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Prestigious Aspen Institute Names West LA College one of Top 150 U.S. Community Colleges Eligible for Aspen Prize

*\$1 Million 2023 Aspen Prize Recognizing Excellence in Equitable Outcomes for
Students in and After College*



Yesterday, The Aspen Institute named West Los Angeles College (WLAC) one of the 150 institutions eligible to compete for the \$1 million Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence, the nation's signature recognition of high achievement and performance among America's community colleges. Former President Barack Obama described the Aspen Prize as "basically the Oscars for great community colleges." The colleges selected for this honor stand out among more than 1,000 community colleges nationwide as having high and improving levels of student success as well as equitable outcomes for Black and Hispanic students and those from lower-income backgrounds.

The 150 eligible colleges have been invited to submit data and narratives as the next steps in an intensive data and practice review process, culminating in the announcement of the prize winner in spring 2023.

LACCD Chancellor Francisco C. Rodriguez added, "We are honored that West Los Angeles College has been recognized by the Aspen Institute. West is known for its responsive and innovative curriculum, and an equity-minded, collegial environment where faculty, staff and administrators educate and serve one of the most diverse student bodies in the country."

"Being selected as an Aspen Prize Top 150 Community College for 2023 is a direct reflection of the ongoing commitment of our faculty and staff to our students' success. On behalf of everyone at West Los Angeles College, we are honored to be accorded this national recognition," said Dr. James M. Limbaugh, WLAC President.

The Aspen Prize spotlights exemplary community colleges in order to elevate the sector, drive attention to colleges doing the best work, and discover and share highly effective student success and equity strategies. Since 2010, Aspen has chosen to focus intensively on community colleges because they are—as First Lady Dr. Jill Biden stated at the 2021 Aspen Prize ceremony—"a powerful engine of prosperity."

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WLAC Eligible for 2023 Aspen Prize...page 2 of 3

But student outcomes vary enormously among community colleges, and improving those outcomes is essential to securing our nation's economic future, strengthening communities, and ensuring that diverse populations experience economic mobility and prosperity. With these goals in mind, the Aspen Prize honors colleges with outstanding achievement in five critical areas: teaching and learning, certificate and degree completion, transfer and bachelor's attainment, workforce success, and equity for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds.

West is located in Culver City and serves West and South Los Angeles, Mid-City, Culver City, Venice and Inglewood. West's online program draws students from all over California and beyond. Approximately 40 percent of the student body are first generation college students and 70 percent identify as Hispanic or African American. In addition to university transfer programs, West is known for its award-winning online degree paths and unique career programs including a dental hygiene bachelor's degree, film/television production crafts, aviation maintenance, computer science information technology, climate change studies and biotechnology.

West was also recently recognized by several other organizations. Hispanic Outlook in Higher Education named West one of 2021 Top 100 Colleges and Universities in the categories of "2019-2020 Total Enrollment 4-year Schools" and "2019-2020 Total Associate Degrees Granted." The Campaign for College Opportunity, founded by the California Business Roundtable, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) and the Community College League of California, named West a "2021 Equity Champion of Higher Education." EduMed.org awarded West top honors in "Best Online Dental Hygiene Programs" and "Best Dental Assistant Programs Online." And, West was included in the top 20 on the "2020 Best Online Community Colleges in California" list published by OnlineU.com

"These recent recognitions demonstrate the fruits of all the effort, dedication, and passion put forward by each member of our institution - classified staff, faculty, and administrators - towards serving and preparing our students," said WLAC Academic Senate President Carlos Sermeno.

"In an era of persistent inequity and workforce talent gaps, our nation's best community colleges are stepping up to deliver more degrees to increasingly diverse students so they are prepared for the good jobs waiting to be filled," said Josh Wyner, executive director of the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program. "Leaders of exceptional community colleges understand that achieving excellence requires expanding college access and increasing degree completion, but it doesn't stop there. They are committed to ensuring that all students—including students of color and those from low-income backgrounds—graduate with the skills needed to secure a job with family-sustaining wages or successfully transfer to and graduate from a university. That same commitment that stands at the center of the Aspen Prize: to advance the goals of social mobility and equitable talent development."

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WLAC Eligible for 2023 Aspen Prize...page 3 of 3

The eligible colleges represent the diversity and depth of the community college sector. Located in urban, rural, and suburban areas across 34 states, these colleges serve as few as 230 students and as many as 57,000. Winning colleges have ranged from smaller institutions serving rural community and smaller towns—including Lake Area Technical Institute (SD, 2017 Prize winner) and Walla Walla Community College (WA, 2013)—to large community colleges serving major metropolitan areas, including Miami Dade College (FL, 2019) and San Antonio College (TX, 2021).

The four other previous winners are Indian River State College (FL, 2019); Santa Fe College (FL, 2015); Santa Barbara City College (CA, 2013); and Valencia College (FL, 2011).

In this first round, eligibility for the Aspen Prize is based on publicly available data. Eligible colleges must show strong and improving student outcomes in key areas such as retention, completion, transfer, and equity. Nationwide, 15 percent of community colleges (150 of the approximately 1,000 public two-year colleges nationwide assessed for the Prize) have been invited to apply—the full list can be accessed on the [Prize homepage](#).

The next steps in the process include:

- Selection of the top ten finalists by an expert panel of 15 experts in community colleges, higher education, and workforce training, to be announced in spring/summer 2022
- Fall 2022 site visits to each of the ten finalists, during which the Aspen Institute and partners will collect additional information, including employment and earnings data and insights about promising practices
- A distinguished jury will meet and make award decisions in the first quarter of early 2023
- Announcement of the Aspen Prize in late spring 2023

For a full list of the top 150 eligible institutions and to read more on the selection process, visit www.highered.aspeninstitute.org/aspen-prize.

The Aspen Prize is generously funded by Ascendium and the Joyce Foundation.

The Aspen Institute College Excellence Program aims to advance higher education practices, policies, and leadership that significantly improve student outcomes, especially for the growing population of low-income students and students of color on American campuses. For more information, visit www.highered.aspeninstitute.org and www.linkedin.com/showcase/aspenhighered, and follow @AspenHigherEd on Twitter. The Aspen Prize hashtag is #AspenPrize.

The Aspen Institute is a community-serving organization with global reach whose vision is a free, just, and equitable society. For 70 years, the Institute has driven change through dialogue, leadership, and action to help solve the world's greatest challenges. Headquartered in Washington, D.C., the Institute has offices in Aspen, Colorado, and New York City, and an international network of partners. For more information, visit www.aspeninstitute.org.