



**2023 ASPEN PRIZE FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGE EXCELLENCE
AWARDED TO AMARILLO COLLEGE & IMPERIAL VALLEY COLLEGE**

Two Outstanding Colleges Lifting Students Out of Poverty Split \$1 Million

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WASHINGTON, D.C., April 20, 2023 — Today the Aspen Institute announced the winners of the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence, the country’s premier award for two-year colleges working to change students’ lives: Amarillo College in Texas, and Imperial Valley College in southern California. Each college was awarded \$500,000; half of the million Prize purse.

This year’s winners both serve large rural areas with high rates of poverty and low rates of educational attainment. These challenges make their achievements in graduation rates and post-graduation success for students especially notable:

- Amarillo and Imperial Valley are among the nation’s fastest improving community colleges, achieving 8 and 12 percentage point improvements (respectively) in graduation rates over just four years, far exceeding improvements nationally.
- The winning colleges also both deliver strong post-graduation success for students:
 - More than half of transfer students from Imperial Valley earn a bachelor’s degree within six years of entering community college, about 10 percentage points above the national average.
 - Amarillo graduates earn wages \$11,000 higher than earned by other new hires in their region.

“These two colleges tell the story of the incredible improvements in student success that can be achieved at community colleges, not just better graduation rates but outcomes that matter even more to students: getting the education they need to land a good job and succeeding in attaining a bachelor’s degree,” said Aspen Prize Jury Co-Chair Jane Swift, former Governor of Massachusetts.

Amarillo College serves 12,000 students—about half of whom are students of color—in the Texas panhandle. President Russell Lowery-Hart is known for his student-centered commitment to “loving students to success”—which means a dedication to not just supporting students’ basic needs but their academic needs too. For example, Amarillo has created clear pathways to the degrees it offers and ensures that students make it to graduation by offering comprehensive and pervasive academic tutoring with proven success. The result of these and other field-leading practices is not only nation-leading improvements in graduation rates, but



also highly effective workforce education programs in both traditional fields such as nursing and emerging fields such as cybersecurity.


Imperial Valley College serves 7,800 students, 93 percent of whom are Hispanic, in a small California town near the Mexican border. President Lennor Johnson and his team have created, alongside the community, a college-going culture in the region. The college has established deep partnerships with K-12 that get high school students onto a degree path before they earn their diplomas, helping students build important early momentum. Imperial Valley has also established strong partnerships with 4-year universities based on clear pathways to regionally needed, well-paying jobs.

“What our country needs to understand is that community colleges educate a third of the nation’s undergraduates. This means that they are essential to talent development and economic mobility in every community, in every state,” said co-chair Michael Sorrell, President of Paul Quinn College.

“Community colleges play an integral role in preparing people with the foundational education and skills they need to be successful in their careers,” said Jennie Sparandara, Head of Programs, Corporate Responsibility at JPMorgan Chase. “JPMorgan Chase is thrilled to support the Aspen Institute in their efforts to drive student success—in the classroom and in the workplace—and to ensure that pathways into good jobs are accessible to everyone.”

Since its creation in 2010, the Aspen Prize has been the nation’s signature recognition of community colleges that are achieving high, improving, and equitable outcomes for students. It honors colleges that show outstanding performance in six critical areas: teaching and learning, certificate and degree completion, transfer and bachelor’s attainment, workforce success, equitable access, and equitable outcomes for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. The winners—along with the eight finalists—show the levels of student success possible at America’s approximately 1,100 community colleges.

“We know that students enroll in college for one reason above all others: to get a good job,” said Josh Wyner, executive director of the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program. “For community college students, there are two ways to achieve that goal. Either a workforce credential that helps them land a good job right away, or an associate degree that prepares them to transfer and earn a bachelor’s. What’s so amazing about these winners is how clearly they hold those goals as the top priority. Amarillo and Imperial Valley are changing lives by getting students not just to completion, but set up for life-long success.”



The 2023 Prize winners were selected by an independent nine-member Prize Jury of leaders in politics, journalism, and education:

- Jaime Aquino, Superintendent, San Antonio Independent School District
- Thomas Brock, Director, Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University
- Sarita Brown, President, Excelencia in Education
- Andrew Kelly, Senior Vice President for Strategy and Policy, University of North Carolina System
- David Leonhardt, Senior Writer, The New York Times
- Ericka Miller, President and CEO, Isaacson, Miller
- Joelle Phillips, President, AT&T Tennessee
- Michael Sorrell, President, Paul Quinn College
- Jane Swift, President and Executive Director, LearnLaunch; former governor of Massachusetts

The 2023 Aspen Prize selection process began in October 2021, when an expert data panel guided the Aspen Institute in crafting a formula to assess student outcomes at nearly 1,000 community colleges in key areas such as retention, completion, and equity. Based on that formula, 150 top community colleges were invited to apply. A selection committee of 16 higher education experts reviewed 109 submitted applications and chose ten finalists in May 2022, following the announcement of 25 semifinalists in April 2022. For more information about the Prize process, please visit: [aspen/Prize](https://aspeninstitute.org/Prize).

The ten finalists (including the two winners of the 2023 Prize) are:

- Amarillo College, TX (winner)
- Broward College, FL
- Imperial Valley College, CA (winner)
- Hostos Community College (CUNY), NY
- Kingsborough Community College (CUNY), NY
- Moorpark College, CA
- Northwest Iowa Community College, IA
- San Jacinto College, TX
- South Puget Sound Community College, WA
- Southwest Wisconsin Technical College, WI

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

Previous Aspen Prize winners:

- 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 advance higher education practices, policies, and leadership that significantly improve student outcomes, especially for the growing population of low-income students and students of color on American campuses. For more information, visit higher.ed.aspeninstitute.org and follow us on [LinkedIn](#) and [Twitter](#). The Aspen Prize hashtag is #AspenPrize.

The Aspen Institute is a community-serving organization with global reach whose vision is a free, just, and equitable society. For 70 years, the Institute has driven change through dialogue, leadership, and action to help solve the world's greatest challenges. Headquartered in Washington, D.C., the Institute has offices in Aspen, Colorado, and New York City, and an international network of partners. For more information, visit aspeninstitute.org.