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Why We Should Celebrate -- And Invest In -- America's Best Community Colleges



Dan Porterfield Contributor 

Education

I write about young people, democracy, and the future.

Earlier this month, the Aspen Institute awarded its [biannual Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence](#). Over two years, the Aspen Institute's College Excellence Program, led by Josh Wyner, identified ten finalists (from more than 1,000 eligible institutions) that stood out for their singular focus on student success and track record of achievement in student learning, certificate and degree completion, success in the workforce and further education, and high levels of access and success for students of color and low-income students.

At the end of the day, two Florida-based institutions stood out as exceptional models of access, success, innovation and community partnership and were awarded the Aspen Prize: Indian River State College and Miami Dade College. They join previous winners Lake Area Technical Institute (2017); Santa Fe College (2015); Santa Barbara City College and Walla Walla Community College (co-winners, 2013); and Valencia College (2011) as exemplars of how to connect students with the resources, opportunities, and inspiration they need to succeed.





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This year's two winners are doing transformational educational work for their students, their communities, and our country, and the Aspen Prize reminds us of the deep, and often undervalued, impact that high-achieving community colleges make as engines of opportunity. Here are a just few reasons why this recognition should be the rule, not the exception:

First, great community colleges are anchors in the communities they serve and elevate their students into the economic mainstream of our country.

Community colleges are in every part of the country—rural, suburban, urban and tribal—and they are keenly aware of the challenges, changes and options (or lack thereof) their neighbors encounter. They provide the space, safety and stability to encounter, learn and discover common ground. They promote broad opportunities for students from all backgrounds in ways that lift up entire communities and regions.

They do this for traditional college-aged students who enter the workforce or who strive for a four-year degree and more, as well as for experienced workers who return to school to retool their skills for a new 21st-century profession.

Last year, Miami Dade College served 95,000 students, the most of any higher education institution in the country. About three-quarters of its students are Hispanic and 16% are black. Seventeen thousand are immigrants, the overwhelming majority come from low-income families, and almost all are first-generation college students. Graduates enter the workforce making 23% more than the average new hire and are working everywhere in Miami. Its size, scope

and success make Miami Dade College an integral part of the South Florida economy, its health and its growth.

Indian River State College makes sure that its students, who are 60 miles from the nearest four-year college, have the opportunity to continue their education if they so choose. To do that, Indian River created 17 bachelor's degree programs right on campus. Today, more than half of Indian River students transfer to a four-year institution to continue their education, and many of them do so without having to move or commute hours away. Indian River knew what its community and students needed, and built it.

Second, great community colleges have so much to teach us, across higher education and throughout our society, because they are on the cutting edge of educational innovation.

As the demographics of our country and the college-going population evolve, great community colleges can help chart the future of higher education. They know how to prepare students for success not just at college but also afterward, when they enter the workforce or transfer to four-year institutions. They aren't afraid to change curricula and transform their internal systems as the needs of students, employers and communities evolve, sometimes rapidly.

A big part of what makes these community colleges successful models of higher education is how they build robust systems of student support.

Both Indian River State College and Miami Dade College have eliminated the often-confusing cafeteria-style mode of course selection, where students choose from a nearly unlimited array of choices, which may or may not lead to timely degree completion. Instead, students choose from a well-defined set of academic pathways, each of which leads to bachelor's degree programs or directly into the workforce via a more focused menu of courses.

Colleges and universities across the nation could learn from Indian River's approach to advising. Advisors help students connect what they do in college to what they want *after* college, through intentional, mandatory advising, and counsel students in how to attain the resources they need—whether tutoring, food aid, scholarships or emergency grants—to overcome the challenges they face.

Likewise, institutions seeking to better support student learning should look to Miami Dade's efforts to improve instruction, through a thoughtful assessment system coupled with incentives and effective professional development for faculty. Miami Dade has also revised procedures and systems to remove the obstacles that prevent students from enrolling and graduating. For instance, it rebuilt its financial aid application so that students can in just 10 minutes become eligible for more than 300 institutional scholarships.

In short, these schools are succeeding—with graduation rates above the national average, both overall and for students of color—because they see students as collections of assets filled with potential and who need mentors and advocates in the form of system administrators, faculty, staff and community supporters.

Third, great community colleges provide the postsecondary education and mid-career retraining opportunities that students need to find jobs with good benefits, fair pay and economic security.

This February, the Aspen Institute's Economic Strategy Group (ESG) identified community colleges as critical infrastructure for developing human capital for the modern economy. Already, [nearly half](#) of those who get a bachelor's degree attended community college at some point in their higher education. A [report](#) authored by ESG's Amy Ganz along with two former chairmen of the Council of Economic Advisors, Austan Goolsbee (under Barack Obama) and Glenn Hubbard (under George W. Bush) recommends a national investment of \$22 billion in community colleges as a way to increase the skills and productivity of American workers.

This public investment would increase the number of college-educated workers (and meet the demand for mid-career training. Importantly, it would also enable institutions that serve large populations of low-income students and students with underrepresented racial and ethnic identities to expand student support services and financial aid, both of which are key to promoting course and degree completion.

Community colleges across America are developing new ways to ensure their students are ready for their next step—whether that's transfer to a four-year

institution or entry into the workforce. With the help of employers, most Aspen Prize finalist colleges have built facilities on campus that closely replicate the professional equipment, environment, and expectations students will encounter after graduation, ensuring they gain the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in the in-demand careers of the future.

At Broward College's Health Sciences Simulation Center, in southern Florida, students prepare for jobs in the growing healthcare industry in a virtual acute-care hospital. While the patients are computerized mannequins that simulate human responses, the equipment is indistinguishable from any professional facility, from the ambulance to the birthing suite to the surgical suite. At Indian River, the region's first responders hone their skills at a public safety complex that includes a simulated jail, courtroom, and state-of-the-art fire science demonstration equipment. At Mitchell Technical Institute in South Dakota, precision agriculture students get their hands dirty on a 85-acre Land Lab while also training on the same sophisticated software their future employers use. With Dow and BASF, San Jacinto College outside Houston is building a petrochemical processing plant that an [industry magazine](#) says will "change the face of how...key technicians of a plant are educated and trained."

Students at these and other exceptional community colleges are job-ready on day one because they can get a high-quality, affordable, and relevant education designed to put them on the path to economic security. Great community colleges are enhancing our nation's economic future by expanding the number of college-educated workers and ensuring that they—whether earn a certificate, associate's, or bachelor's degree—have the skills and knowledge to succeed.

This kind of innovation and transformation that happens at great community colleges is thanks in part to great leaders and supporters. That's why the JPMorgan Chase Foundation just issued a [\\$3.2 million grant](#) to the Aspen Institute's College Excellence Program to train, support, and empower the next generation of great community college leaders through the new Aspen New Presidents Institute and the existing Aspen Presidential Fellowship for Community College Excellence. JPMorgan Chase knows what students are learning and what employers now know: that the future of work and the road to

economic success depend on a strong foundation of skills and knowledge ready to be refined and expanded throughout a career.

Finally, great community colleges enable us to live our values as a country.

Education, the great American Frederick Douglass said, makes a person “forever free.” Our country’s great community colleges catalyze that freedom. They welcome and engage and empower talent from every zip code. They are so critical to our country’s future. They create economic opportunity, stability, and security; they transform families and communities; and they strengthen the forces for equality, justice and fairness in our country by ensuring that the door of opportunity is opened, the ladder of economic uplift extended, and the path to prosperity kept clear and accessible.

Miami Dade College President Eduardo Padrón calls his school (he’s also a graduate) “democracy’s college.” Under his leadership, the college is making sure everyone has a fair and equitable opportunity to get an education regardless of where they are from or what their dreams may be. Everyone there is focused on students’ success beyond their campus careers, because Miami Dade students are Miami Dade’s neighbors and future champions.

At Indian River State College, everyone—faculty, staff and system administrators—is fully invested in student success. Christina Hart, vice president of enrollment and student services, [says](#) the reason is simple: “We are family.”

Recently, we’ve seen, through the [Varsity Blues admissions scandal](#), how desperately and recklessly some will compete to provide their children with access to a highly selective four-year college. At the same time, [research](#) by my Aspen Institute colleague Tania LaViolet shows that, each year, more than 50,000 striving community college students have the academic record to succeed at any four-year institution, but do not transfer—despite the fact that 80 percent of community college students nationally express a desire to ultimately earn a bachelor’s degree. Frankly, our society could achieve so much more if we placed less emphasis on status and prestige in higher education and instead nationalized the view that access to and excellence at strong community colleges—and building a wide,

strong bridge between them and four-year institutions—are critically important to fostering economic mobility, revitalizing communities, and developing the great talent of our country.

That is why we at the Aspen Institute are so focused on helping to discern what the best community colleges are doing well and helping other community colleges replicate that success. The effectiveness of the education community colleges provide will determine whether Americans are able to meet the challenges of our day—from creating good jobs locally to saving our planet from climate change, and everything in between.

I'm so proud of the work the Aspen Institute and the College Excellence Program does in highlighting and celebrating these tremendous institutions, and of the institutions like Miami Dade College, Indian River State College, and all the Aspen Prize finalists who are leading the way to ensure broad and equitable student success.

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