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Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence

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Florida’s Valencia College Named Top US Community College; First Annual Aspen Prize Caps Year-long Effort to Recognize Excellence in Nation’s 1,200 Community Colleges, Which Serve Nearly Half of All Undergraduates Nationally

Valencia and Four “Finalists with Distinction” Show Strongest Results in Student Learning, Completion, Equity and Employment/Earnings After College; National Leaders in Business, Labor, Education and Philanthropy Endorse National Initiative to Spotlight and Foster Community College Excellence

Washington, DC, December 12, 2011 – Highlighting the need to improve student learning and graduation rates in community colleges — leading to good jobs — the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program today announced that Valencia College in Orlando, Florida, is the nation’s top community college and honored four “finalists with distinction” from an original pool of over 1,000. ** (see list below)** The announcement follows a rigorous, yearlong effort by the Aspen Institute to assemble and review an unprecedented collection of data on community colleges and the critical elements of student success: student learning, degree completion and transfer, equity and employment/earnings after college.

This is the first national recognition of extraordinary accomplishments at individual community colleges. The Prize celebrates these top performers both to elevate the community college sector nationwide and help other institutions understand how to improve outcomes for the seven million students — nearly half of all undergraduates in post-secondary education — working toward degrees and certificates in community colleges.

The announcement made today at the National Press Club in Washington, DC involved leaders from across the fields of education, business, labor and philanthropy, including Second Lady Dr. Jill Biden, a longtime educator; Secretary of Education Arne Duncan; Aspen Institute President and CEO and Steve Jobs’ biographer Walter Isaacson; John Engler, former Governor of Michigan and President of the Business Roundtable; and highly respected former Secretary of Education and South Carolina Governor Richard Riley.

The naming of the winner follows an announcement of the ten finalists in September and the project's unveiling at the White House Community College Summit in October 2010.

"Valencia College is a shining example of what really matters in community colleges, and that's helping students succeed through learning, graduating and getting good jobs," said Joshua Wyner, Executive Director of the Aspen Institute's College Excellence Program. "The Prize Jury was especially impressed by how faculty, administrators and staff all take responsibility for success of a very diverse student body. Valencia graduates are employed at higher rates than the graduates of any of the other Aspen finalists despite entering a local labor market with double digit unemployment rates. Valencia's unique culture of continuous improvement and innovation has a real impact on student outcomes that is amazing to see."

Nearly half of Valencia's students are underrepresented minorities — African American, Hispanic/Latino or Native American — and many are low-income. Yet, more than 50 percent graduate or transfer within three years of entering college, compared to under 40 percent for community colleges nationally.

Valencia will receive a \$600,000 prize to support its programs while each "finalist with distinction" will receive \$100,000. The Finalists with Distinction are: Lake Area Technical Institute (Watertown, SD); Miami Dade College (Miami, FL); Walla Walla Community College (Walla Walla, WA); and West Kentucky Community and Technical College (Paducah, KY).

Community Colleges and the Economy

Community college students constitute nearly half of the entire US undergraduate student population. Out of the 13 million students enrolled in more than 1,000 two-year colleges nationwide, over half are working towards degrees and certificates. With four-year colleges and universities' tuition escalating at over twice the rate of inflation (and costing up to \$60,000 per year per student), community colleges are growing at four times the rate of four-year colleges. They serve as the most affordable option in higher education for millions of people in this country, who are more likely than other college students to be minorities and come from low-income backgrounds.

"Community colleges for too long have been under-appreciated," said Richard Riley, co-chair of the jury that selected the winners — and former Secretary of Education and Governor of South Carolina. "By 2018, more than 60 percent of American jobs will require some kind of post-secondary qualification, and community colleges are uniquely poised to answer the needs of both employers and students looking for economic security.

"Community colleges share a common and vital purpose in preparing students of all ages, including working adults, for jobs and continued academic study," added Riley. "For seven million Americans, they represent the most promising path to education and employment. But, for community colleges to fulfill that promise, we need to identify ways for them to boost student success -- and that's what this prize is all about."

"The job training programs at these schools are incredibly important to America's employers in search of skilled employees," said John Engler, jury co-chair, former Governor of

Michigan and president of Business Roundtable. “As the winners of the Prize show us, community colleges can help students achieve higher levels of success, translating into job-ready skills after their graduation. If other campuses followed the practices of Valencia and the other top community colleges, it would make a tremendous difference for students, employers and the economy as a whole.”

Valencia, for example, is doing its part to fill a national shortage of laser technicians in the labor market, while linking local residents to well-paying jobs. The school developed a program to satisfy local employer Northrop Grumman’s needs for laser technician jobs that pay over \$40,000 upon graduation, for which there is an estimated national shortage of over 2,000 trained workers. Valencia achieves exceptional success for students starting their journey to bachelors’ degrees, academically preparing thousands of students every year for the selective University of Central Florida, which guarantees admission to those who complete their associate’s degree.

While every community college faces challenges, the Prize winner Valencia and “finalists with distinction” offer lessons in how all students can graduate, helping other colleges understand how to expand learning, graduation and job placement rates.

Winner:

Valencia Community College (Orlando, FL):

Contact: Lucy Boudet, (407) 234-6443, lboudet@valenciacollege.edu

Finalists with Distinction:

Lake Area Technical Institute (Watertown, SD)

Contact: LuAnn Strait, (605) 882-5284 ext. 241, straitl@lakeareatech.edu

Lake Area Technical Institute (LATI) achieves a graduation and transfer rate of 76 percent, almost twice the national average. All students at LATI enter a cohort-based program of defined courses, providing each student a clear pathway to a degree or certificate as well as a community of students and instructors dedicated to each student’s success. Of LATI graduates, more than 90 percent secure jobs or continue their education, and graduates earn 22 percent more than other new hires in the regional labor market.

Miami Dade College (Miami, FL)

Contact: Juan Mendieta, (305) 237-7611, jmendiet@mdc.edu

Five years after completing their degrees, 2005 graduates from Miami Dade earned an average of more than \$60,000 in 2010, nearly 40% more than the average worker in the regional labor market in the same year (2010). The college graduates more Hispanic students annually than any other college nationally, and many of its graduates become leaders in the Miami area, including the college’s own president.

Walla Walla Community College (Walla Walla, WA)

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Walla Walla’s visionary development of programs creates job opportunity for its graduates and drives economic development in the region around the college. Seeing the demise of traditional agriculture, for example, the college developed new programs related to the land, from wine-making to wind energy and water management. As a result of this vision and other exceptional practices, 2010 graduates from Walla Walla earn more than twice the wages of other new entrants in the regional labor market.

West Kentucky Community and Technical College (Paducah, KY)

Contact: Janett Blythe, (270) 534-3079, janett.blythe@kctcs.edu

WKCTC’s graduation and transfer rate significantly exceeded the national average, achieved through an astonishing 23 percent improvement in the graduation/transfer rate over five recent years. The college achieves excellence by focusing equally on improving student learning in core skills — overhauling reading instruction and remedial math — and thoughtfully connecting programs to regional jobs, from credentials that fuel a large health care sector to the nation’s first marine technology associate’s degree.

The Selection Process:

The winner and runners-up were selected by a “Prize Jury” co-chaired by Engler and Riley. In addition to Engler and Riley, the following individuals served on the Prize Jury:

- **Anthony P. Carnevale**, Research Professor and Director, Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce
- **David Leonhardt**, Washington Bureau Chief, *The New York Times*
- **Joe Loughrey**, retired CEO, Cummins, Inc.; Board member, Lumina Foundation
- **Wes Moore**, author, *The Other Wes Moore*; military veteran; two-year college graduate
- **John Morgridge**, Chairman Emeritus, Cisco Systems, Inc.
- **Janet Murguía**, President and CEO, National Council of La Raza
- **Charlene Nunley**, Professor and Program Director, University of Maryland University College’s Doctor of Management in Community College Policy and Administration; former President, Montgomery Community College
- **John Payton**, President and Director-Counsel, NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund
- **Jon Schnur**, Chairman of the Board, co-founder and former CEO, New Leaders for New Schools

Note: Affiliations of Prize Jury members are listed solely for purposes of identification.

Each finalist was reviewed by multiple teams of educational experts who conducted extensive interviews and collected original data on completion, learning, equity and employment/earnings used by the Prize Jury to select the winner and Finalists with Distinction.

The original pool of over 1,000 community colleges was pared to 120 in April, based on a data formula created with assistance of an expert advisory committee. The data focused on college completion, improvement of completion performance over time and equity for under-represented students, based primarily on institutional data submitted to the federal government annually.

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The Aspen Prize is funded by the Joyce Foundation, Lumina Foundation, Bank of America Charitable Foundation and JPMorgan Chase Foundation.

The Aspen College Excellence Program aims to identify and replicate campus-wide practices that significantly improve college student outcomes. Through the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence, the New College Leadership Project and other initiatives, the College Excellence Program works to improve colleges' understanding and capacity to teach and graduate students, especially the growing population of low-income and minority students on American campuses.

For more information, visit www.aspenprize.org.

The Aspen Institute mission is twofold: to foster values-based leadership, encouraging individuals to reflect on the ideals and ideas that define a good society, and to provide a neutral and balanced venue for discussing and acting on critical issues. The Aspen Institute does this primarily in four ways: seminars, young-leader fellowships around the globe, policy programs, and public conferences and events. The Institute is based in Washington, DC; Aspen, Colorado; and on the Wye River on Maryland's Eastern Shore. It also has an international network of partners.

For more information, visit www.aspensintitute.org.