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Valencia Named Top Community College in Nation

Valencia Wins 2011 Aspen Prize for Focus on College Completion, Job Preparation

Valencia College learned today that it won the inaugural Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence. Announced in a ceremony held at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., the award comes with \$600,000 in prize money.

“It is such a privilege to represent my colleagues and the hundreds of community colleges across the country that have done amazing work for years and years,” said Dr. Sanford Shugart, president of Valencia College. “The whole country is looking to us these days, it seems. The nation has discovered that we have this unique instrument at hand. We are institutions where excellence is not defined by exclusivity.”

“This award embodies the idea that community colleges are incredibly important; important to the future of this great country, of course, important to our education system and our economy,” said Richard Riley, former U.S. Secretary of Education and former governor of South Carolina. “The prize is also highlighting which community colleges best show us the way to moving beyond extraordinary access to exceptional levels of student success. That’s something we need all community colleges to do nationally.”

In a competitive year-long process, the Aspen Institute, along with a panel of some of the biggest names in higher education, selected Valencia and four runners-up from a preliminary list of 120 “top” community colleges in the nation, based on student performance and graduation data collected by the U.S. Department of Education. The runners-up include community colleges from around the country, including Miami-Dade College, Lake Area Technical Institute in Watertown, S.D., Walla Walla Community College in Walla Walla, Wash., and Western Kentucky Community and Technical College in Paducah, Ky.

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“Valencia College has proven that devotion to assessment yields results,” said Josh Wyner, executive director of the Aspen Institute’s College Excellence Program. “The college is an engine for employment in Central Florida, and a model for the country.”

“Community colleges are America’s best kept secret,” said Jill Biden, wife of Vice President Joe Biden and a community college professor. “Excellence happens every day in community college classrooms and campuses across this country...Congratulations to Valencia College and all the finalists. Your commitment to your students is an inspiration to all of us.”

In selecting Valencia as the best community college in America, Aspen officials noted that over half of the college’s full-time students graduate or transfer within three years of entering the school, a rate significantly higher than the national average (51 percent versus 39 percent).

At a time when data show an increasing number of students nationwide are not ready for college-level work – and that the U.S has slipped to 12th globally in the percentage of young adults who hold at least an associate degree – Valencia is experiencing rising graduation rates among all students, including minorities.

- Valencia has experienced dramatic increases in graduation rates among college-ready African American students, nearly tripling in the last decade from 15.4 percent to 44.3 percent today.
- Graduation rates for college-ready Hispanic students have similarly impressive gains, jumping from 38.7 to 45.5 percent in the last decade.

Because community colleges also train students for the workforce, Aspen judges focused on the college’s workforce training programs and the likelihood of graduates landing jobs. They noted that Valencia graduates “are employed at rates higher than graduates from any of the other 10 Aspen Prize finalists. This is especially impressive given the region’s unusually high unemployment rate and low job growth rate.”

This is not the first time that Valencia has made national news. In November, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching named Valencia ESL professor James May the 2011 Florida Professor of the Year. May was one of only 27 state professors selected to represent the most outstanding undergraduate instructors in the country.

In 2009, Valencia won the inaugural Leah Meyer Austin Institutional Student Success Leadership Award for helping minority students succeed. In 2007, the New York Times named Valencia as one of the nation’s leading community colleges, and in 2001, Valencia was chosen by *Time* Magazine as one of the nation’s best schools at helping first-year students excel.

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Valencia's innovations include:

- LifeMap, launched in 1998, empowers students to chart their own paths through college to achieve career and life goals through connections with advisors, faculty, staff and interactive tools.
- Supplemental Learning, which bolsters traditional courses with small-group study sessions, led by a student who has already successfully taken the class. Since 2006, almost 32,000 students have taken SL courses – one of the largest scale learning experiments to ever take place in a U.S. community college.
- Bridges to Success, which offers disadvantaged high school students free tuition if they enroll in Valencia immediately after high school graduation, keep their grades up and participate in Bridges activities.
- DirectConnect to UCF, which has streamlined the admissions, financial aid, advising and transfer processes for Valencia students continuing their education at UCF.

Founded in 1967, Valencia College operates six campuses and centers in Central Florida's Orange and Osceola counties, offering credit and continuing education programs. The college has more than 70,000 students and more than 80,000 students have earned degrees at Valencia since its founding.

View full media kit: valenciacollege.edu/media-kit

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