

ASPEN PRIZE FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGE EXCELLENCE

Improving community college completion rates is a vital national priority. Their open access and affordability have benefitted millions of Americans, but now the nation must get more community college students successfully through to high-wage career opportunities and further education. In setting America's sights on retaking the global lead in postsecondary education, President Obama focused unprecedented attention on the key role community colleges must play.

In response to the President's leadership on this issue and in recognition of the education and workforce imperatives facing our country, the Aspen Institute, the Joyce and Lumina Foundations, and the charitable foundations of Bank of America and JP Morgan Chase have partnered to launch the \$1 million Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence.

The purpose of the Aspen Prize is to recognize community colleges with outstanding academic and workforce outcomes in both absolute performance and improvements over time. By focusing on student success and lifting up models that work, the Aspen Prize will honor excellence, stimulate innovation, and create benchmarks for measuring progress.

VISION

Community colleges are a critical linchpin in America's efforts to educate our way to greater prosperity and equality. If the U.S. is to regain a leadership position in postsecondary education and economic growth, community colleges must be a big part of the solution: they account for most of the growth in college enrollment over the last decade; they disproportionately educate students of color and first-generation college students who most need higher education to get a foothold in the new economy; and community colleges are the primary source of skills training for workers in many sectors of the economy.

Despite their critically important mission, community colleges are under-recognized, under-resourced and many are under-performing. The Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence is designed to help change the way community colleges are understood, bolstering effective leaders and enabling institutions to learn more effectively from peers.

The Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence will:

Honor Excellence - Shine a spotlight on outstanding community colleges that deliver exceptional results in student completion, learning and workforce success, both in terms of absolute performance and dramatic transformation.

Stimulate Innovation - Identify exemplars, document successful practices, and create opportunities to learn from them, generating momentum for reform-minded educators, governors, employers, and community college presidents across the nation.

Clearly Define Success - Contribute to the development of high-quality, consistent measures and benchmarks for assessing community college outcomes so prospective students and businesses can get a clear sense of how effective schools are in helping students – including the most disadvantaged – learn, graduate, and secure good jobs.

With an annual prize purse of \$1,000,000 and the Aspen Institute's unique ability to elevate issues on the public agenda, the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence represents an important opportunity to accelerate transformation in community colleges.

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RATIONALE

Postsecondary education and training are increasingly essential for individual economic security and national economic growth. Since 1970, workers with college education have remained in the middle class or moved up; those without any college have languished with stagnant wages or fallen into poverty. Despite these trends, supply has not kept up with demand: labor economists at Georgetown University project that, by 2018, the U.S. will face a shortfall of at least 3 million workers with college degrees (associate or higher) and at least 4.7 million workers with postsecondary certificates *by 2018*.

Political and education leaders increasingly are calling for a concerted focus on student success in community colleges (and, indeed, across the postsecondary spectrum). President Obama articulated a bold national goal for the U.S. to regain the international lead in postsecondary education by 2020, and leading national foundations and nonprofit organizations have embraced similar goals. Clearly, community colleges will have to play a major role if America is to dramatically boost educational attainment: more than 6,000,000 students – youth and adult learners – enroll in America’s nearly 1,200 community colleges every year.

But efforts to increase completion rates are stymied by several obstacles. One is a widespread sense that community colleges are not high-performing institutions. Existing data on community college performance do paint a bleak picture overall: according to longitudinal data from the U.S. Department of Education, fewer than four out of every ten community college students completes any type of degree or certificate after six years. While some students aren’t pursuing credentials or degrees, the overwhelming majority of students are -- and such massive leakage in the education pipeline imperils the country’s economic future. Underneath the averages, outstanding community colleges surely exist but are not recognized for their accomplishments.

A second challenge: the lack of generally accepted measures of student success in the community college sector impedes meaningful evaluation and comparative analysis of success. This relates to a third challenge: without clear measures of success, it is hard for community colleges to benchmark against one another, analyze what field leaders are doing, and emulate the practices of those who are succeeding with more students. As a result, the accomplishments of the best community colleges go unnoticed and colleges have few incentives, expectations, or roadmaps for improvement.

A national prize competition will help lift up the best community colleges and galvanize nascent efforts to improve student completion, learning and labor-market outcomes.

The Aspen Prize will develop a process that respects the vital diversity of community colleges while prioritizing the most important markers of success – student learning, degree and credential attainment, transfer, and career and earnings outcomes. In this effort, the Aspen Prize will build on other important efforts that focus on improving student success rates, including the Voluntary Framework for Accountability (VFA) led by the American Association of Community Colleges, Achieving the Dream, and the National Governors’ Association’s Compete to Complete campaign, as well as other state and national initiatives.

EXPERT PANELS

The Aspen Institute is committed to shaping a world-class prize based on student outcomes and informed by the best expertise available from practitioners and researchers. The Aspen Institute is convening three committees of thought leaders and practitioners to administer the prize process (full list of expert panel members is available, once finalized, at www.aspenprize.com):

Data/Metrics Advisory Panel - Leading researchers and community college practitioners will examine available data and advise the Aspen Institute on measures/metrics, so that community college performance and improvement in performance can be measured fairly and accurately. The Data/Metrics Advisory panel is co-chaired by two expert practitioners with deep experience in measuring community college performance:

- William Trueheart, CEO of Achieving the Dream
- Keith Bird, Senior Policy Fellow at the Corporation for a Skilled Workforce; and Chancellor Emeritus of the Kentucky Community and Technical College System

Finalist Selection Committee - Former community college presidents and faculty, along with respected researchers and policy experts, will review extensive data and applications for each eligible community college to select a set of finalists. The finalist selection committee is chaired by Cecilia Rouse, Professor of Economics and Public Affairs at Princeton University and former member of the White House Council of Economic Advisors in the Obama Administration, a national expert in higher education and workforce.

Prize Jury - A jury of former elected officials and other prominent national business, labor, education and civil rights leaders will review quantitative and qualitative data to select a winner and three runners-up. The Prize Jury is co-chaired by two former governors, one who is also a former Secretary of Education, with deep experience in education and the workforce:

- John Engler, Former Michigan Governor and President of the Business Roundtable
- Richard Riley, Former Secretary of Education and Governor of South Carolina; and senior partner at Nelson Mullins Riley & Scarborough LLP and its affiliate, EducationCounsel LLC

PRINCIPLES

The prize competition strives to be:

Fair: Community colleges serve a broad range of students and communities, with some community colleges facing greater challenges than others. Prize competition metrics will be designed to account for these differences to the greatest extent possible, so that apples-to-apples comparisons are used to identify colleges making the greatest contributions to student success.

Inclusive: Community colleges with bigger administrative offices and more savvy in seeking recognition should not be the only ones that are celebrated for their accomplishments.

To help create a level playing, efforts have been made in Round 1 to minimize the data collection burden on individual community colleges, using publicly available data to evaluate student outcomes at as many community colleges as possible.

- Performance- & Progress-Oriented:** Prize selection will consider both absolute achievement levels and improvements over time. It will not reward just the top overall performers or just colleges that show big gains but still have low student success rates, but rather, those which demonstrate both solid performance and impressive improvements. This dual focus will provide benchmarks that community colleges can strive to beat in subsequent years, both in terms of overall performance and dramatic increases in desired outcomes.
- Comprehensive:** No one or two metrics can fairly or accurately characterize the outcomes of a community college, especially in light of the multiple missions and broad range of students they serve. The prize competition will consider multiple outcomes (e.g., degree and credential attainment, transfer, career advancement) and multiple types of data will be examined in multiple ways (e.g., trends over time, absolute performance levels, performance by different groups of students). Moreover, professional judgment will complement rigorous data analysis at each stage of the process to ensure a holistic review of the data.
- Guided by Practitioners:** For the Prize to be effective, community college educators have to see their work and aspirations reflected. To this end, community college practitioner-leaders will participate in every phase of the process, from design to selection of winners.

STRUCTURE

The structure of the prize competition is designed to reinforce these principles. A three-round competition has been launched and offers multiple points of recognition for colleges. The Aspen Prize will be awarded annually at a public event that will include elected officials, educators, students, and journalists; the first prize will be awarded in late 2011. The Aspen Institute recognizes that much of the Prize's potential impact occurs after winners are awarded and is thus committed to distilling what works and helping all community colleges accelerate learning, innovation, and reform.

The Aspen Prize competition will have four phases, including three rounds of selection:

Round 1: Evaluation of Public Data - Guided by the Data/Metrics Advisory Panel and with technical assistance from the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS), publicly available data on student outcomes have been analyzed to winnow the field in an initial cut to determine the 120 community colleges around the country that have demonstrated the highest levels of performance on three key metrics: student outcomes, change over time, and equity in student achievement.

Round 2: Collection of New Data - Eligible community colleges have been invited to compete by submitting additional data on student outcomes and contextual variables. Multiple data sets and descriptive information will be examined to assess performance levels and trends in performance over time in academic and workforce outcomes. A Finalist Selection Committee of former community college presidents and faculty, along with respected researchers and policy experts, will review extensive data reports for each participating community college to select a set of finalists. In addition, full data reports will be provided back to community colleges that submit data, conferring a unique benefit for participating in the competition.

Round 3: Qualitative Data and Expert Judgment - Qualitative research will be conducted during site visits to each of the finalist institutions. Along with full analysis of quantitative data, written reports from the qualitative research will be provided to a Prize Jury of prominent former elected officials, national business and civic leaders, and former community college leaders, who will review quantitative and qualitative data to select the Prize winner and three runners-up.

Post-Award Knowledge-Sharing Phase - Identifying exemplars is just the beginning. In addition to celebrating the winners and finalists, the award event will serve as a launching pad for learning from leading colleges and creating a network of education leaders with similar challenges and concerns. Participating community colleges will generate an unprecedented database of what can be done to achieve exceptional student outcomes across institutions, creating opportunities for learning and knowledge-sharing. Profiles of the winners' strategies and practices will be released and publicized to increase public understanding of the work being done at outstanding community colleges.

CONCLUSION

The Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence will focus attention and galvanize efforts on the postsecondary completion agenda. It will create a new demand for – and supply of – exceptional practices. It will inspire and reward those community colleges that are the most effective incubators of successful students and skilled workers. Most important, it will generate acclaim for the educators whose efforts have been ignored for too long -- and spur a new generation of leaders to innovate for student success.

For more information or to sign up to learn more, visit www.aspencprize.org.