

# Excellent Community Colleges

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THE ASPEN INSTITUTE  
COLLEGE EXCELLENCE PROGRAM

# Aspen College Excellence Program

**Mission:** The College Excellence Program aims to identify and replicate practices and policies that significantly improve college student outcomes.



# Aspen College Excellence Program

**Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence** seeks to

- Recognize community colleges with outstanding academic and workforce outcomes,
- Stimulate innovation,
- Create benchmarks for measuring progress, and
- Replicate exceptional practice.

**New College Leadership Project** aims to advance the hiring and professional development of college presidents so more leaders are equipped to lead their institutions to achieve high levels of student success.

## THE ASPEN PRIZE

# Four measures of community college excellence:

High absolute  
performance

- *Completion* outcomes
- *Learning* outcomes
- *Labor market* outcomes
- *Equity* in outcomes

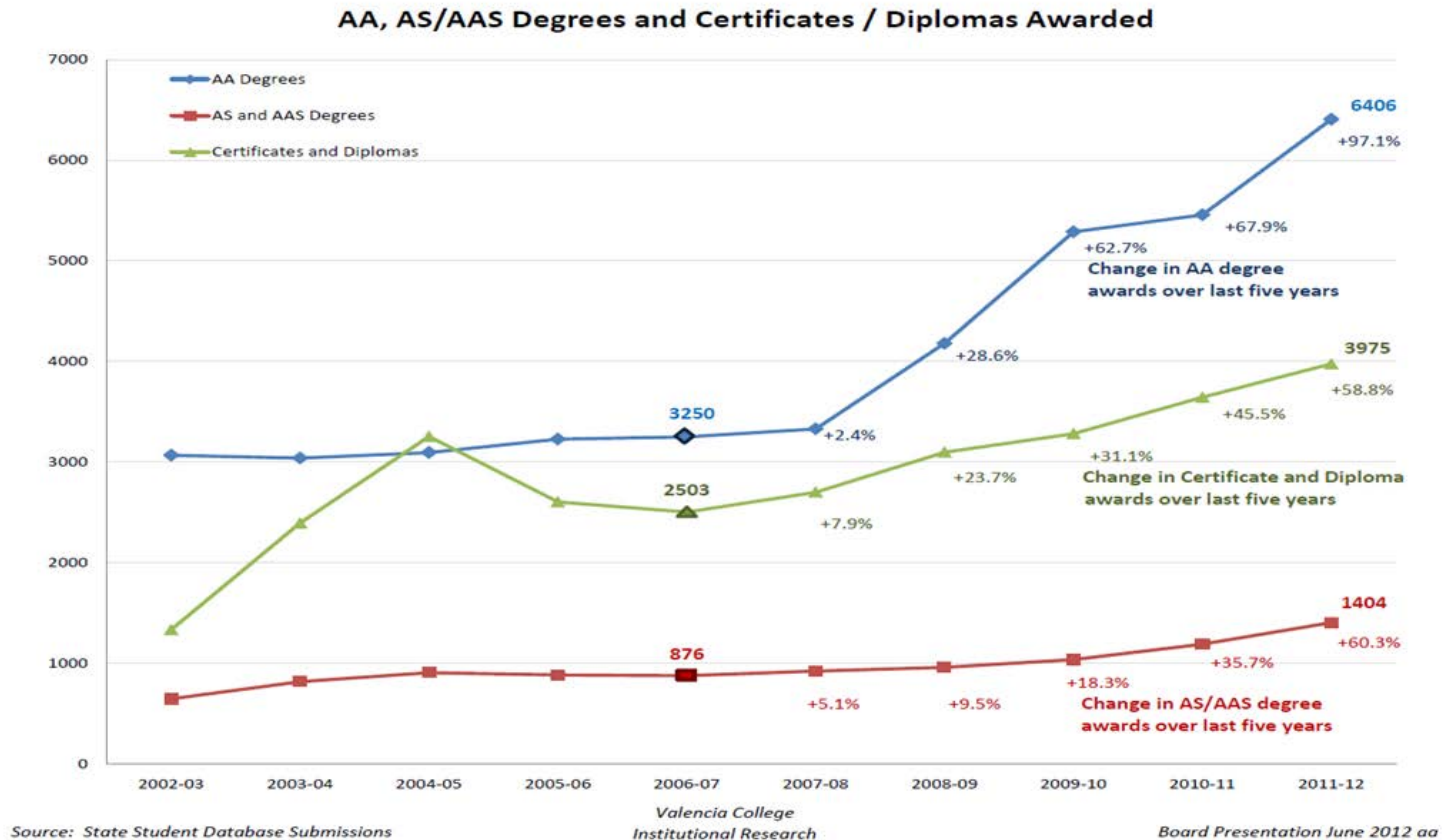
Improvement  
over time



# Outcomes of Prize finalist colleges:

## *Exceptional improvements over time in completion*

Increase in the number of credentials awarded at Valencia College, 2002-2011

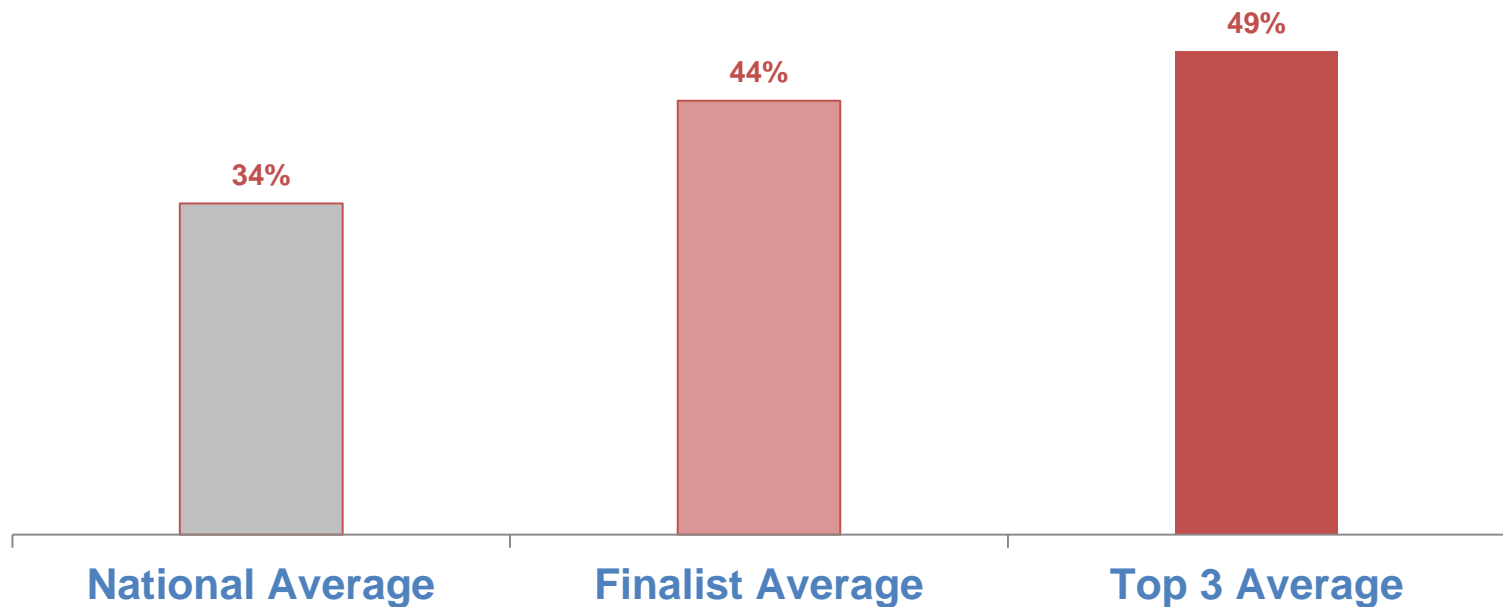


\*Note: Enrollment increased by only 40% between 2006-07 and 2011-12

# Outcomes of Prize finalist colleges:

*Far greater equity in outcomes than the national average*

Three-year completion and/or transfer rates for *underrepresented minority students* compared to the national average



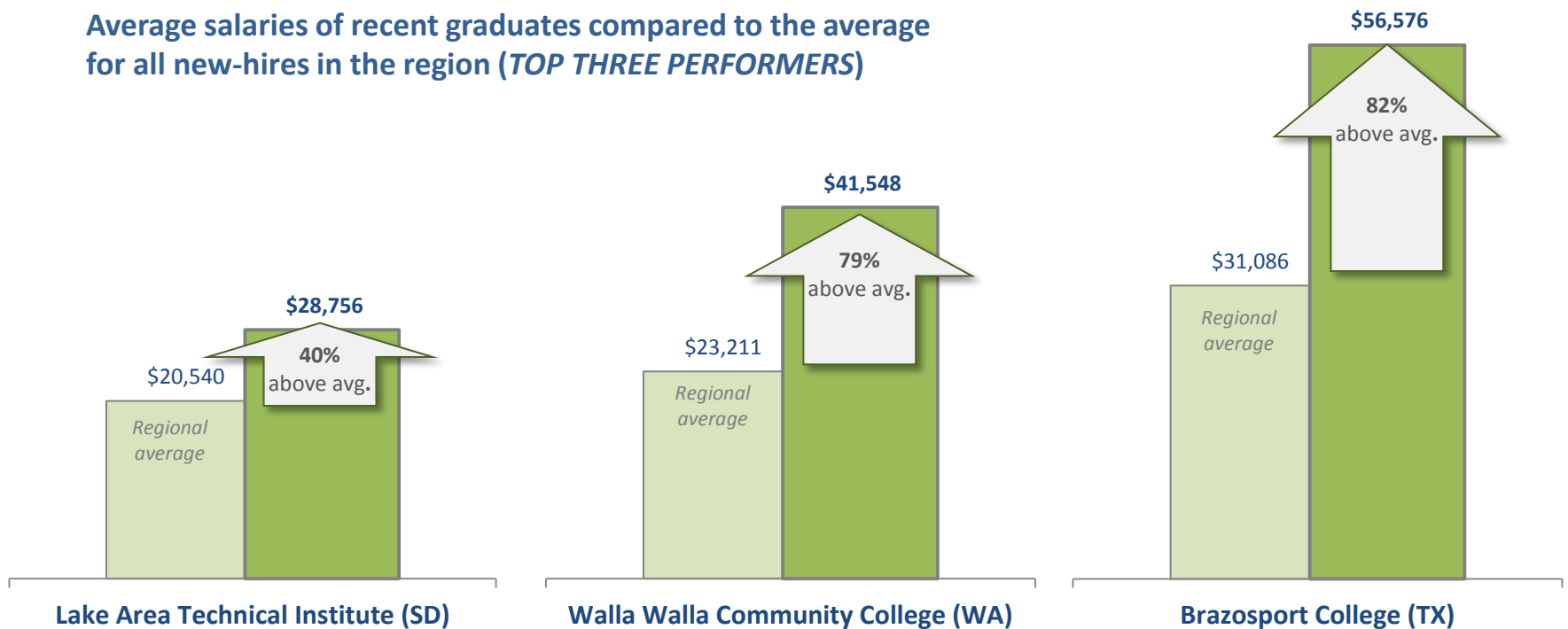
- Brazosport College (TX)
- Santa Barbara City College (CA)
- Santa Fe College (FL)



# Outcomes of Prize finalist colleges:

*Exceptional short-term labor market outcomes for graduates*

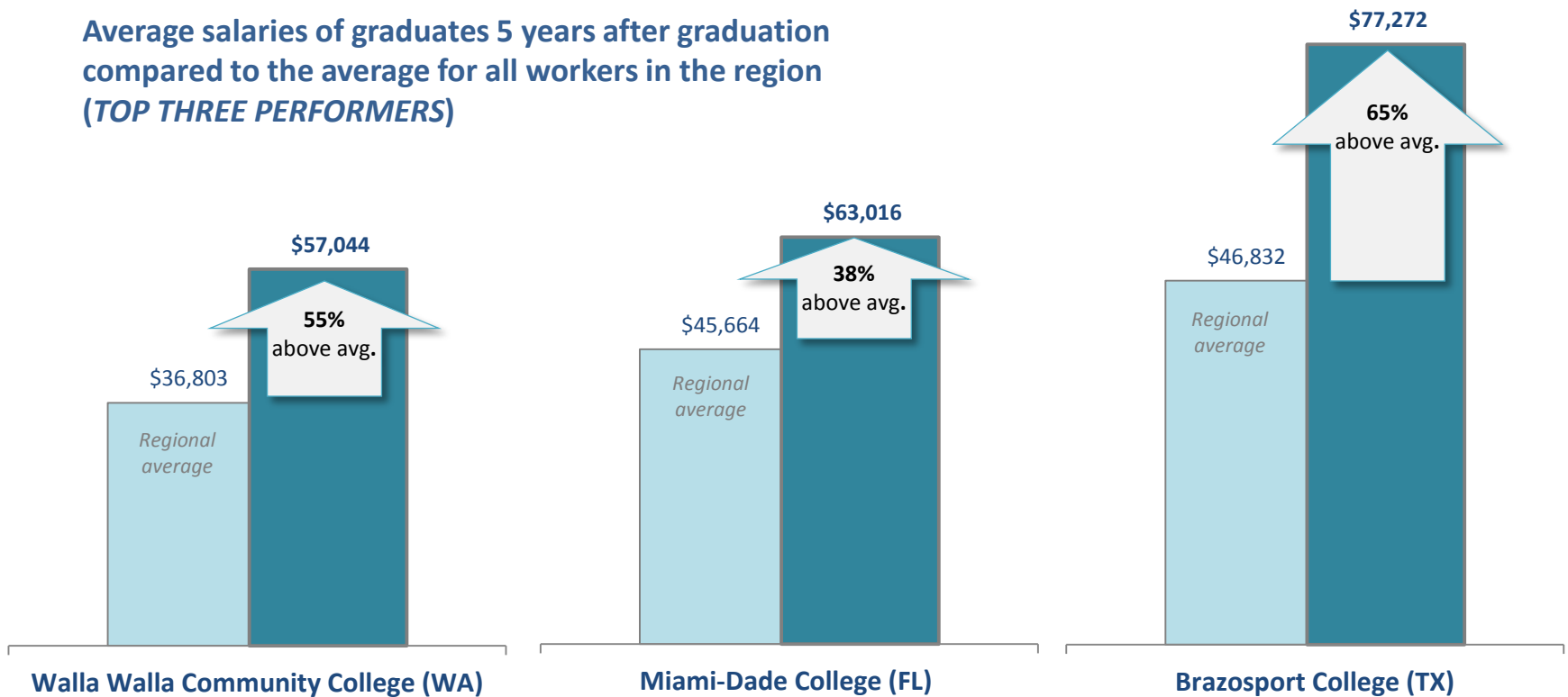
Average salaries of recent graduates compared to the average for all new-hires in the region (*TOP THREE PERFORMERS*)



# Outcomes of Prize finalist colleges:

*Exceptional long-term labor market outcomes*

Average salaries of graduates 5 years after graduation compared to the average for all workers in the region  
**(TOP THREE PERFORMERS)**





# Lessons from the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence



Themes characterizing the institutions that achieve exceptional outcomes for students:

**1. Strong leadership & vision**

**2. Clear pathways to credentials and other intentional structures to support students**

**3. Intentional focus on improving teaching and learning**

**4. Consistent, systematic, & strategic use of data to improve practice**

**5. Integrated structures that link the college to the broader community for the benefit of students**



# Theme 1: Strong Leadership & Vision

Exceptional colleges have strong executive leaders who:

- Communicate a clear vision focused explicitly on student success, and ensure that all the institution's work and resources aim towards that goal
- Inspire and sustain a change in culture towards innovation, data-informed practice, and shared responsibility for student success
- Consistently act in ways that make clear that their central concern is student success, including by taking risks
- Develop strong external partnerships that support student success



# Theme 1: Strong Leadership & Vision (example)

## Walla Walla Community College

- President Steven VanAusdle developed and created enthusiasm around a vision that the college could help drive sustainable, equitable development in an economically declining region.
- Under VanAusdle's leadership, the college develops new programs that spawn tremendous economic growth
  - Output of nurses doubled through college efforts and state investment.
  - A new wine-making program funded by private and public dollars has undergirded a new tourist economy and economic growth.
  - The college is developing sustainable energy programs both in response to, and in anticipation of, regional needs.
- The college closes programs that, though popular among students, do not lead to good jobs.
- **Result: High graduation rates and exceptional labor market outcomes.**



## Theme 2: Clear pathways and structures for student support

The most effective of the Prize finalist colleges have built comprehensive student support systems crossing major functional or curricular divisions that historically did not work together. They have:

- Built new pathways to success that eliminated pitfalls for students, including narrowly defined course sequences, fully integrated learning communities, and block program structures.
- Embedded high-impact support services within the classroom to ensure that all students receive core non-academic supports (e.g., advising, registration, tutoring, note-taking guidance, career counseling).
- Redesigned systems from scratch (one-stop shops, new registration centers, etc.) and implemented them college-wide rather than in small pilots.



## Theme 2: Clear pathways and structures for student support (example)

### Lake Area Technical Institute

- For all 30 programs, students proceed in a cohort and attend together in a set, all-day schedule.
- Students do not choose their courses; the progression for each program is developed according to job requirements and fixed for all students.
- Since the same professor sees the same students each day, instructors serve as counselors, getting to know students and addressing barriers they face to completion in real time.
- Structured design eliminates the need for certain kinds of student supports, including those caused by variable schedules semester-to-semester.
- **Result: 76 percent graduation rate, among the nation's highest.**



## Theme 2: Clear pathways and structures for student support (example)

### Miami-Dade College

- Part of its work with Completion by Design addressed challenge of over 1,000 courses in hundreds of pathways with no clear direction for students
- Engaged faculty and advisors in the design of structured course sequences
- Established clear expectation for fundamental change, using data and leadership to create urgency
- Created time and space for faculty to learn from students and advisors, ensuring deep understanding of challenges of existing program structure
- **Result: New default curricula for five degree pathways, that, together, serve 60 percent of all new students**

## Theme 3: Intentional focus on teaching & learning

Exceptional colleges set the expectation that faculty and staff will continually improve their own practices. They take seriously the scholarship of teaching and learning and make intentional efforts to improve the quality of instruction. This focus is demonstrated by:

- Faculty engaged in self-assessment and eager to improve their instruction to better serve students.
- Explicit connections between individual student learning and larger measures of course, program, and institution success.
- A systematic use of evidence of students' learning outcomes to drive improvements in instruction.
- Tenure and promotion models supported by systematic collection and discussion of data on student learning outcomes.





## Theme 3: Intentional focus on teaching & learning (example)

### Valencia College

- Throughout the college, faculty consistently invent new approaches to teaching and measure whether they improve student learning.
- Two-thirds of tenured faculty came through the new tenure process, which requires “action research projects”: Candidates take a new approach to teaching, measure student outcomes, and present results to colleagues.
- Faculty built and implemented the Teaching & Learning Academy, a high-quality center for professional development tied to both tenure and continuous improvement.
- The college is working to improve the post-tenure review process and engage adjuncts in Teaching and Learning Academy practices.
- **Result: Graduation rates nearly double those of peer institutions; strong transfer and bachelor’s completion rates.**



## Theme 4: Consistent and strategic use of data

Colleges that achieve exceptional outcomes for students go beyond data-driven practice; they have *cultures of inquiry and action* evident in the use of varied forms of data and information to systematically diagnose, assess, benchmark, and make decisions.

- Data are distributed consistently throughout the institution that reflect the focus on student success.
- Data beyond internal measures are collected to help understand students' longer-term success—such as labor market outcomes and post-transfer academic success including bachelor's degree completion.
- Faculty and staff are given structured time and space to meet, analyze, and discuss data on student outcomes.



# Theme 4: Consistent and strategic use of data (example)

## Walla Walla Community College

- Data on labor market trends and completion drive consistent, iterative changes in programs and communications with students.
- Examples of effective data practice include:
  - Helping undecided students choose a program of study based on projected jobs and earnings data.
  - Closing and opening programs based on rigorous assessment of future labor market needs and analysis of graduates' employment outcomes and earnings.
  - Targeting retention and counseling efforts on predictive analytics (e.g., using early alert system to intervene early in semester when students showed signs of failing).



## Theme 5: Integrated structures with external partners for the benefit of students

Exceptional colleges understand their role in improving students' lives as one segment of a longer trajectory—from high schools, work, military, or unemployment, and on to jobs or four-year institutions. They build *new structures*—not just partnerships—to link the college to its community and create seamless experiences for students. For example, they:

- Build strong ties with regional industries to help students get jobs, anticipate growing industries, and design curricula for the jobs that exist.
- Work with K-12 districts to align academic requirements and implement early-warning and college-prep systems to reduce the need for remedial education.
- Work with four-year colleges to develop collaborative programs, guaranteed transfer, and aligned academic requirements for transfer.
- Make the college a vital community asset, building brand recognition and attracting new resources that benefit students.



# Theme 5: Integrated structures with external partners for the benefit of students (example)

## Valencia College

- Leaders worked with the University of Central Florida—one of the major transfer destinations for Valencia students—to develop a program that guarantees admission to students who earn an associate’s degree.
- UCF located a facility on Valencia’s main campus, so students experience transfer as a seamless continuation of their studies.
- The college works regularly and deliberately to align its transfer program expectations with the upper-division expectations at UCF.
- UCF transfers from Valencia are twice as diverse, as measured by the number of underrepresented minorities, as students who started college at UCF.
- **Result: UCF enrolls 10,000 Valencia transfers who earn grades and bachelor’s degrees at rates nearly identical to the students who started at UCF.**



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