

**The**  
**Aspen Prize**  
**for Community College Excellence**



HONORING OUR NATION'S EXCEPTIONAL COMMUNITY COLLEGES

2011


The Aspen Institute gratefully acknowledges  
the following charitable institutions' leadership and support  
for the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence:

Bank of America Charitable Foundation

Lumina Foundation

Joyce Foundation

JPMorgan Chase Foundation



**For millions of Americans, community colleges provide an essential pathway to well-paying jobs and continuing higher education. The Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence honors those institutions that strive for and achieve exceptional levels of success for all students, while they are in college and after they graduate.**

## A MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

**O**ur nation's community colleges share a common and vital purpose: preparing students—young and working adults—for jobs and continued academic study. Today, over 7 million community college students strive to attain a degree that will expand their opportunity, whether they aim to graduate directly into the workforce or continue on to seek a bachelor's degree. Regardless of their path, what they want is no different from what every other college student (and parent) wants—an affordable education that leads to genuine learning and, ultimately, a job paying good wages with benefits.

The community colleges profiled in this publication do an exceptional job of providing exactly that. Winning the top five spots in the inaugural Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence competition, these colleges are distinctive because they have achieved high levels of success for their students. They partner with employers to train students for internships, and then jobs after graduation. They assess learning, improving instruction for students who have not always excelled educationally. And, they graduate students, delivering the quality credentials students will need to succeed in life, career, and continuing higher education.

Not resting on past successes, the Prize-winning community colleges understand that they must adapt if they are to thrive as their student bodies change. The next generation in the U.S. will see a majority minority population—more non-whites than whites. More lower-income students will attend college than ever before, many arriving under-prepared for college-level work. The Aspen Prize winners offer lessons in how all students can graduate, helping others understand how to expand learning, graduation, and job placement rates. These community colleges are making good on the promise that being poor doesn't mean staying poor, that college access and success together can fuel the American economy and the American dream.

The Aspen Institute congratulates the first annual Aspen Prize winner—Valencia College—and four finalists with distinction. On so many other community college campuses across the United States, the hard work of educating the next generation of nurses and laser technicians, school teachers and small business owners, as well as retraining a current generation of displaced workers, is being performed admirably.

But while other community colleges have something to teach, the winners of the Aspen Prize show how a specific combination of actions can significantly improve community college student success. That is something all Americans, and our country as a whole, can and should celebrate.

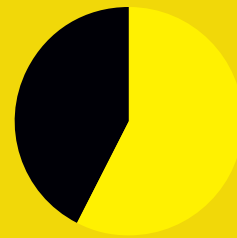
Sincerely,



JOSHUA WYNER  
Executive Director, College Excellence Program, The Aspen Institute

## WHY FOCUS ON COMMUNITY COLLEGES?

# 44%



■ For-Credit Enrollment in Community Colleges  
■ Undergraduate Enrollment in Four-Year Colleges

### **Community college students constitute nearly half of the entire United States undergraduate student population.\***

There are 13 million students being educated in more than 1,000 community colleges across the country. Of these students, 7 million are working toward degrees and certificates. They are more likely than four-year college students to be minorities, to come from low-income backgrounds, and to be the first in their families to receive higher education. In uncertain economic times, community college is often their only viable path to advancement.

Ranging in size from under 1,000 students to over 100,000, some of our nation's community colleges offer technical workforce credentials, while others maintain comprehensive sets of transfer and career training programs. What is often said about the entire U.S. higher education system rings true for community colleges as well: diversity is a large part of their strength.

\*Source: NCES. (2010) IPEDS Fall Enrollment Survey

**With this prestigious prize, the Aspen Institute and its partners aim to further the national understanding of how community colleges can increase student success. The winning community colleges profiled in this document have done just that. They have shown us that what colleges do matters deeply to student achievement.**

## HOW DO WE DEFINE EXCELLENCE?

Community college excellence means providing students with strong and equitable access to a high quality, continuously improving education; an education that motivates and inspires students to excel, and, in the end, equips them with the skills and knowledge they will need to succeed in work and life. The winners of the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence have achieved excellence within four domains.

### **Completion Outcomes**

Institutional practices and policies leading to frequent completion of associate's degrees, credentials of at least one year in duration, and/or transfer to four-year colleges.

### **Labor Market Outcomes**

Institutional practices and policies aligned with labor market needs and student labor market success, resulting in high rates of employment and earnings for graduates.

### **Learning Outcomes**

Institutional practices and policies that result in strong and improving levels of student learning in courses, within programs, and at the college-wide level.

### **Equitable Outcomes**

Institutional practices and policies that ensure access and success among students who are often under-served, including those from three underrepresented racial/ethnic groups—African American, Hispanic/Latino, and Native American—and students from low-income backgrounds.

The winner of the Aspen Prize and the four Finalists with Distinction deserve the gratitude of everyone who believes in the promise of higher education to deliver the job and life skills our nation’s businesses, economy, communities, and families need.

The five community college profiles that follow showcase important lessons from our first national Prize winner, Valencia College, and the four additional colleges chosen for commendation.



**WINNER**  
Valencia College

**FINALISTS WITH DISTINCTION**  
Lake Area Technical Institute  
Miami Dade College  
Walla Walla Community College  
West Kentucky Community and Technical College

## HOW DID WE SELECT THE WINNERS?

### ROUND I

**From over 1,000 community colleges to 120 eligible to apply.** Aspen convened a national panel of community college experts, which devised a formula—based on existing national data on performance and improvement in student completion, as well as completion for underrepresented racial/ethnic groups—to assess over 1,000 public two-year colleges and identify 120 eligible to apply for the Prize.

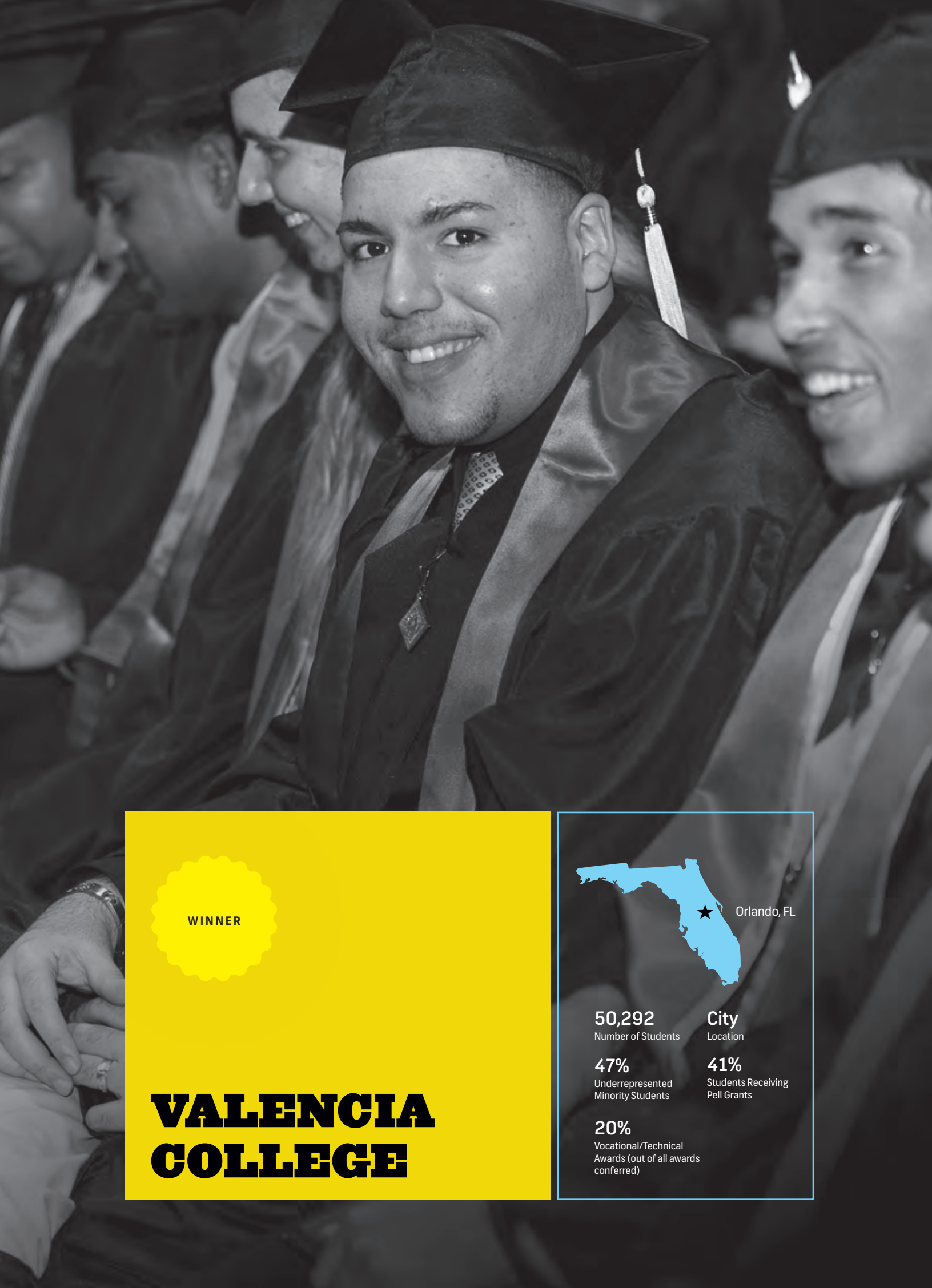
### ROUND II

**From 120 community colleges to 10 finalists.** Aspen invited each of the 120 eligible institutions to submit an application, and convened a selection committee of experts in community colleges and higher education to select 10 finalists from among 110 applications submitted. The Selection Committee identified 10 finalists based on Round 1 data and information from applications, including (1) institution-level data on completion, labor market, and learning outcomes, disaggregated by race/ethnicity, and (2) descriptions of how institutions have achieved and improved student outcomes.

### ROUND III

**From 10 finalists to the selection of the winner and finalists with distinction.** Aspen conducted two-day site visits to the 10 finalist institutions and collected supplemental data, including data from states on graduates’ employment rates and earnings. A Prize Jury of prominent former elected officials, national business and civil rights leaders, and community college experts reviewed the quantitative and qualitative information gathered in each of the three rounds to select the Prize winner and runners-up.

A list of expert committees and decision making panels can be found on pages 28 and 29.



WINNER

# VALENCIA COLLEGE



Orlando, FL

**50,292**

Number of Students

**City**

Location

**47%**

Underrepresented  
Minority Students

**41%**

Students Receiving  
Pell Grants

**20%**

Vocational/Technical  
Awards (out of all awards  
conferred)

**VALENCIA COLLEGE IS A LARGE, DIVERSE, MULTI-CAMPUS COMMUNITY COLLEGE** in central Florida, offering a comprehensive range of programs, including transfer-directed associate's degrees, career technical certificates, and continuing professional education. Valencia achieves exceptional student outcomes by offering clear pathways to success, from associate's degree programs with guaranteed admission to the selective University of Central Florida to technical degree programs that have career advisers embedded in each program. The environment at Valencia is defined by professors and administrators taking responsibility for student success, consistently asking what they each can do to improve student outcomes. Interventions aim at creating incentives for students to use services, clarifying pathways, and, at times, limiting the kinds of student choices that result in poor completion rates, such as not allowing students to add courses after the first day of class. The graduation and workforce results are clear and especially impressive given Valencia's diverse student body, the large percentage who arrive needing remedial work, and the significant number from lower-income households.



Leaders at Valencia College in Orlando, Fla., could see from the data that whether students succeeded in their first five courses on campus foretold whether they would succeed in the long run. As Sandy Shugart, the president of Valencia since 2000, put it, “All the failure occurs at the front door.”

The school enrolls 50,000 credit students and offers more than 700 courses a term. Yet only 15 or so introductory courses account for more than two-fifths of student enrollment—courses that not nearly enough students were passing. So Valencia zeroed in on how students could be set up to succeed in their earliest experiences and start learning from the first moment of the first day of class.

To “Start Right,” as the school termed the goal, Valencia reworked many traditional processes that other colleges view as immutable. Students needed earlier advising and orientation, which in turn meant earlier application and admission deadlines. Adjunct professors were assigned courses a year ahead of time. No more sections were hastily

added at the start of the term, a practice that creates chaos for students and faculty, not to mention the bookstore. And because data showed that students who start classes late are the least likely to complete them, nobody could add a course that had already met, even once. But the school didn't want to slow anyone's progression. So for the classes first-time students typically take, Valencia created “flex start” sections a month into the semester for students enrolling late.

Valencia's student body is nearly half underrepresented minorities and many live in poverty. Yet two-thirds of minority students return for their second year of school and over 40 percent graduate or transfer within three years (compared to one-third for community colleges nationally). The story of Start Right exemplifies how the institution has been able to accomplish this: Understand when students do and don't succeed, and use that information to make decisions. Try new things where they'll matter most, for the neediest students.

Two-fifths of Valencia students—including all those with the greatest developmental needs—now take a course

## Completion/Transfer Outcomes

Over half of Valencia's full-time students graduate or transfer within three years of entering the school, a rate significantly higher than the national average.

**51%** **39%**

- Valencia Percentage of Full-Time Students Who Graduate or Transfer Within Three Years
- U.S. Average Percentage of Full-Time Students Who Graduate or Transfer Within Three Years

Source: Federal IPEDS Data 2007-09

## Labor Market Outcomes

Graduates from Valencia College are employed at rates higher than graduates from any of the other ten Aspen Prize finalists. This is especially impressive given the region's unusually high unemployment rate (11.4%) and low job-growth rate (1% over five years).

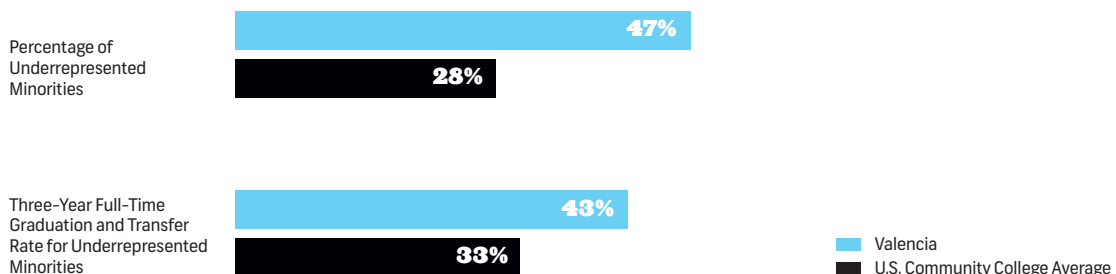
Source: State Submissions of Employment and Wage Data on Graduates from 10 Finalist Colleges

## Learning Outcomes

National experts and site visitors ranked Valencia's processes for assessing and improving learning outcomes as "excellent," and were especially impressed with the college's professional development program for tenure-track professors.

## Equitable Outcomes

Valencia's graduation/transfer rate for underrepresented minorities is well-above the national average, especially significant because nearly half of its students are Hispanic or African American.



Source: Federal IPEDS Data 2007-09

called Student Success, where they create a personalized education plan and learn organizational skills. Additionally, learning communities link two classes, often Student Success and a developmental class. Now that she is team-teaching with a Student Success instructor, math professor Julie Phelps can direct students to the personal services they need, is more deliberate about how she groups them for collaborative work, and teaches not just what to study but how. In her old beginning algebra classes, 70 percent of students would pass—90 percent or more of students pass her class now that it's linked to Student Success. Schoolwide, the percentage of students who complete the developmental education sequence they are placed in has increased significantly.

Patrice Cobb, 40, took pre-algebra linked with Student Success and attended peer tutoring sessions with her classmates several times a week, taught by a “supplemental learner” assigned to her class alone. The instructional tools were great, she said, but just as important, the community that developed sustained her. “In that class, we were amazing as a team,” Cobb said. “We made sure that all of us went through and made it.” Now Cobb aspires to be a math professor and creates that community herself as a tutor for the course she once surprised herself by excelling in.

### **Clear pathways for students**

Jim Lipscomb, a Northrop Grumman manager in Orlando, used to spend half the year on the road, looking for workers qualified to help make laser sights for military hardware. Competition was fierce—a good candidate had five or ten job offers to choose from—and those he hired often left Florida in months, homesick for Texas or Idaho or Iowa.

Now, Lipscomb doesn't need to leave town. Over the last several years, he has hired nearly every laser technician

who has come out of Valencia, which created a program in response to growing industry demand. Valencia is doing its part to fill a national shortage of laser technicians while linking local residents to well-paying jobs. “It's very important that we have this local source for employees,” Lipscomb said. What's even more important, he said, is that Valencia graduates “are really good.” They have enough theoretical knowledge and hands-on experience to work independently in the lab nearly immediately, compared to a six-month learning curve for most new hires.

## **Valencia College sees itself not as a destination for students, but as a bridge to higher accomplishments—a role it accomplishes by creating strong, clear pathways to careers and higher education.**

Valencia College sees itself not as a destination for students, but as a bridge to higher accomplishments—a role it accomplishes by creating strong, clear pathways to careers and higher education. Thirty percent of students who enter Valencia transfer to a four-year college, four in five to the selective University of Central Florida (UCF), which now has an outpost at Valencia, so students need not leave to get a bachelor's degree. Thanks to an agreement called DirectConnect, students cannot transfer to UCF without an associate's degree, but cannot be denied admission if they have one from Valencia. Those who enter Valencia with their sights on UCF get counseling all along from both schools. Representatives from the community college and from the university work together to analyze student data and align programs.

For the two-fifths of Valencia students enrolled in technical programs, the college maintains strong relationships with employers; aligns programs with actual, good jobs; and provides opportunities for in-the-field training. Strong faculty-industry relationships net students internships—at hotels, on movie sets, in hospitals—and, through advisory boards, ensure that curriculum is state-of-the-art. Lisa Macon, an information technology instructor, said that when faculty meet with the IT advisory board, “we listen to every word they say.” For example, when employers expressed concern that

Valencia graduates needed more work on “soft skills” such as working in teams or making presentations, the department added a required course giving students practice in just that.

Career program advisors embedded in each technical department at Valencia help students stay on track. The advisors, who have experience in industry, keep an eye on career trends and maintain outside connections that benefit students. Additionally, the program advisors know the ropes within Valencia, helping students navigate everything from the course catalog to lab hours. They work one-on-one with each student to help them set a goal and determine exactly which courses will get them there most efficiently.

The completion rate in Valencia's career programs has grown 44 percent

over four years. Cheryl Robinson, dean of students at Valencia's Winter Park campus said, "I really think it's because of these specialized advisors that form the relationships with the students and can get them through their sequence really quickly."

### **Experimenting in the classroom**

The textbook that professor Al Groccia used to assign his developmental math students cost \$150. So he wrote one that cost a tenth of that and his class performed just as well. This wasn't a rogue experiment; it was part of the improvement process for every Valencia instructor seeking tenure.

Over the course of three years—with the help of a training course, an advisor, and a review panel of their peers—new full-time instructors each develop action research projects to be tested on students in the classroom and assessed against a control group. They're asked to consider what

might make the biggest difference for students? A teacher may test an innovative hands-on project, or a new approach to tutoring. Ideas that work are spread, which is why all beginning algebra classes on the Osceola campus now use Groccia's \$15 textbook.

Summer Trazzera's developmental reading students used to all be assigned, and get frustrated with, the same lab work. As one of her action research projects, she gave a section of students a pretest to determine their areas of weakness and gave them personalized lab assignments based on their needs. Now, all sections of that course on the East Campus use her model of individualized instruction.

"Our culture really supports innovation," said Wendi Dew, Valencia's director of faculty development. "But it's innovation that's supported by evidence." One thing that evidence makes clear: Students attending Valencia College have an exceptional chance to succeed. ♦





FINALIST WITH DISTINCTION

# LAKE AREA TECHNICAL INSTITUTE



Watertown, SD

**1,391**  
Number of Students

**Small town**  
Location

**2%**  
Underrepresented  
Minority Students

**53%**  
Students Receiving  
Pell Grants

**84%**  
Vocational/Technical  
Awards (out of all awards  
conferred)

**LOCATED IN SMALL-TOWN SOUTH DAKOTA,** *Lake Area Technical Institute (LATI) offers exemplary workforce training. With 27 discrete programs aimed at career preparation, ranging from aviation mechanics to nursing to welding, the college achieves exceptionally high rates of completion and job placement. While some part-time options are available, programs are designed for full-time attendance (for example, four days a week from 8 a.m. until 3 p.m.) providing students the clear scheduling and progression inherent in a block-structured format. As a result, the college faculty, who generally worked in and remain connected to the industries in which their graduates will work, know their students well, and serve not only as instructors but as de facto guidance counselors. Students are primarily traditional college-age and most are lower-income, with 53 percent of students receiving Pell grants. Given the high percentage of students on need-based aid, it is notable that LATI has virtually eliminated the necessity for remedial education by establishing a different set of readiness requirements for entry into each of its programs of study.*



Administrators at LATI will tell you, “We’re not a community college.” Yet the Watertown, S.D., higher education institution embodies as profound a sense of community as any community college in the country. Faculty are hired and trained with an eye toward ensuring they’ll pay attention to students as individuals, a mission made easier by the fact that faculty members see students almost daily.

Nearly all of LATI’s 1,400 students attend full-time and everyone is enrolled in a technical program as part of a cohort, which progresses together through each semester, course, and day, from morning until mid-afternoon. At LATI, there’s no room to wander. Program instructors serve as students’ advisors and can’t help but know when they are troubled, or struggling academically, or absent. (At LATI, attendance is mandatory and administrators track down students who are absent three days.) Students with remedial needs are not held back; they are given online materials to work on before they arrive on campus and then launch into their technical programs right away with their peers, fitting in developmental math and reading courses at lunchtime.

That rigid structure and intense focus on student development is a key reason for the school’s remarkable success. Sixty-six percent of LATI students graduate within three years, and another 10 percent transfer to four-year colleges. Upon graduation, over 90 percent secure jobs.

LATI president Deb Shephard, whose background is in counseling and social work, said, “We tell [instructors], ‘You’ve got to know their names. You’ve got to know their little town. You’ve got to know what they did over the weekend.’” Many LATI students come from far-flung towns so small that Watertown, at 21,000 residents, seems overwhelming. So, early in the fall, the school holds a Hometown Day, where students mix with others from their area.

Chelsea Morris, 20, attended a high school far smaller than LATI, and even so felt like her high school teachers didn’t care if she succeeded or not. “The teachers here, they actually want to help,” she said. “Lake Area people, they get in your face, and I like that.”

## Completion/Transfer Outcomes

Three of every four full-time students who begin at LATI graduates or transfers within three years, a rate well over twice the national average.

**76%** **39%**

- LATI Percentage of Full-Time Students Who Graduate or Transfer Within Three Years
- U.S. Average Percentage of Full-Time Students Who Graduate or Transfer Within Three Years

Source: Federal IPEDS Data 2007-09

## Labor Market Outcomes

Students who graduated from LATI in 2010 earned 22% more than other new hires in the regional job market.

**\$24,388** **\$20,028**

- Annualized Wages for 2010 Employed Graduates of LATI
- 2010 Average Regional Annualized Wages for New Hires

Source: South Dakota State Wage Records

## Learning Outcomes

LATI instructors ensure that their students are learning by modifying what students are taught whenever employers identify gaps in LATI graduates' job-related skills.

## Equitable Outcomes

LATI's exceptional student outcomes are particularly impressive given the fact that over half of its students receive Pell grants, the main federal financial aid program for low-income students.



- LATI Pell Recipients
- Average Pell Recipients, All U.S. Community Colleges

Source: Federal IPEDS Data 2007-09

Todd Bretschneider, who ran an auto body shop in Minnesota for 23 years before coming to LATI to start its new custom paint and fabrication program, said, “I want to get to know each and every one of my students. That’s my responsibility. I don’t want a single one to leave my program saying, ‘I don’t think Todd gave me the attention I deserved.’”

### Strong business partnerships

LATI benefits from unusually close relationships between faculty members and area professionals through advisory boards in each of the school’s 27 programs. Most community colleges have such boards; few, if any, rely on them more intensely. Members, who serve for three years, meet formally at least twice a year with LATI faculty but, in reality, are in touch far more often—even weekly, in some cases.

The advisors ensure that the educational programs stay ahead of industry trends and give feedback on how LATI’s graduates are faring in the workplace. When weaknesses are identified, faculty respond immediately: redesigning the agriculture program with a greater focus on precision technology; giving dental assisting students more practice taking impressions; teaching energy students not just how to operate hydroelectric equipment, but also to repair it; adding conflict resolution training to the nursing program to smooth interactions between graduates and their colleagues. If industry experts suggest a new need based on area trends, LATI administrators analyze projections, focusing not just on whether enough jobs will be available, but enough good jobs. They can build a new program in a year, as they have done recently with energy technology, entrepreneurship, and custom paint and fabrication.

Ed Mallett, a Midwest region vice president for the energy and grains firm CHS Inc., serves on advisory boards for LATI’s agriculture department and for

the school’s president, Deb Shephard. “With the pace of change, you need to be able to respond and evolve,” Mallett said. “The faculty listens to what is coming down the road. They’re very futuristic in their approach to what kids are going to need to be successful.” This pays off in student success. In his field, Mallett said, LATI graduates are coveted and have their pick of several jobs.

out here”—a spacious hangar with nine aircraft to work on, from a Piper Cub to a 727—“everything starts clicking.”

Hoelsing was working on airplanes within a month at LATI, nursing students interact with patients in their first year, and automotive students get under the hood of a car in their first week. Thanks to aggressive

## **LATI benefits from unusually close relationships between faculty members and area professionals through advisory boards in each of the school’s 27 programs. Most community colleges have such boards; few, if any, rely on them more intensely.**

### “They hit the ground running”

When Isaac Hoelsing, 26, arrived at an aviation maintenance company for an internship last summer, he had a year under his belt at LATI and an edge over his fellow interns. He was the only one with his own tools: a \$3,500 Snap-on set that LATI students can buy at a deep discount. More important, the first year of Hoelsing’s associate of applied science degree program had been spent not just learning about aviation maintenance technology in the classroom, but actually living it: installing flight controls, restoring planes from nose to tail, even getting up in the air with instructors each month.

“At other schools, it’s, ‘We’ll show you what it looks like,’” said Hoelsing, who studied aviation at a four-year college before arriving at LATI. “Here it’s, ‘Get in there and see for yourself.’ You can sit in class and get the concepts, but when you get

grant-seeking and the school’s strong business partnerships, students learn on state-of-the-art equipment: the only truck chassis dynamometer at a South Dakota school, to measure the force of an engine; new John Deere tractors each year; a cadaver lab funded by a local hospital. Even the campus itself is a cutting-edge tool, fitted with water control features that environmental technology students use as a learning lab.

The community college’s strengths culminate in uncommonly skilled, impressive graduates. Scott Lawler, who hires for robotics and machining jobs at a 3M plant an hour south said, “These kids, they come to me, they hit the ground running.” ♦



FINALIST WITH DISTINCTION

# MIAMI DADE COLLEGE



Miami, FL

**96,123**  
Number of Students

**City**  
Location

**87%**  
Underrepresented  
Minority Students

**34%**  
Students Receiving  
Pell Grants

**29%**  
Vocational/Technical  
Awards (out of all awards  
conferred)

**MIAMI DADE COLLEGE (MDC) IS NOT ONLY THE LARGEST** U.S. community college, it is also the largest public college in the nation. Its size, however, has not distracted Miami Dade from focusing on achieving high levels of student success. Serving students from more than 100 countries—nearly three-quarters of whom are Hispanic—the college has worked hard to integrate student supports into classroom-based education so that all students receive what they need, whether their goal is four-year transfer or graduating directly into a career. In an economy with more than 12 percent unemployment, recent graduates of Miami Dade have exceptionally high employment rates and earn, on average, significantly more than other new hires. The college achieves this success while serving as a vital member of its community, running a nationally regarded arts school for high school and college students and hosting the city’s national book fair and film festival.

**N**

ot only is South Florida thick with graduates from Miami Dade, but they often run the show. Miami’s mayor graduated from MDC, as did several of the area’s most influential CEOs, members of Congress, police and fire chiefs, judges, journalists, and most of the city’s public safety officers.

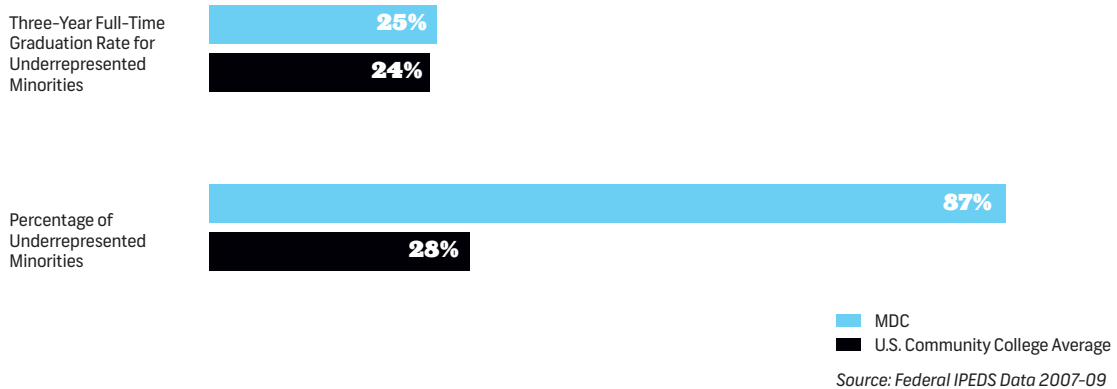
Another prominent alumnus is the president of MDC, Eduardo Padrón, who, like many, came to the college when there were few other options open to newly arriving Cuban refugees. Since its start in 1960, the college has grown to nearly 100,000 credit students across eight campuses. Over time, the school’s reputation has grown too. People don’t always advertise their community college degrees, but at MDC they do, literally, on a billboard ad campaign. “There’s tremendous pride of saying you graduated from Miami Dade College,” said Helen Aguirre Ferre, a Univision journalist and chairman of the MDC board of trustees.

MDC parlays that reputation right back into opportunity for its new generation of students, nine in ten of whom are Hispanic or black, and who range from top performers enrolled in the prestigious Honors College to immigrants who require many layers of English language instruction before beginning academic studies. Its college foundation is the fourth-largest in the state, funding, among other initiatives, \$18 million in scholarships annually for students from poor backgrounds. A new American Dream Scholarship promises two years free at MDC to academically qualified candidates.

MDC reaches out to students still in the K-12 system, offering dual-enrollment and summer enrichment programs, bringing them on campus for college placement test preparation and working with their teachers. For example, MDC recently convened college faculty and teachers from several high schools to look at math placement test results and see how they can better align high school coursework to the skills needed in college.

## Completion/Transfer Outcomes

Miami Dade achieves graduation rates just above the national average, significant for a community college that enrolls more than three times the typical number of underrepresented minority students.



## Labor Market Outcomes

2005 graduates from Miami Dade earned significantly more in 2010 than the average worker earned in the regional labor market in that same year.



## Learning Outcomes

Miami Dade has been recognized for excellence in learning outcomes, earning a 2011 Council for Higher Education Accreditation Award for Outstanding Institutional Practice in Student Learning Outcomes.

## Equitable Outcomes

Miami Dade educates the largest number of Hispanic students of any college in the US, graduating them into well-paying jobs and leadership positions throughout the Miami area.

## Providing skills for success

MDC is one of the largest colleges in the country, a fact not lost on Nelson Bermudez. When the 20-year-old enrolled this fall, he didn't know how he'd find the right buildings, much less navigate the system to get an associate degree in the most efficient way possible.

Bermudez, like 70 percent of all MDC students who place into developmental education, enrolled in a three-credit class called Student Life Skills (SLS), which has been found to double the graduation rate for the neediest students. MDC offers several versions of SLS: one required for students who place in developmental courses in at least two areas, another for students with less intense needs, a third for students returning from academic probation, and even a variation for honors students. SLS students learn how to make the most out of their education—like which seats in a classroom are susceptible to the least distraction or how to ask a professor for help.

Instructors guide students in evaluating prospective careers and developing the course-by-course education plans that will get them there. “Really quickly, I got comfortable with college life, because of that class,” Bermudez said. “My teacher, she’s on top of us.” She helped him devise an education plan in which every class moves Bermudez closer to his business administration degree and eventual transfer to a four-year college.

To improve student results in math and science, the college has adopted an approach called peer-led team learning (PLTL), which now runs in 65 courses on four campuses, and will be expanded even further. Students who did well in a course and are deemed to be good mentor material are hired to return as PLTL tutors. At the beginning of the term, students can sign up for small study groups—about half do—that meet with the tutor several times weekly. The tutors are expected

to meet regularly with the professors whose classes they’re assisting.

“It creates this feedback loop about what’s really happening in the classroom,” said science dean Heather Belmont. “Often, students are scared to tell the faculty what they don’t know.” PLTL tutors bridge that gap, and have made a measurable difference. Administrators note that students who participate in the study groups receive, on average, one letter grade higher than those who do not.

## **MDC offers a three-credit class called Student Life Skills (SLS), which has been found to double the graduation rate for the neediest students.**

A group of three students at a recent PLTL session said they could see why. Their chemistry professor had told them to raise their hands in class if they had questions, but none did. Yet in a recent session with their tutor, engineering major Valeria Perez, 25, the students were fully engaged as she reviewed on a whiteboard how to balance chemical equations. You don’t feel as much pressure as you do in class, the students said, and Perez explains everything clearly. “This last test,” said Joseph Ghanime, 23, “is the first ‘A’ I ever got.”

### **In math, a search for solutions**

“Mathematics is where most of our students get lost,” said Professor Rosany Alvarez. So over several years, as part as an improvement plan tied to accreditation, MDC faculty made a number of changes aimed at improving outcomes in math.

This wasn’t a hastily assembled effort. The college identified four lower-level courses that enrolled 17,000 students

and had pass rates hovering around 50 percent. For those classes, faculty implemented one or more interventions from a carefully curated toolkit of ten possible ways to improve outcomes. Each set of interventions was then measured—through course completion data, grades, and survey results—to see whether it worked, for whom, and under what conditions.

None were an unqualified success, but some showed promise. Assessing students more frequently on smaller chunks

of material seemed to discourage developmental math students, but students in college algebra benefited, so the practice continues in that class. Students were not necessarily following through on “prescriptions” their professors wrote urging them to seek tutoring on specific areas of weakness, but they liked online instruction in math study skills.

School officials describe how the math initiative reflects the college’s systematic approach to continuous improvement and the faculty’s dedication to experimentation and growth. Those attitudes laid the groundwork for the biggest intervention of all: a technology-based redesign of developmental math courses, which is being piloted on the 30,000-student Kendall campus and is expected to be expanded throughout the college. By continuing to search for the most effective strategies, MDC wants to ensure that its two millionth student—who is expected to enroll soon—and everyone who comes after, will be provided with the best possible opportunity to succeed. ♦



FINALIST WITH DISTINCTION

# WALLA WALLA COMMUNITY COLLEGE



Walla Walla, WA

**8,541**  
Number of Students

**Small town**  
Location

**20%**  
Underrepresented  
Minority Students

**23%**  
Students Receiving  
Pell Grants

**66%**  
Vocational/Technical  
Awards (out of all awards  
conferred)

**LOCATED IN RURAL WASHINGTON,** Walla Walla Community College (WWCC) has 103 programs split evenly among career technical and general education/transfer. Despite a majority of students entering below college-ready standards, WWCC does a very good job creating pathways to four-year degrees, posting a particularly impressive rate of transfer to four-year colleges. But it is strong connections with local employers and the community that stand at the center of WWCC's success. Using a combination of sophisticated data analysis and deep engagement on regional economic development, the community college identifies projected areas of job growth and then provides students with the skills and credentials needed to succeed in those jobs. WWCC also partners with segments of its community that, without the college, might remain overlooked. For example, it has established a water management center that works with the local Native American tribe to restore the local watershed and it partners with the Washington State Department of Corrections to educate prisoners.



hroughout the Walla Walla valley, vineyards and wineries have sprung up on land once dedicated to more traditional agriculture. The strength of southeast Washington's new grape economy is due in no small part to WWCC, which hasn't just educated the people who work at these wineries—it educated the people who created them.

As lumber and food processing jobs left the region over the last decade, along with many of the people who held them, the college has worked double-time to ensure that its training programs are not just up-to-date, but are forward-thinking. Egils Milbergs, executive director of the Washington Economic Development Commission said at WWCC, “the attitude is not about buying into the recession. It’s about inventing the future.”

The region's unemployment rate is well below the state average and development officials give much of the credit to WWCC. It engages in many of the workforce practices of effective community colleges: relying on advisory boards,

hiring from industry, and using surveys to make sure graduates are successful and employers are satisfied. But the college doesn't stop there. It attempts to grow the regional economy from the bottom up, creating innovative programs that will create tomorrow's jobs.

The wine program attracts students from around the country and is a central reason there are about 140 wineries in the Walla Walla area, compared to fewer than 20 when the program began in 2000. The school paired with the local power company to open programs in the growing fields of electrical and wind energy. And, a watershed ecology program created two years ago has convened farmers, environmentalists, and Native Americans in an alliance to restore the local watershed, which creates jobs and brings back the disappeared salmon that are crucial to the culture of the local Umatilla Indian tribes. It also provides an opportunity to Native Americans, who make up one-quarter of students in the degree program and traditionally have lacked the educational credentials to move ahead in water-related careers.

## Completion/Transfer Outcomes

Within three years of entering Walla Walla, over half of full-time students graduate or transfer.

**53%** **39%**

- WWCC Percentage of Full-Time Students Who Graduate or Transfer Within Three Years
- U.S. Average Percentage of Full-Time Students Who Graduate or Transfer Within Three Years

Source: Federal IPEDS Data 2007-09

## Labor Market Outcomes

Washington state records show that 2010 graduates of Walla Walla earn more than twice the wages of other new hires in the area around the college.

**\$54,756** **\$20,904**

- Annualized Wages for 2010 Employed Graduates of WWCC
- 2010 Average Regional Annualized Wages for New Hires

Source: Washington State Wage Records

## Learning Outcomes

Walla Walla makes sure that what students learn has value when they graduate, using sophisticated labor market data to tie degree programs to future labor market needs.

## Equitable Outcomes

Underrepresented minorities at Walla Walla succeed at rates well above the national average, an achievement that is especially important given the college's sizable and growing Hispanic population.

Three-Year Full-Time Graduation and Transfer Rate for Underrepresented Minorities



- WWCC
- U.S. Community College Average

Source: Federal IPEDS Data 2007-09

These programs aren't conceived on a whim. WWCC president Steven VanAusdler is very active in the local and state development efforts. School officials work with outside experts to develop economic feasibility studies and share data about career projections with current and prospective students.

Matthew Locati moved from Boise to enroll in WWCC's wine program, envisioning working in a vineyard with his dog at his side. But he would not have signed up without the information the college provided him, including evidence of strong job placement and solid salaries for recent graduates. "That was key to me," Locati said. "I'm 36. Even though I love wine, I don't want to commit two years of my life to a program if I might not have a career at the end."

### **Close connections with students**

The careful attention paid to workforce development is mirrored by an equally deliberate focus on student development, which college officials believe is a big reason why the school's 8,500 credit students are so successful. Nationally, just under one-quarter of full-time community college students graduate in three years; at WWCC, 36 percent do. WWCC students who start off in developmental education have an unusually high graduation rate as well.

Many community colleges require students to see an academic advisor—at some point. WWCC students must meet with one each quarter. Faculty members who advise receive regular training and mentoring and have their schedules cleared each term for a full day of advising.

Garrett Wolf, 24, feels fortunate that the chair of his civil engineering department is also his advisor, steering him toward internships, electives, and a career exploration class. "He really knows what all the courses are and he gets to know each one of us," Wolf said.

WWCC developed the online Advisor Data Portal, which houses a wealth of information about each student that used to be scattered in various places, if it existed online at all: placement scores, grades, educational plans, and warning flags for poor performance or

## **The careful attention paid to workforce development is mirrored by an equally deliberate focus on student development.**

attendance. The portal is one of many fruits of a unique collaboration between student services and information technology. Members of both staffs meet weekly and have designed many tools to improve student completion. A degree estimator, for example, automatically maps students' transcripts against program requirements to determine how close to completion they are. Notices go out to students near a credential—even if they are no longer enrolled—and they are offered a bookstore gift certificate to come talk with a counselor, who helps get them back on track.

### **Educating prisoners for a productive future**

Lloyd Gray, 47, is on the WWCC honor roll. He's also a prisoner at the Washington State Penitentiary in Walla Walla.

Since 2009, the college has set up degree programs, funded by a private donor, at the penitentiary and the Coyote Ridge Corrections Center nearby. Instructors teach classes on site and students get the same high-touch advising offered on the main campus. Technical programs are available too, with hands-on facilities for students in diesel technology, welding, and other

fields. Since 2008, inmates have earned more than 1,300 vocational certificates through WWCC.

The educational opportunities—including credentials aimed at four-year transfer—are targeted to inmates

close to release, so that they can have productive futures when back in the community. Gray had been locked up before, but was never given a shot at an education. When not incarcerated, he worked in restaurants and struggled with addictions. He didn't have an academic future in mind when he entered the penitentiary in 2009, but he jumped immediately at the opportunity.

Gray calls his WWCC education "probably the most positive aspect of my life." Without it, he said, he'd probably be headed back to dead-end kitchen work. Instead, in December he will receive his associate's degree, and his release. He plans to attend Central Washington University and become a behavioral psychologist. Thanks to a community college that has one eye trained closely on students and the other on the future, he thinks he has a great shot of making it. ♠



FINALIST WITH DISTINCTION

# WEST KENTUCKY COMMUNITY & TECHNICAL COLLEGE

Paducah, KY



**9,244**  
Number of Students

**Small town**  
Location

**7%**  
Underrepresented  
Minority Students

**34%**  
Students Receiving  
Pell Grants

**62%**  
Vocational/Technical  
Awards (out of all awards  
conferred)

**IN AN AREA OF THE COUNTRY THAT IS SEEING NO ECONOMIC GROWTH,** *West Kentucky Community and Technical College (WKCTC) provides tremendous opportunities for students and the region alike. The community college excels at its twin goals of providing students with strong job training and continuing higher education opportunity, boasting high completion and transfer rates and strong employment results for graduates. On campus, WKCTC works hard to make sure every student is learning by using classroom-based and campus-wide assessments to drive improvements in instruction. The results are clear: WKCTC transfers perform better than other Kentucky students in their junior and senior years at area four-year colleges. At the same time, WKCTC is a vital player in regional economic development, supplying the majority of nurses and other allied health professionals for the region's robust health care sector as well as creating new programs to respond to the needs of local industries—from the nearby chemical factory to area riverboat operators.*



For many people studying health sciences, the anatomy and physiology course is an insurmountable hurdle. The educators at West Kentucky Community and Technical College in Paducah have found a way to help students clear it.

Since 2006, WKCTC's academic faculty have identified student learning outcomes and developed consistent ways to assess whether they are being met. The precise stumbling blocks in anatomy and physiology were unknown as long as professors gave their own exams. But now that students in the course take the same final, aggregated results made it clear: Students had trouble understanding the nervous system. Instruction on the topic was bulked up.

Educators work to ensure a WKCTC education means something consistent no matter who is teaching. This takes on different forms in different departments, from a common essay to coordinated scoring to aligned grading across courses. The ultimate outcome is instruction that constantly improves and focuses keenly on the success of the school's 9,000 students. Data can show whether high grades in a

section are justified, or whether a professor teaches better online or face-to-face. Professors are free to tailor instruction, to a point: specific learning goals guide professors' teaching. For example, when the goal was set that 80 percent of Introduction to Computer students will score 90 percent on the applications section of a common final, teachers no longer had the luxury of focusing on Microsoft Word at the expense of Access just because they wanted to. "I think back 10 years ago and where we are now, it's just a tremendous improvement in student learning," said Tammy Potter, the dean of business.

The recent five-year push to improve student reading reflects the college's drive. Faculty members from auto body to English received intensive training in instructional strategies to boost students' weak reading skills. Peggy Block, the dean of allied health, now teaches the Cornell method of taking notes and conducts class activities aimed at understanding the textbook. Her course retention rate has gone up and her student evaluations have improved. She sent several colleagues to the training and believes that's why the

## Completion/Transfer Outcomes

48% of full-time students at WKCTC graduate or transfer within three years of entry, a rate that has improved steadily and substantially over the past five years.

**48%** **39%**

- WKCTC Percentage of Full-Time Students Who Graduate or Transfer Within Three Years
- U.S. Average Percentage of Full-Time Students Who Graduate or Transfer Within Three Years

Source: Federal IPEDS Data 2007-09

**23%** **2%**

- WKCTC Percent Change in Credentials Awarded Per 100 FTE Students Between 2004-2009
- U.S. Average Percent Change in Credentials Awarded Per 100 FTE Students Between 2004-2009

Source: IPEDS Completions and Enrollment Surveys

## Labor Market Outcomes

Recent graduates from WKCTC (2010 class) are employed at very high rates compared to other Aspen finalist colleges, even though the regional job market is contracting. The county job growth rate diminished by 1.7% over the past 5 years.

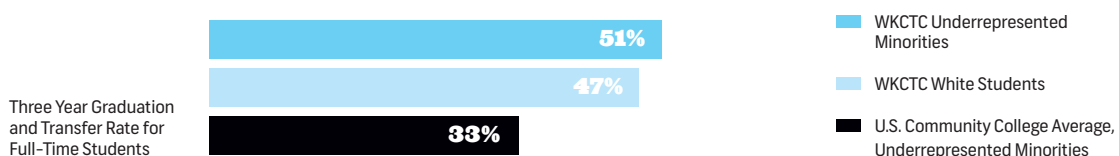
Source: State Submissions of Employment and Wage Data on Graduates from 10 Finalist Colleges

## Learning Outcomes

National experts retained by Aspen and site visitors ranked WKCTC's processes for assessing and improving learning outcomes as "excellent," and were especially impressed with professors' efforts to use and act on learning gaps revealed by commonly administered tests and questions.

## Equitable Outcomes

WKCTC has achieved much higher success rates for underrepresented minorities than the national average, with underrepresented minorities more likely to graduate or transfer than other students.



Source: Federal IPEDS Data 2007-09

graduation rate in their physical therapy program increased from 75 percent to 94 percent. “I really do think it made that much of a difference,” Block said. “And it’s really permeated throughout the whole institution.”

## Removing barriers to completion

Student outcomes have improved at WKCTC, fast—the number of credentials awarded has increased 23 percent over the last five years. One by one, the school is identifying and removing barriers to completion. A thoughtfully designed one-stop shop enables students to receive services from financial aid to registration to veterans’ support without delay. Advisors have reduced the number of undecided students, by providing career counseling and regular contact. For students awaiting entry into the selective nursing program, WKCTC created a more accessible associate degree in health science technology. Now, nearly 800 students who may have spun their wheels indefinitely or dropped out are making use of their nursing prerequisites and earning a marketable degree.

WKCTC has also made a big push to reform developmental education, and the completion rate in remedial courses has increased. Local high school students take the math placement test, and those who score poorly must take a class that WKCTC helped their schools design. WKCTC students who score low on placement tests may take a free training course, retake the exams a month later, and enroll in compressed, web-enhanced courses that reflect their new placement level midway into the semester.

For all its developmental math courses, WKCTC has thrown out the lecture in favor of an “emporium” model, where students move through computer-based modules at their own pace, with professors and tutors on hand to help. Maurice Large, 24, a former

car salesman studying for a business administration degree, finally feels like he can get a handle on algebra. “I’ve always been a very weak math student,” he said, “but it breaks things down in a way that you can understand them.”

## A pillar in Paducah

WKCTC focuses its lens outward just as intently. Under the leadership of Barbara Veazey, a former nurse and the college’s president for 10 years, WKCTC has placed itself at the center of nearly every development that has mattered to Paducah and its

donations) and offer the third and fourth years of a bachelor’s degree.

The college, which offers customized training to area companies, is a not-so-secret weapon for attracting industry to the area. And in a region where plant closings hit hard, killing a thousand jobs at a time, the school looks closely at economic projections to develop programs that will ensure viable, skilled careers. New programs can be created in a just over a year, such as the online associates degree in marine technology developed recently for the deckhands in Paducah’s river economy who aspire to advance their careers.

# The number of credentials awarded has increased 23 percent over the last five years. One by one, the school is identifying and removing barriers to completion.

surroundings. “There’s a constant drive by her to try to figure out what the community really wants from this institution, and at a very, very rapid pace turn around and deliver it to them,” said Bruce Brockenborough, chairman of the college’s board of directors.

When economic development officials told Veazey that the area could not attract jobs when the community college was training future workers on such outdated facilities, Veazey immediately began rallying support—from private donors, then the state—for a \$16 million state-of-the-art technology building. In response to local companies’ difficulties recruiting and keeping engineers, WKCTC decided to grow their own, by inviting University of Kentucky to locate on campus (in a building funded largely by private

In recent years, Paducah has been recast as a fine arts hub. You might not think there’s much of a role in that effort for a community college—but then you wouldn’t be from Paducah. WKCTC started an associate degree in fine arts in 2008 and will be opening an art school downtown. Local leaders believe that culture attracts economic development. Barbara Veazey believes that her students need a revitalized city, no matter how it comes to be. As the art school proceeds, as with every WKCTC effort, there’s no doubt that each step will be taken deliberately, with opportunity for students as the number one priority. ♦

*We are deeply grateful to everyone who contributed to the analytic work and selection processes that led to the naming of the 2011 Aspen Prize Winner, Finalists with Distinction, and Finalists, chosen from among more than 1,000 public two-year colleges.*

## Prize Jury

We offer our sincere appreciation to the Prize Jury, which thoughtfully deliberated and selected the winner and commended institutions from among the 10 finalist community colleges.

**The Honorable John Engler (Co-chair)**

Business Roundtable; former Michigan Governor

**The Honorable Richard Riley (Co-chair)**

Nelson Mullins Riley and Scarborough LLP and Education Counsel LLC; former Secretary of Education; former Governor of South Carolina

**Dr. Anthony P. Carnevale**

Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce

**David Leonhardt**

*The New York Times*

**Joe Loughrey**

Cummins, Inc. (President/Retired)

**Wes Moore**

Author, *The Other Wes Moore*

**John Morgridge**

Cisco Systems, Inc. (Chairman Emeritus)

**Janet Murguía**

National Council of La Raza

**Dr. Charlene Nunley**

University of Maryland University College

**John Payton**

NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund

**Jon Schnur**

New Leaders for New Schools

## Data/Metrics Advisory Panel, Round I

In Round I, the Data/Metrics Advisory Panel, with technical support from the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS), devised a strong formula to evaluate all U.S. community colleges and select 120 colleges eligible to apply for the Prize. We greatly appreciate the efforts of **Dr. Patrick Kelly** and **Matt Crellin** from NCHEMS as well as the members of the Data/Metrics Advisory Panel:

**Dr. Keith Bird (Co-chair)**

Corporation for a Skilled Workforce

**Dr. William Trueheart (Co-chair)**

Achieving the Dream

**Dr. Tom Bailey**

Community College Research Center, Columbia University

**Dr. Jacquae Belcher**

Options Unlimited

**Kevin Carey**

Education Sector

**Dr. Randy Eberts**

W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research

**Dr. Kent Farnsworth**

University of Missouri-St. Louis

**Gerri Fiala**

U.S. Department of Labor

**Dr. Robert McCabe**

Miami Dade College (President Emeritus)

**Dr. Charlene Nunley**

University of Maryland University College

**Jane Oates**

U.S. Department of Labor

**Jon O’Bergh**

U.S. Department of Education

**Jay Pfeiffer**

MPR Associates, Inc.

**Kent Phillippe**

American Association of Community Colleges

**Jessica Shedd**

National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education

**Dr. Shirley Robinson Pippins**

American Council on Education

**Dr. David Stevens**

University of Baltimore

**Dr. Jeff Strohl**

Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce

**Robynn Sturm Steffen**

White House Office of Science and Technology Policy

*Affiliations of Prize Jury Members and Data/Metrics Advisory Panel listed solely for purposes of identification and do not reflect organizational endorsement of the Aspen Prize.*

## Finalist Selection Committee, Round II

In Round II, the Finalist Selection Committee identified 10 institutions that aim to deliver exceptional student results in terms of completion, learning, labor-market, and equitable outcomes. Many thanks for the hard work and thoughtful analysis of the Committee:

**Dr. Cecilia Rouse (Chair)**  
Princeton University

**Dr. Keith Bird**  
Corporation for a Skilled Workforce

**Dr. George R. Boggs**  
American Association of Community Colleges  
(President/CEO Emeritus)

**Dr. Rob Johnstone**  
Skyline College

**Dr. Nan Poppe**  
Completion By Design

**Deborah Santiago**  
Excelencia in Education

**Dr. Nancy Shulock**  
Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy,  
California State University, Sacramento

**Dr. Nicole Smith**  
Georgetown University Center on Education and  
the Workforce

**Jane Wellman**  
Delta Project on Postsecondary Costs

## Site Visitors, Round III

In Round III, teams of experienced researchers and practitioners led by the RP Group conducted two-day site visits to each of the 10 finalist institutions to gather qualitative research. Special thanks to **Kathy Booth**, **Dr. Rob Johnstone**, and **Kelly Karandjeff** for leading the RP Group's efforts, and to our site visitors:

**Dr. Elaine Baker**  
Community College of Denver

**Dr. Keith Bird**  
Corporation for a Skilled Workforce

**Dr. Darla Cooper**  
Research & Planning Group for California  
Community Colleges

**Dr. Rebecca Cox**  
Seton Hall University

**Dr. Robert Gabriner**  
San Francisco State University

**Dr. Rob Johnstone**  
Skyline College

**Patrick Perry**  
California Community Colleges System Office

**Dr. Ian Walton**  
Mission College

**Cynthia Wilson**  
League for Innovation in the Community College

**Linda Perlstein**, the lead author of the community college profiles in this publication and on our website, deserves our gratitude for her tireless work and keen observations.

In addition, we greatly appreciate the efforts of **John Dorrer**, Jobs for the Future, who gathered and assessed state labor market data, and **Dr. Peter Ewell** and **Dr. Karen Paulson**, NCHEMS, who collected and analyzed information on learning outcomes assessments.

Last but not least, we would like to thank our colleagues at **the American Association of Community Colleges** and **the Association of Community College Trustees**; and our communications partners at **Burness Communications**, who have been valuable partners in communicating the importance of community college excellence and the value of the Prize.

*Affiliations of Selection Committee members and Site Visitors listed solely for purposes of identification and do not reflect organizational endorsement of the Aspen Prize.*





**For more information about the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence, please visit our website at [www.aspenprize.org](http://www.aspenprize.org).**

The Aspen Institute congratulates each of the ten finalists for the inaugural Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence.

Lake Area Technical Institute

Miami Dade College

Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College

Mott Community College

Northeast Iowa Community College

Santa Barbara City College

Southwest Texas Junior College

Valencia College

Walla Walla Community College

West Kentucky Community and Technical College





The Aspen Institute  
College Excellence Program  
One Dupont Circle, NW  
Suite 700  
Washington, DC 20036