

# THE CHRONICLE

of Higher Education

## Aspen Competition Drives Innovative Ideas for Community Colleges

By Jennifer Gonzalez  
January 1, 2012

When Valencia College became the first recipient of the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence last month, an unsung sector earned uncommon recognition.

Now that the speeches are over and the prize money has been awarded, the Aspen Institute is sharing early lessons from its yearlong effort to determine the top community college in the country. In a way, that is the real goal of the group's effort.

Announced by President Obama last year during the White House Summit on Community Colleges, the competition was designed not only to spotlight the sector but also to galvanize and promote promising programs and policies to improve learning, completion rates, and employment outcomes.

Valencia's victory was based in large part on its statistical measures of success: More than half of full-time students at the college, in Orlando, Fla., graduate or transfer within three years of enrolling, a rate significantly higher than the national average of 39 percent. The college also boasts a relatively high employment rate for its graduates.

Valencia's president, Sanford C. Shugart, attributes the success to a cultural shift away from creating "volume," or just enrolling students, toward helping them transfer to a four-year college or graduate and enter the work force.

While Valencia's practices, like student-success courses and career-program advising, clearly suit its students, the college's larger goals could be pursued by any peer institution.

"You don't want each community college to look exactly like Valencia," says Jamie P. Merisotis, president of the Lumina Foundation for Education, which works to increase academic credentials in the American population. "Instead, the value of the prize is to elevate the understanding of a successful model."

Initially, 120 community colleges were vying for the award. The institute's jurists selected 10 finalists and visited their campuses to evaluate programs and policies. The colleges varied in location, size, and student population, but the site visits revealed similar efforts: program structures that expedite students' progress, accountability measures for student achievement, and faculty commitment to teaching. West Kentucky Community and Technical College, for example, was training faculty members in departments as diverse as English and auto-body work to boost students' reading skills, and Walla Walla Community College was requiring students to meet with an academic adviser each quarter.

A common thread among the finalists was that all were "dedicated to continuous improvement," says Joshua Wyner, executive director of the Aspen Institute's College Excellence Program. "They were always interested in doing more."

Valencia, which receives \$600,000, shares the \$1-million prize with four runners-up: West Kentucky; Walla Walla, in Washington state; Lake Area Technical Institute, in South Dakota; and Miami Dade College.

The money is important, especially given the nation's economic woes, but it is more important that community colleges inspire and learn from one another, Mr. Wyner says.

The sector educates nearly half of all college students—six million enroll in 1,200 community colleges each year—and plays a crucial role in meeting regional needs to train future employees.

Its work is paramount, given unemployment statistics and the projection that, by 2018, more than 60 percent of jobs in the United States will require some kind of postsecondary education, according to the Georgetown University Center for Education and the Workforce.

Last month's prize is one of several efforts by the Aspen Institute, an educational- and policy-studies center, to ensure that community-college students graduate and enter the work force prepared.

### **Accountability, Credentials**

Community colleges' multiple missions—educating transfer-bound students, for example, and offering enrichment courses—have always set them apart from their four-year counterparts. Those missions live in two basic houses, general and career and technical education.

"The general-education side could learn a thing or two from the other side," Mr. Wyner says. Programs in career and technical education tend to have a better sense of graduation rates and labor outcomes because they need to track the data for specialized accreditation.

Career and technical educators' grasp on measuring accountability is invaluable, says Mr. Wyner. That knowledge needs to be shared better among all faculty and staff, he says: "If we are going to improve outcomes, we need to find out how students are doing." New federal gainful-employment regulations will intensify that work, requiring institutions to calculate their graduates' earnings on the job market.

And the idea that only associate-degree holders count as completers needs to change, jurists say. Certificates, especially those that take a year or more to complete, are increasingly touted as a strategy to meet the nation's college-attainment goals.

Deborah A. Santiago, vice president for policy and research at Excelencia in Education, a group that seeks to help Latino students succeed, says she had an "aha! moment" while judging finalists: She realized the large volume of short-term technical certificates

community colleges award. Higher-education policy tends to focus on associate and bachelor's degrees, she says, but credentials deserve more attention.

"There are a lot of people earning these credentials," she says, "and they are not being counted as completers."

### **Limiting Choice**

Fusing innovative ideas with traditional models is an important strategy at successful community colleges, the Aspen Institute found.

Community colleges are known for their flexible scheduling of online and campus-based courses, but Lake Area Technical Institute has taken a different approach. Nearly all 1,400 students at the small-town college attend full-time, enrolling in a technical program as part of a cohort that progresses together. Attendance is mandatory; administrators contact students after three absences.

Remedial students complete online assignments before they arrive on campus, so they can begin classes with their peers. Lake Area fits in more developmental math and reading classes during lunchtime.

The rigid structure, intensely focused on student development, is paying off. Two-thirds of Lake Area Technical students graduate within three years, and more than 90 percent of those secure jobs.

Creating cohort programs and otherwise limiting student choice are important trends at community colleges, Mr. Wyner says.

Miami Dade, which has more than 90,000 students, for example, decided to require those who place into developmental courses to take a "success" course that teaches basic study and time-management skills. That requirement helped to double graduation rates for the college's minority students. Valencia, seeing data that students who added classes late had poor completion rates, instituted a policy barring students from registering for classes that have already met. To maintain some flexibility, the college introduced "flex start" sections, which begin a month into the semester.

### **Faculty-Led Efforts**

Faculty buy-in is another crucial component to colleges' meeting their completion goals. Finalists for the Aspen Prize all had faculty members strongly dedicated to teaching—and conducting research on teaching methods.

"What we heard a lot from faculty was, 'How can I find better ways to deliver instruction to my students?'" Mr. Wyner says. As part of the tenure process at Valencia, full-time faculty develop three-year "action research projects" on teaching techniques that involve training courses, advisers, and peer-review panels. The faculty members test teaching strategies, assessing students' performance against that of control groups.

Ideas that work find a place in the classroom. In one project, a professor tried giving individual lab assignments to developmental-reading students, rather than a blanket assignment for all students. The new method worked better, the professor determined, and all sections of that course on Valencia's East Campus now use that model of instruction.

Valencia is not the only college where faculty drive the innovation. At Miami Dade, faculty members banded together to improve students' pass rates in math, choosing and testing several new teaching methods. Some showed promise, such as testing algebra students more often on smaller amounts of material, a practice that continued.

### **Future Efforts**

To make community colleges across the country aware of successful practices, Aspen officials are planning to log some miles. Lessons from the site visits and selection process will be presented at the annual American Association of Community Colleges conference in April, as well as at other national conferences and workshops throughout the year. Profiles of the winner and runners-up will be displayed prominently on Aspen's Web site, and a book proposal is in the works.

"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," John M. Engler, a former governor of Michigan and co-chair of Aspen's jury, said last month at the awards ceremony. "If other campuses followed the practice of Valencia and the other top community colleges, it would make a tremendous difference for students, employers, and the economy as a whole."

The institute plans to award a community-college prize annually while continuing to support the sector in other ways. In partnership with Achieving the Dream—a national nonprofit dedicated to improving success at community colleges, particularly among low-income students and students of color—the Aspen Institute will train future community-college presidents. The two organizations plan to develop a curriculum that could be used at existing leadership programs, or perhaps as part of a new fellowship program Aspen creates. Information gathered from Aspen's visits to campuses will mold the curriculum, Mr. Wyner says. Engaging college presidents, he says, is one way to ensure that colleges adopt proven practices to help students succeed.

"All students deserve the chance to graduate and get a good job," Mr. Wyner says. "We are absolutely committed to that."