programs provide similarly scaled-up opportunities for hands-on learning and practice.

Industry leaders see the college as nimble, both open and quickly responsive to the need to change curriculum or teaching practices to meet workplace needs. As a result, regional employers are eager to support the college in designing curriculum and providing



in-person feedback on student training and performance. For example, representatives of petrochemical companies provide feedback on a capstone experience when students operate all aspects of the college's chemical factory training facility over three days of 12-hour shifts.

San Jacinto makes decisions based on which programs offer value to students after graduation. Recently, college leaders worked with a labor market data and analytics company to identify programs that the college should either strengthen or close. As a result, the college closed several low-value programs, including auto body collision repair and associate-level accounting. The college worked to improve the value of others. For example, in early childhood education, the college created a bachelor's degree that will boost the earning potential of students in a typically low-wage field.

San Jacinto's focus on connecting students to high-value pathways and good-paying jobs extends into high school. The college steers dual enrollment students toward courses that place them on a path to earn a degree, rather than being satisfied with students taking any college course (as is the case at most other community colleges). In fact, the college resists the temptation to expand dual enrollment to include any course, even though doing so could help both school districts and the college increase state revenue through higher levels of dual enrollment participation. Instead, San Jacinto has developed advising structures and incentives with its network of K-12 partners with the goal of increasing their students' college-going rates.

Making college affordable is also a priority. San Jacinto endowed a scholarship that guarantees every FAFSA-completing high school senior within the college's taxing district a last-dollar scholarship that brings tuition costs to zero. This is especially important because 30 percent of San Jacinto students receive Pell Grants. The College Promise Scholarship program was launched with a \$30 million gift, and San Jacinto has raised more to enable the program to continue indefinitely. The program started at three high schools with high numbers of students from low-income backgrounds, and it is adding 3,000 new students each year.

Alumnus Razzmon Williams chose San Jacinto College because of the Promise scholarship. "I achieved my associate degree debt free," he said. Williams, who transferred from San Jacinto and earned a bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of Texas Permian Basin, said professors' caring attitudes helped him succeed. His favorite professor "reassured me that I was in the right career path and encouraged me when I doubted myself."

FINALIST WITH DISTINCTION

SOUTH PUGET SOUND COMMUNITY COLLEGE



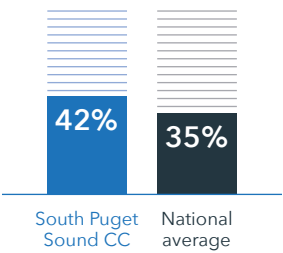
Olympia, Washington

Highlights

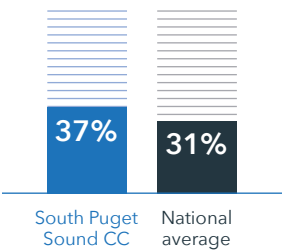
Located in the state capital of Washington, south of Seattle

6,000
students

THREE-YEAR GRADUATION RATE (2023)



SIX-YEAR TRANSFER RATE TO FOUR-YEAR COLLEGE/ UNIVERSITY (2023)



South Puget Sound Community College—located in Olympia, Washington’s state capital, has a strong culture of continual improvement that centers on achieving high levels of student success. While other colleges define student success as completing credentials, South Puget Sound focuses on a broader definition—both what happens in the classroom and whether students are prepared for what comes next, including securing a good job and earning a bachelor’s degree after transferring.

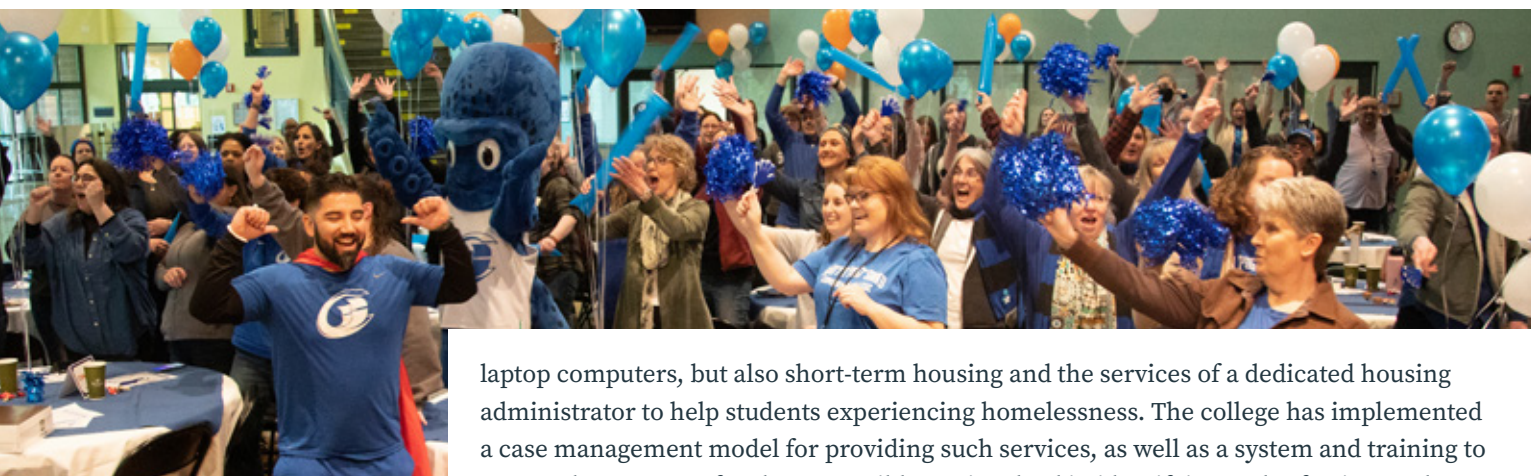
Teaching and learning systems are very strong at South Puget Sound, leading to improvement at both the program and course levels. Faculty and deans engage in a robust, data-driven program review process that focuses explicitly on improving student success. The process begins with program leaders analyzing data on student success, demographics, enrollment, completion rates, and other factors that yield insights into shortcomings within each academic program. Faculty and deans then work collaboratively to develop and implement two-year action plans for improvement. This has led to concrete changes in course-level teaching that have, in turn, yielded better student outcomes.

These strong outcomes, along with the multiple ways the college has enacted student-focused reforms, have led South Puget Sound to be recognized as a 2025 Aspen Prize Finalist with Distinction. This is South Puget Sound’s second time as an Aspen Prize finalist.

South Puget Sound also stands out for its efforts to improve completion through several ambitious research-backed practices. Advising is especially impressive. Each student is assigned to a support network: a team of staff advisors, a faculty advisor, and a financial aid advisor. These support networks guide students toward carrying out their individualized plans for completing degree programs, securing funding to pay for college, and receiving nonacademic supports such as food or housing assistance.

Eighty-five percent of South Puget Sound students build individualized plans for completing their program, developing them with the support of advisors during a college success course that must be taken within their first two quarters of enrollment. Research suggests that when students have an individualized plan in their first year—including defining courses to be taken across multiple semesters—they are more likely to earn their degree.

South Puget Sound also excels in providing wraparound services that support students’ nonacademic needs. These include not only a food pantry, gas cards, and refurbished



laptop computers, but also short-term housing and the services of a dedicated housing administrator to help students experiencing homelessness. The college has implemented a case management model for providing such services, as well as a system and training to ensure that as many faculty as possible are involved in identifying and referring students who would benefit from them. Among students, such services are largely destigmatized, leading eligible students to utilize them at high rates.

Even though most students are pursuing transfer credentials, South Puget Sound has also focused on strengthening workforce programs. For example, to graduate from a career and technical Education (CTE) program, all students are required to complete an internship. Courses and other on-campus components of the college's CTE programs have been moved to nights and weekends to accommodate this requirement.

South Puget Sound has made significant structural changes and financial investments to broaden access for several groups of students. To help underprepared students, the college has arranged for every degree program to offer at least one course that follows the Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) model, a Washington State teaching model that places two instructors in the classroom: one to teach, and the other to provide targeted individual support to students who need it. While other colleges have typically implemented I-BEST in math and English gateway courses, South Puget Sound has scaled and spread the model to expand access to other credit-bearing courses for students in Adult Basic Education and/or English for Speakers of Other Languages.

President Timothy Stokes has led South Puget Sound for 11 years, and during that time, he has moved the college toward focusing on improving transfer and bachelor's attainment. For example, South Puget Sound is actively working with four-year partners to better align their courses/pathways to help more students graduate with a bachelor's degree. As noted above, the college helps most students develop individual plans to complete degrees—and for many, that includes plans to transfer. But the college does not wait for students to arrive at the front door—it strongly encourages dual enrollment students to complete a course during high school on going to college that covers transfer preparation.

President Stokes has invested significant effort into building a culture at South Puget Sound of centering student success. The shared sense of purpose and mission is reflected in strong collaboration of leaders, staff, and faculty on substantial, scaled reforms.

“We should never back away from the goal of ensuring every student can earn a credential, increase their earnings, and contribute to a better world,” Stokes says. “Even if it feels impossible, we owe it to our students to keep pushing forward.”

RISING STAR

WALLACE STATE COMMUNITY COLLEGE-HANCEVILLE

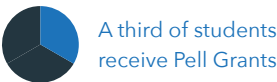


Hanceville, Alabama

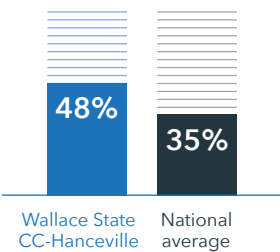
Highlights

Serves a predominantly rural area in northern Alabama

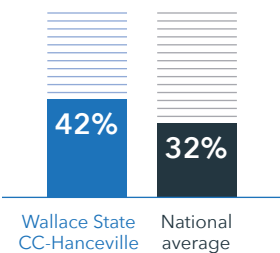
8,000 students



THREE-YEAR GRADUATION RATE (2023)



THREE-YEAR PELL GRADUATION RATE (2023)



Wallace State Community College-Hanceville demonstrates how excellent community colleges effectively educate their students and, in turn, strengthen their communities. The college, located an hour’s drive from both Birmingham and Huntsville, offers strong workforce programs tied to local industry and good-paying jobs; ambitious, scaled completion reforms; and robust nonacademic supports to keep students from dropping out in an area where poverty is prevalent.

The significant, steady improvements in student outcomes that have resulted from focused reform work have led Wallace State to be recognized as a 2025 Aspen Rising Star. This is Wallace State’s first time as an Aspen Prize finalist.

President Vicki Karolewics has led Wallace State for 21 years. She has been a driving force for scaled reform on campus, including the launch of the college’s advising system, the development of Guided Pathways, the overhaul of developmental education, and the creation of the three-year training and mentoring program for new faculty.

President Karolewics understands that people inside and outside the college are key to the college’s success. So, she has been deeply involved in hiring, which has helped Wallace State develop faculty and staff with not just requisite technical skills but also a commitment to students, many of whom face barriers tied to poverty. Externally, she has built and maintained strong relationships with regional employers and local K-12 districts that help introduce students to the college and connect them to good-paying jobs after graduation.

In workforce education, Wallace State shines. The college aligns its programs to the region’s workforce needs and prepares students well for careers that are in high and growing demand, including advanced manufacturing, automotive, and health care. With a reputation for excellence in student preparation, the college has become a substantial player in recruiting new employers to the region.

Students have ample apprenticeship opportunities and access to outstanding training facilities that are impressive both in sophistication and scale. For example, in a facility with 84 welding bays where students can get hands-on experience and training, Wallace State has included cutting-edge virtual reality welding simulators that enable new students to gain practice. The nursing training center also uses simulators, and its patient bays are



“Wallace State’s mission is to provide education that transforms lives and communities,” President Karolewics said. “We not only help students achieve their dreams, but for some, we also help them learn they can dare to dream.”



remotely monitored by instructors who provide real-time feedback and guidance via wireless earpieces.

To advance completion, Wallace State has enacted multiple reforms that research shows improve student outcomes. It has developed clear maps detailing courses for every program and requires that all students take a success course where they create an individualized plan for completing their program tailored to their career interests and circumstances. The college has also reformed all developmental education classes, resulting in very high rates of students passing gateway English and math in their first year, which research shows leads to higher completion rates.

Wallace State has established a palpable culture of care for students, backed by robust nonacademic services to keep students from dropping out because of financial or life challenges. These include emergency monetary support for essential needs like transportation, free mental health counseling, and a mother’s lounge.

Recognizing that many parents in some communities in their service area have not been to college, Wallace State has developed an unusually deep structure for engaging K-12 students. For example, elementary students are invited to a “let’s pretend” event at the college’s nursing facilities, while middle school students engage in STEM programming supported by the college. Wallace State offers every 9th grader in its county a free Workforce Skills 101 course that explains choosing a major and the link between college programs and specific jobs and careers. This course is followed by outreach and targeted messaging throughout the students’ high school years.

Under the president’s leadership, retention of faculty and staff has been strong, even though the college’s workforce/CTE faculty could earn significantly higher salaries in industry jobs. Perhaps that is because of how focused Wallace State is on economic prosperity and social mobility of its students, and across the region.

“Wallace State’s mission is to provide education that transforms lives and communities,” President Karolewics said. “We not only help students achieve their dreams, but for some, we also help them learn they can dare to dream.”

FINALIST

GEORGIA HIGHLANDS COLLEGE



Rome, Georgia

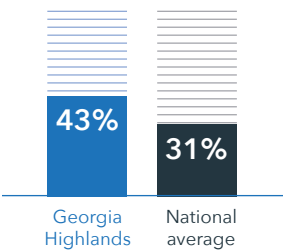
Highlights

Serves students in the Atlanta suburbs and surrounding rural counties on five campuses

6,300

students

SIX-YEAR TRANSFER RATE
TO FOUR-YEAR COLLEGE/
UNIVERSITY (2023)



Georgia Highlands College offers lessons to the field about how to develop talent for an entire region and increase economic mobility for students. Most students entering Georgia Highlands aim to earn a bachelor’s degree, and the college not only helps them transfer to four-year institutions at high rates but offers nine of its own bachelor’s programs tied to workforce needs, including nursing, logistics management, and environmental and natural resources.

The college has done an excellent job making connections to regional employers and delivering the associate and bachelor’s degree programs they need. Most impressive: the programs at the School of Health Sciences, which enrolls about 30 percent of all Georgia Highlands students in programs such as nursing and dental hygiene. To enable expansion of health care programs to the scale needed regionally, Georgia Highlands leaders developed a partnership with Atrium Health Floyd, a system of health care providers that serve northwest Georgia and northeast Alabama. Atrium has invested \$7 million in the nursing program, which the college uses for student financial aid (including tuition and free supplies), hiring a student success coach, and increasing faculty salaries (because instructors can earn a lot more as practicing nurses).

Georgia Highlands also stands out for how it has created strong pathways for health sciences students who don’t get into the college’s selective nursing and dental hygiene programs. This challenge—faced by many community colleges across the country—exists because many more students want to get into nursing than there are seats in the program. So, the college has created alternatives that students are routinely made aware of, including an innovative health sciences bachelor’s degree with four concentrations tied to workforce needs, including public health.

The college has a warm, caring culture, and faculty and advisors work individually to connect students to opportunities and encourage them to complete a four-year degree. Students who choose to finish their bachelor’s degree at Georgia Highlands say they do so because of the supportive environment and small classes with professors who know them.

FINALIST
MOORPARK
COLLEGE



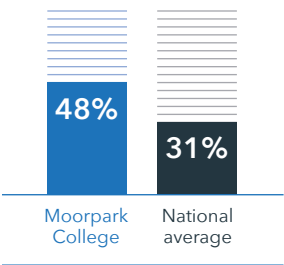
Moorpark,
California

Highlights

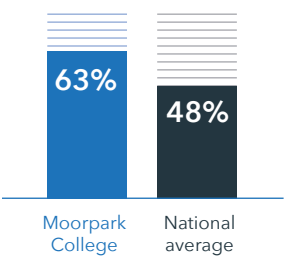
Located in the suburbs
north of Los Angeles

Serves approximately
20,000
students

SIX-YEAR TRANSFER RATE
TO FOUR-YEAR COLLEGE/
UNIVERSITY (2023)



SIX-YEAR BACHELOR'S
COMPLETION, TRANSFER
STUDENTS (2023)



Like other strong transfer-focused community colleges, **Moorpark College** has focused its reform efforts on getting students onto pathways that deliver affordable on-ramps to a bachelor's degree. The result: Nearly half of students transfer to a four-year institution within six years of starting (compared to the national average of just under one third) and 63 percent of transfer students earn a bachelor's within six years (compared to 48 percent nationally).

Moorpark's strong transfer outcomes are almost certainly related to the very high numbers of students who complete California Associate Degrees for Transfer (ADTs)—discipline-based credentials designed to ensure that students meet the transfer requirements of the California State University system. Because so many students take courses on those program pathways, their outcomes in other areas are also strong. For example, the college has achieved exceptionally high rates of students completing gateway English and math courses during their first year, which research shows is positively correlated to degree completion. Those student outcomes—and the practices that enabled the college to achieve them—are why Moorpark has been named an Aspen Prize finalist for the second time.

Moorpark was the first community college in California to offer ADTs, and it now offers more ADT options and confers more ADTs than any other community college in the state. For students who want to transfer to one of six participating University of California campuses, there is also a Transfer Admission Guarantee (TAG) program, which offers early admission for students who qualify academically.

When Moorpark College was an Aspen Prize finalist in 2023, judges noted the college's pervasive culture of caring and belonging. That culture is still strong today, with faculty, staff, and senior leaders working hard to ensure students have a sense that everyone cares that they succeed in their coursework. Professional development for faculty and staff focuses on learning about different student groups' experiences, and faculty are given incentives to experiment with innovative solutions to improve outcomes for groups of students who struggle most in their classrooms. Successful solutions have been adopted widely across the college, including embedded tutoring in courses and two-way texting to help students connect to advising and needed supports.

FINALIST

NORTHEAST WISCONSIN
TECHNICAL COLLEGE



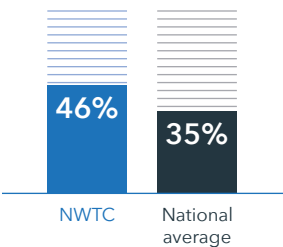
Green Bay,
Wisconsin

Highlights

Serves Green Bay and surrounding rural counties with five campuses

15,000
students

THREE-YEAR GRADUATION
RATE (2023)



Ask anyone at **Northeast Wisconsin Technical College** to name the college’s top priority and you’ll get the same answer: student success. But what is more distinctive is the definition of success. Everyone—from senior leaders to the board, faculty, advisors, and staff—shares a focus on helping students not just complete college but be prepared to secure a good-paying job after graduation. These outcomes, along with the college’s especially strong workforce programs, are why the college is an Aspen Prize finalist (for the first time).

That collective attention to student success manifests in major reforms. The college has created clear program maps for every program and changed most courses from 16- to 8-week formats after finding that students perform better in the shorter courses. Other changes have helped individuals take action to advance student success, such as an early alert system that exists at many colleges but is used at Northeast Wisconsin at an unusual scale by faculty and staff to keep students on pathways, connect them to mentoring and nonacademic services, and send out “kudos” to recognize good work and keep students motivated.

The college’s use of multiple, data-informed completion strategies has contributed to strong student outcomes. Northeast Wisconsin’s completion rate for full-time students is 11 points higher than the national average, and the rate for part-time students is consistently higher than the national average as well.

Northeast Wisconsin is primarily a workforce college, with strong connections to regional industries such as manufacturing, shipbuilding, and health care (including rural hospitals that need nurses). Employers who sit on advisory boards are involved in updating curriculum to align with industry changes, and the college is seen as highly responsive to industry leaders and their talent development needs.

The college has strong work-based learning opportunities for students and top-notch equipment and facilities for them to train on, including virtual reality labs. Evidence shows that students leave Northeast Wisconsin very well prepared to succeed in the workforce: Five years after graduating, students have a median salary nearly \$11,000 higher than for all new hires in the region.

FINALIST

NORTHWEST VISTA COLLEGE



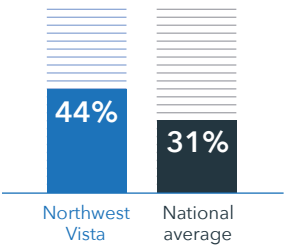
San Antonio, Texas

Highlights

Part of a five-college Alamo Colleges District in San Antonio

25,000
students

SIX-YEAR TRANSFER RATE TO FOUR-YEAR COLLEGE/UNIVERSITY (2023)



Among community colleges, **Northwest Vista College** is a leader in the rate at which students transfer to a four-year college or university on the path to a bachelor’s degree. The college’s rate of transferring to a four-year school is 13 percentage points above the national average (44 percent compared to 31 percent), and bachelor’s degree attainment after transfer is also higher than the national average. This is Northwest Vista’s first time as an Aspen Prize finalist.

The college’s successes flow from having in place clear program maps and strong advising systems. Upon entry to Northwest Vista, each student develops an individual success plan that maps out the coursework needed to successfully transfer in their field of study. The success plans are developed using one of 1,500 Transfer Advising Guides, each prepared in collaboration with Northwest Vista’s seven major transfer partners in the area. To help part-time and working students get the courses they need, the college offers flexible options, including eight-week courses and shorter summer and winter terms.

Advising is particularly strong at Northwest Vista. After students complete orientation, they participate in mandatory advising with clear goals aligned to timely completion. Advisors set up a plan for each student, helping them choose an appropriate pathway early. Students continue to have multiple touchpoints with an advisor, who monitors their progress after completion of 15, 30, and 45 credits. This allows advisors to intervene when students are off track.

To ensure that every student is supported on their path to a credential, Northwest Vista recently doubled the number of advisors. And the college invests in their training and professional development. After a six-week onboarding process, advisors meet every Friday—which the college calls “Student Success Fridays”—for training on advising as well as updates from faculty on any program changes.

The culture of care for students at Northwest Vista is palpable, and one way it has been maintained is through the services offered at the college’s Student Advocacy Center. The Center offers free grocery and clothing stores, mental health services, case managers to help with housing situations such as eviction, and spaces for neurodivergent students. It also puts \$300 in meal credits on the ID of every student receiving a Pell Grant. Combined, these services allow Northwest Vista students to focus less on getting their basic student services met and more on succeeding in their major and preparing to transfer.

FINALIST

SEMINOLE STATE COLLEGE OF FLORIDA



Sanford, Florida

Highlights

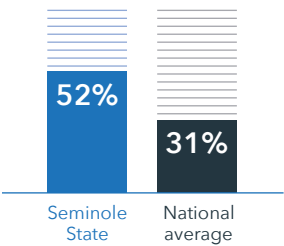
Located in and around urban and suburban Orlando

21,000
students

Strong labor market outcomes

\$58,000
Annual earnings five years after completion (median)

SIX-YEAR TRANSFER TO
FOUR-YEAR COLLEGE/
UNIVERSITY (2023)



From the time they enter college, students at **Seminole State College of Florida** are set up for success. The college has a strong onboarding experience for students with a registration lab and a well-designed, first-year experience course that helps students start exploring a career and choosing a path early.

Students who are aiming to transfer are identified at registration, and advisors help them pick a major and get on a degree pathway. Within six years of entering Seminole State, 52 percent of students pursue bachelor’s degrees at four-year institutions, well above the national average. Those student outcomes—and the practices that enabled the college to achieve them—are why Seminole State has been named an Aspen Prize finalist (for the first time).

Most Seminole State students transfer to the University of Central Florida (UCF), a partner with a very high graduation rate. Seminole State has a longstanding partnership with UCF through an effort called Direct Connect, which guarantees students from six area colleges admission if they complete an associate degree. Seminole State students have three opportunities a year to apply through Direct Connect, with support from UCF advisors who are physically located on the community college campus, as well as a strong commitment to transfer success from Seminole State leaders and faculty.

Seminole State has also aligned workforce programs to good jobs in fields that include firefighting, graphic design, IT support, and law enforcement. As a result, the college can rely on local employers to identify upskilling opportunities around which the college builds programs, to provide many opportunities for students in work-based learning, and to have employees serve as adjunct faculty.

Student Christopher Ward, who came to Seminole State seeking a career change and is set to graduate with a bachelor’s in construction management in May, has benefited from the college’s strong workforce connections. “I was excited about getting job offers two to three years into my schooling. Right after receiving my associate degree in construction management, I was offered up to seven jobs.” Ward says Seminole State’s college success class, which taught him how to balance working while going to college, was extremely helpful. “Now that I’m graduating in three months, I can definitely say I’ve had college success.”

FINALIST

UCNJ UNION COLLEGE OF
UNION COUNTY, NJ



Cranford,
New Jersey

Highlights

Located in a suburban
area 45 minutes outside
of New York City

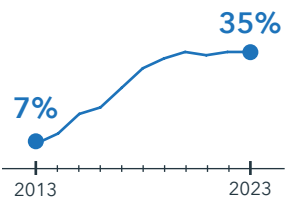
11,000

students

\$64,000

Annual earnings five years
after completion (median)

GRADUATION RATE
INCREASE OVER
10 YEARS (2023)



A decade ago, **UCNJ Union College of Union County, NJ**’s graduation rate was only 7 percent. In response, President Margaret McMenamín and her team launched a collegewide initiative called Operation Graduation that aimed to reform multiple areas within the institution. Focused priorities included strengthening curriculum, developing program maps, overhauling the advising system, enhancing tutoring services, and launching student support initiatives focusing on specific groups that historically had been underserved.

A decade later, UCNJ’s graduation rate has increased five-fold, to 35 percent. This accomplishment, along with President McMenamín’s strong and sustained leadership in driving improvements in student success and building a culture of student completion, are major reasons why UCNJ is a first-time finalist for the Aspen Prize.

These reforms are especially notable because the president worked closely with the faculty—and its union—to devise major changes. As a result, faculty have become more engaged with students outside the classroom, including in advising students on careers and course sequences.

This did not happen by accident. Over her 15-year term, President McMenamín has built a strong senior team and, with them, earned the trust and credibility needed to spearhead lasting institutional reforms. Today, UCNJ faculty and staff exhibit pride in increasing graduation rates and ensuring that historically underserved groups receive ample tailored supports.

UCNJ is also notable for how it serves its students, the local workforce, and community needs through its nursing program, which enrolls approximately 2,000 students. (Many community college nursing programs are much smaller because of limits on clinical capacity). UCNJ delivers strong outcomes to the notably diverse students in its nursing program, and offers a part-time option for students who need to work. In recent years the nursing program’s completion rate has increased substantially, and the college’s relationship with its health care system partners has become stronger. It’s one way UCNJ is proving that community colleges can advance economic mobility and talent development by connecting education to real-life opportunities.





How are the winners selected?

Round 1: From 1,000 to 150 institutions eligible to apply

To award the Aspen Prize, the College Excellence Program engages in a rigorous two-year process that assesses student outcomes at nearly 1,000 U.S. community colleges, leading to the selection of 20 semifinalists, 10 finalists, and, ultimately, the winner and finalists for additional recognition. Throughout the process, Aspen and the higher education experts we engage analyze quantitative data, evaluate detailed applications from colleges, and interview a wide range of stakeholders at colleges.

A national panel of community college experts advises Aspen in the creation of a model based on publicly available data to identify 150 colleges eligible to apply. The model considers overall student outcomes of those typically underrepresented in higher education, and improvements over time.

Round 2: From 150 eligible institutions to 20 semifinalists and 10 finalists

Aspen invites eligible colleges to submit an application detailing their approach to student success. A committee of experts scores applications and additional student outcomes data, then a panel of Aspen and external experts interviews leaders at the top 50 colleges to gather further evidence. This informs the selection of the 20 semifinalist institutions. The selection committee then convenes for a day-long meeting to name the 10 finalist institutions.

Round 3: From 10 finalists to winners

Small teams of experts in community college practice, research, and leadership, conduct two-day site visits to each finalist institution. Partnering with the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS), Aspen also collects additional information on employment and earnings outcomes. A jury of prominent leaders in education, business, politics, policy, journalism, and other relevant fields reviews quantitative and qualitative analyses of each institution to select the winner and other recognized colleges.

How are the finalists assessed?

To assess the finalist colleges, the Aspen Institute collects quantitative and qualitative data as well as extensive contextual data (sources listed below). All of this information helps the finalist selection committee and Aspen Prize jury understand each finalist college and the unique attributes of the students, communities, and regions they serve.

The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS)

A national panel of community college experts advises Aspen in the creation of a model based on publicly available data to identify 150 colleges eligible to apply. The model considers overall student outcomes of those typically underrepresented in higher education, and improvement over time.

- Number of completers per 100 FTE students (including both full- and part-time students)
 - For all students
 - For students of color (Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous students)
- Three-year graduation/transfer rate
 - For all students
 - For students of color (Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous students)
- Three-year graduation rate for Pell Grant recipients
- Retention rate (first to second year)
- Eight-year completion outcomes for part-time students
- Improvement over five years on two measures: retention rate and three-year graduation/transfer rate
- Percentage of students attending part-time
- Percentage of vocational/technical awards (out of all awards conferred)
- Percentage of nontraditional-age students (25 and older)
- Percentage of Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous students
- Percentage of Pell Grant recipients

National Student Clearinghouse

- Six-year transfer rate
- Six-year bachelor's degree completion rate
- First-year retention and persistence rate

How are
the finalists
assessed?

(continued)

State Unemployment
Insurance Records
Matched with Institutional
Cohort Data

- Workforce outcomes based on surveys
- Completion of math and English gateway courses in students’ first year
- Credit accumulation rate in first year

U.S. Census

- Classes of 2018 and 2022 employment information
- Employment rate one year and five years after graduation
- Annualized salaries and wages five years after graduation

U.S. Bureau of
Labor Statistics

- Median family income of service area
- Urbanicity of institution location
- Racial/ethnic demographics of the service area
- Average annual county new hire wage
- Percentage of service area population living below 200% of poverty line

Site Visits

- County unemployment rate
- County five-year employment change rate
- Average annual county wage and average wages for new hires

Writers generate reports based on expert site visitor interviews with institutional leaders, professors, department chairs, deans, staff, students, board members, community partners, and employers as well as documents submitted by each institution, including strategic plans, accreditation reports, and program review reports.

2025 Aspen Prize Decision-Making Committees

We are deeply grateful to everyone who contributed to the analytic work and selection processes that led to the selection of the 2025 Aspen Prize winner, finalists, and finalists with additional recognition.

Data and Metrics Advisory Panel

The Data and Metrics Advisory Panel, with technical support from NCHEMS, provided critical guidance to improve upon the methodology for evaluating all U.S. community colleges and selecting colleges eligible to apply for the Aspen Prize.

- Kathy Booth**, WestEd
- Sue Clery**, ASA Research
- Darla Cooper**, Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges
- Daryl Davis**, Valencia College
- Kim Dancy**, Institute for Higher Education Policy
- John Fink**, Community College Research Center
- Kent Phillippe**, American Association of Community Colleges
- Elizabeth Pisacreta**, Ithaka S+R
- Tatiana Velasco**, Community College Research Center
- Christina Whitfield**, State Higher Education Executive Officers Association

Finalist Selection Committee

The Finalist Selection Committee reviewed data, applications, and findings from leadership interviews to identify 10 institutions that deliver exceptional student results.

- Marty Alvarado**, Jobs for the Future
- Darla Cooper**, Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges
- Dhanfu Elston**, Complete College America
- John Fink**, Community College Research Center
- Marc Herzog**, Chancellor Emeritus, Connecticut Community College System
- Audrey Jaeger**, Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research
- Robert Johnstone**, National Center for Inquiry and Improvement
- Kate Kreamer**, Advance CTE
- Hana Lahr**, Community College Research Center
- Shannon Looney**, SML Consulting
- Susan Mayer**, Achieving the Dream
- John Nixon**, President Emeritus, Mt. San Antonio College
- Iris Palmer**, New America
- Amelia Parnell**, National Association of Student Personnel Administrators
- Monique Perry-Graves**, Teach for America
- Gretchen Schmidt**, National Center for Inquiry and Improvement
- Nicole Smith**, Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce
- Heather Wathington**, iMentor

2025 Aspen Prize Decision-Making Committee

(continued)

Site Visitors

Teams of experienced researchers, practitioners and community college leaders conducted two-day site visits to each of the 10 finalist institutions to gather qualitative evidence.

Ben Barrett, Senior Program Manager, Aspen CEP
Pascale Charlot, Managing Director, Aspen CEP
Darla Cooper, Executive Director, RP Group
Martha Ellis, Senior Pathways Fellow, Texas Association of Community Colleges
Maria Harper-Marinick, Chancellor Emeritus of Maricopa Community College District
Robert Johnstone, Founder and President, National Center for Inquiry and Improvement
Hana Lahr, Senior Research Associate, Community College Research Center
Tania LaViolet, Director, Aspen CEP
Mary Rittling, President Emeritus, Davidson-Davie Community College
Gretchen Schmidt, Senior Fellow, National Center for Inquiry and Improvement
Josh Wyner, Founder and Executive Director, Aspen CEP

Jury

The Prize Jury thoughtfully reviewed quantitative data and site visit reports and deliberated to select the winner and finalists with additional recognition.

Thomas Brock, Director, Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University
Sarita Brown, Co-Founder and President, Excelencia in Education
Andrew Jack, Global Education Editor, Financial Times
John B. King, Jr., Chancellor, State University of New York (SUNY)
Ericka Miller, President and CEO, Isaacson, Miller
Timothy O’Shaughnessy, CEO, Graham Holdings
Sonja Santelises, CEO, Baltimore City Public Schools
Tammy Thieman, Director, Career Choice, Amazon

We are grateful to the members of the College Excellence Program team who made invaluable contributions to so many aspects of the Aspen Prize: Ben Barrett, Derrick Frazier, Tatiana Johnson, Rebecca Lavinson, Kathryn Masterson, Kristin O’Keefe, Barbara Phillips, and Nicole Zefran.



To learn more about the Aspen Prize, visit higherred.aspeninstitute.org/aspen-prize