

## Southwest Wisconsin Technical College Named Winner of \$1 Million 2025 Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence

*Rural Wisconsin College Wins Nation's Top Prize for Community College Excellence; three community colleges in Alabama, Texas, and Washington State also recognized*

**CONTACT:** Kristin O'Keefe, (240) 351-8531, [kristin.okeefe@aspeninstitute.org](mailto:kristin.okeefe@aspeninstitute.org)

**WASHINGTON D.C., April 17, 2025** – Today, the Aspen Institute announced that Southwest Wisconsin Technical College, one of 16 colleges in the Wisconsin Technical College System, is the winner of the 2025 Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence, the nation's signature recognition for high achievement and performance among America's community colleges.


Aspen also recognized two community colleges with excellent workforce and transfer practices as Finalists with Distinction: San Jacinto College (Texas) and South Puget Sound Community College (Washington). Wallace State Community College-Hanceville (Alabama) received the Rising Star award for significant improvements in its student outcomes.

Since its creation in 2010, the Aspen Prize has been the nation's signature recognition of community colleges that are achieving high and improving outcomes for students. It honors colleges that show outstanding performance in several areas of student outcomes: student learning, certificate and degree completion, transfer and bachelor's attainment, and employment and earnings after graduation. In each area, the Aspen Prize looks for strong outcomes and substantial improvement for all students and different groups, including those historically underserved in higher education. The winner, two finalists with distinction, and rising star—along with the six finalists—demonstrate what is possible at America's approximately 1,000 community colleges.

Aspen Prize winner Southwest Tech stands out for its strong completion rates—including for lower-income students—and exceptional wage outcomes for graduates. Five years after completion, graduates earn nearly \$14,000 more than the average new hire in the region.

The college exceeds the national average for community college graduation rate (35%) by nearly 20 percentage points. Southwest Tech is aiming even higher—working to raise its already impressive 54% graduation rate to 70% through multiple strategies, including ensuring that every student develops a career-aligned student success plan and has the support in place to complete their program.

A culture of continuous improvement is deeply embedded at Southwest Tech: faculty regularly assess student learning outcomes and adjust instruction to ensure better results each



semester. Guided by a mission to “never graduate anyone into poverty,” Southwest Tech has restructured or replaced programs to align with living-wage careers, demonstrating how a rural college with a modest budget can implement collegewide reforms that deliver outstanding results.

“Southwest Wisconsin Technical College inspires the field with how they connect every program to a good-paying job that regional employers need to fill,” said Aspen Prize co-chair Tim O’Shaughnessy, CEO of Graham Holdings Co. “Their emphasis on work-based learning and hands-on training in every program shows how an engaging, high-quality education can change lives while strengthening a regional [economy](#).”


As the winner of the 2025 Aspen Prize, Southwest Tech will receive \$700,000 of the \$1 million Prize purse. The two Finalists with Distinction—San Jacinto College (Texas) and South Puget Sound Community College (Washington)—and Rising Star Wallace State Community College-Hanceville (Alabama) will each receive \$100,000.

“These top community colleges are an inspiration,” said John King Jr., former Secretary of Education and co-chair of the Aspen Prize jury. “By embracing excellence and reform, they show community colleges nationwide how the diverse students they serve can learn a lot and graduate at high rates so that they can be well-prepared for whatever comes next in their lives. Other community colleges should learn from these Prize finalists so that every community college student in our country has a chance at a first-rate [education](#).”

Rounding out the Aspen Prize top 10, named in the spring of 2024, are Georgia Highlands College, Moorpark College (California), Northeast Wisconsin Technical College, Northwest Vista College (Texas), Seminole State College of Florida, and UCNJ Union College of Union County, NJ. The finalists—spanning rural, suburban, and urban areas with diverse student populations and a mix of technical workforce and academic transfer programs—demonstrate that community colleges can achieve strong, improving rates of student success across a variety of contexts.

Josh Wyner, executive director of the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program, highlighted that the 2025 Aspen Prize finalists not only deserve national recognition but also serve as models for how community colleges can drive meaningful, scalable improvements in student outcomes.

“The ten finalists for the 2025 Aspen Prize demonstrate what’s possible when community colleges are deeply committed to student success,” Wyner said. “Each of these institutions has



taken scaled, innovative approaches to better outcomes, from improving completion rates to making sure credentials lead to good-paying jobs and fulfilling careers, whether directly after community college or after transfer and bachelor’s attainment.”

The 2025 Prize winners were selected by an independent eight-member Prize Jury of leaders in business, journalism, and education:

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

The 2025 Aspen Prize cycle began in summer 2023 when the Aspen Institute analyzed outcomes at all 1,000 community colleges nationally and invited 150 community colleges to apply, based on data showing strong and improving student outcomes in key areas such as retention, completion, and transfer. A selection committee of 18 higher education experts reviewed data and narratives for the 118 submitted applications and chose ten finalists in June 2024, following the announcement of 20 semifinalists in May 2024. For more information about the Prize process, please visit: [as.pn/prize](https://as.pn/prize).

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The **Aspen Prize** is generously funded by Ascendium, the Joyce Foundation, JPMorgan Chase, and the Kresge Foundation.

Previous winners are:

- 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 [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 [www.aspeninstitute.org](http://www.aspeninstitute.org).