

# THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

## Students

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### Aspen Prize Honors Colleges That Are Helping Students Succeed

*By Katherine Mangan*

A Florida community college that has been more successful than most four-year institutions in propelling students toward bachelor's degrees took top honors on Wednesday as the Aspen Institute announced its biennial prize for community-college excellence.

Santa Fe College, an institution in Gainesville, Fla., whose 62-percent graduation and transfer rate far eclipses the 40-percent national average for community colleges, will take home \$800,000.

The two "finalists with distinction" are Lake Area Technical Institute, in South Dakota, where 98 percent of graduates are employed or continuing their education six months after graduation, and West Kentucky Community and Technical College, where highly structured block schedules and hands-on learning have helped erase achievement gaps between minority and white students. Each college will receive \$100,000 out of the \$1.1-million prize.

This year the institute also recognized a college whose completion numbers started out in the single digits but that tripled its graduation rate from 2010 to 2015. Kennedy-King College, one of seven colleges in the City Colleges of Chicago System, received \$100,000 after being designated the year's "rising star."

"We wanted to show that, no matter where you started from, dramatic improvement is possible," Joshua Wyner, vice president of the Aspen Institute and executive director of its College Excellence Program, said in an interview.

The excellence prize, which has been awarded every two years

since 2011, is based on graduation and transfer rates, placement in decent-paying jobs, student learning, and equitable outcomes for low-income and minority students.

Community colleges enroll some seven million students — more than 40 percent of all undergraduates in the United States — who are working toward degrees or certificates. Fewer than half of those students, who include a rapidly growing number of lower-income and minority students, graduate. The award is intended to demonstrate how colleges can increase their success rates.

The prize has its skeptics, including those who are wary of ranking open-access colleges with widely divergent missions. The institute has sought to play down the competitive nature of the prize by awarding it [in 2013](#) to both a transfer-oriented and job-oriented college, and by recognizing improvement this year.

### **A Florida Success Story**

Aspen is among the many groups seeking to achieve policy goals by [awarding prizes](#). But even with all of the improvement they're seeing, community colleges still graduate fewer than half of their students within three years.

By contrast, Santa Fe College's 62-percent transfer and graduation rate is one of the highest in the country, Mr. Wyner said. In addition, 63 percent of students who transfer from Santa Fe complete a bachelor's degree within six years, compared with 59 percent who begin at four-year colleges.

Graduates of the college, which serves nearly 22,000 students on its main and satellite campuses, also do well in the job market. Like many two-year colleges in Florida, Santa Fe offers bachelor's degrees in applied fields that the region's four-year colleges don't offer. That includes a program in information technology to meet local companies' needs for programmers and network specialists.

Coursework is rigorous, the Aspen committee said, but students are supported by critical-thinking lessons added to every health discipline and support services for students who, because of a new state law, are no longer required to take [remedial classes](#).

The completion rate among underrepresented minority students, who make up 20 percent of Santa Fe's student body, is 49 percent, compared with 34 percent nationally.

"We insinuate ourselves into our students' lives in a way that shows respect for one student at a time, regardless of where they begin," the college's president, Jackson N. Sasser, said in an interview on Wednesday. "We're an open-access college, not open-exit."

Santa Fe students who enter with goals of becoming Florida Gators usually succeed. Seventy percent of Santa Fe graduates who apply to the nearby University of Florida are accepted, the institute noted.

The college's transfer office helps students zero in on a program of study early on. An online program similar to the travel-booking site Expedia helps them map out classes that meet their degree requirements and are available during the times they can attend class. Instead of a travel itinerary, the program spits out a list of suggested class schedules. A student clicks on one, and a hold is placed for a spot in all of those classes. If he picks a class outside his degree plan, it shows up in red, meaning it's OK to sign up, but it may not count toward the degree.

Instead of housing mathematics, English, and history professors in separate buildings, faculty members are intermingled, Mr. Wyner said. "The college clusters faculty members in ways that promote the kind of interdisciplinary thinking that helps them succeed," he said.

### **Making Strides in Chicago**

This year's "rising star," Kennedy-King College, serves 11,000 students and is located in a South Chicago neighborhood considered one of the poorest and most dangerous in the city.

In 2010 only about 7 percent of its full-time, first-time students graduated within three years. That rate has tripled since then.

The graduation and transfer rate among underrepresented minority students, who make up more than 90 percent of

Kennedy-King's student body, is 42 percent, nearly double the national average.

The changes in the college system have been spurred by a reform effort begun in 2011 by Chicago's mayor, Rahm Emanuel.

Much of the responsibility for that overhaul landed on the shoulders of the [system's chancellor](#), Cheryl L. Hyman, whose comprehensive reform effort, dubbed the Reinvention project, made many faculty members uneasy because of what they saw as its corporate approach.

Strategies rolled out at Kennedy-King have been particularly effective, the Aspen Institute said.

"Educators guide students through extremely structured programs, providing a clear path not only toward completion, but also toward careers that are in demand in the Chicago area," the institute noted in a written statement. "Every student's progress is closely monitored with leaders, advisers, and other staff all taking responsibility for keeping students on track all the way to graduation."

Speakers at a ceremony on Wednesday included Jill Biden, the wife of Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. and a professor of English at Northern Virginia Community College.

"So many Americans are relying on community colleges to provide the steppingstones to a college degree and a better future," she said. "Our nation's prosperity truly depends on our higher-education system delivering more high-quality degrees to an increasingly diverse group of students."

The [selection process](#) began with data crunching to identify 150 top-performing colleges that were invited to complete.

A committee made up of researchers, policy experts, and former community-college presidents selected 10 finalists from the 100 that applied this year after reviewing data on performance and improvements in graduation rates, job placement, and learning outcomes for all students, but with a particular emphasis on

low-income and underrepresented minority students.

Co-chairs for the prize were Mitchell E. Daniels Jr., who is president of Purdue University and a former governor of Indiana, and George Miller, a former U.S. representative from California.

*Katherine Mangan writes about community colleges, completion efforts, and job training, as well as other topics in daily news.*

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**Uncle Noodle** • 3 hours ago

Santa Fe College (of Florida) does seem to be unique among community colleges, although calling the institution a community college may mislead. This may be why the school avoids the label when referring to itself. Many CCs are closely coupled with local businesses operating in the locales they serve. This leads to inefficiencies and more than a little waste. IBM can negotiate for on-site degree programs that are more expensive than the general costs. SFC seems to be more closely linked to the University of Florida than to local businesses. That influence seems most beneficial in maintaining excellent transfer, completion rates, and other metrics.

I am hungry for more data from SFC. The college website reports that they offer a full range of certification as well as degree programs. I wonder what percent of students take remedial courses before matriculating and how the college's resources are allocated. I would be happy to see a follow-up article, CHE.

This story gives me hope. Some community colleges do succeed and not by throwing more money at the problems. This success seems to emerge from academic rigor, persistent hands-on mentoring and a partnership with a single university.

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**flaprof** • 3 hours ago

Santa Fe College is technically (and officially) no longer a community college (so one wonders how it qualified for this award). Nearly all of the former community colleges in Florida now offer a wide range of 4-year degrees in addition to the AA, AS and AAS. In fact, the state now calls all of these institutions "State Colleges" and governs them entirely separately from the 12 state universities. This is why "community college" no longer appears in the names of these institutions.

Nevertheless, these institutions have nearly "open enrollment" from Florida high schools and many, many students take what might be termed "remedial" courses (which the state university system institutions are prohibited from offering). Still, many, many students at these institutions get AA degrees and transfer to the state university system institutions (of which UF is the most prominent). Santa Fe is lucky to be near Gainesville (it's main campus is actually about 20 min north of the UF campus) and to have a good relationship with its SUS partner.

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