

**RESEARCH NOTE**

**Introduction to the Aspen Institute's  
Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence**

Community colleges play a crucial role in fostering social mobility for students and developing talent for their communities. Institutions across the nation are trying to enhance student success by improving outcomes – through graduation and beyond. This Research Note highlights the Aspen Institute's Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence and its selection process as well as the actions NOVA should take to become a recognized community college.

**Aspen Institute:** The Aspen Institute utilizes outstanding representatives and experts from across the world and industries to focus on critical problems and complex issues. The Aspen Institute experts come together to focus on the empowerment, development and improvement of the world. With a focus on world improvement, the Aspen leaders focus on more than 30 issues, from business and society to energy and environment to communications and culture. Within these complex issues, a significant group of “thought leaders” are focusing on improving education by, “developing and informing education leaders across policy and practice, with an emphasis on sustainability and equity.” The Aspen Institute has introduced measures and metrics to recognize community colleges who have made significant progress in student achievement.<sup>1</sup>

**College Excellence Program:** Under the umbrella of The Aspen Institute is the College Excellence Program, founded in 2010 to advance the “practices, policies and leadership to support improved college student outcomes.” The College Excellence Program has grown to influence more than 10 projects, one of which is the renowned Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence.<sup>2,3</sup>

**Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence:** The Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence is a \$1 million award given to the top performing community college(s) every two years. For community colleges in the United States, the Aspen Prize is the highest honor and recognition of student achievement and performance. Student Success is defined by “student learning, certificate and degree completion (including a bachelor's degree after transfer), employment and earnings, and high levels of access and success for minority and low-income students.”<sup>4</sup>

**NOVA must improve on its student success metrics in order to be considered an eligible institution to apply for the Aspen Prize.**

<sup>1</sup> Aspen Institute: <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/about/#our-impact>

<sup>2</sup> Aspen Institute College Excellence Program: <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/programs/college-excellence-program/>

<sup>3</sup> Aspen Institute's Aspen Prize for CC Excellence: <https://highered.aspeninstitute.org/aspen-prize/>

<sup>4</sup> The Aspen Prize Selection Process: <http://highered.aspeninstitute.org/aspen-prize-program/selection-process/>

**Selection Process:** To award this esteemed Prize, the College Excellence Program has established a rigorous, two-year process that includes three rounds of evaluation. The prize has been awarded every two years to the top one or two community colleges since 2011.

**Round 1:** The Aspen team collaborates with their data and advisory experts and connections with the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) to utilize nationally available data from sources such as the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). The purpose of the first round is to narrow down the nearly 1,000 community colleges to the top 155 performing institutions using an analytics tool. The weighted analytics tool/model is “based on institutional performance in three general areas: (1) retention, completion, and transfer, (2) improvement in performance over time, and (3) equity, defined as performance outcomes for underrepresented minorities and institutions in low-income service areas.”<sup>5</sup> Once the model identifies the top 150 institutions, those colleges are then eligible and invited to apply for round two.

**Round 2:** Eligible colleges are invited to submit an application for the Prize. A selection committee of dedicated higher education experts assemble into panels to review applications. This selection committee narrows the field of applicants to the top 10 finalists. In addition to reviewing submitted materials and making the finalists selections, the committee members also collect additional data and information from the institution and the senior leadership.

**Round 3:** The selection committee conducts additional research on each institution in the form of interviews, site visits, and student success beyond the institution by reviewing employment and earnings. The finalist selection committee and site visitors/researchers provide their materials to the prize jury who will then select a winner(s), finalist(s) with distinction (selected from the top 10 finalists), and rising star(s) (honor designation since 2015).

The Aspen Prize is a significant sign of a community college’s impact on student success. In order for NOVA to become an eligible institution which is invited to apply for the Aspen Prize, NOVA must be tracking and improving within the Aspen Prize metrics (See Table 1).

**Table 1. Measures Used by The Aspen Institute for Prize Selection/Eligibility<sup>6</sup>**

Measures	Definitions and Calculations
First-Year Retention Rate	Percent of Fall first-time (full- and part-time) students returning the following Fall semester.
Three-Year Graduation Rate	Percent of Fall first-time full-time degree/certificate-seeking undergraduates completing any formal award within 150% of normal program time or transferring out to another institution within 3 years.
Undergraduate Credentials Awarded per 100 FTE Undergraduate Students	Undergraduate certificates of one year and more, associate and bachelor's degrees awarded per 100 full-time equivalent undergraduates.
Change Over Time: Credentials Awarded per 100 FTE Students	Average annual percent increase in "undergraduate credentials awarded per 100 FTE undergraduate students" from 2010-11 to 2014-15.
Minority Three-Year Graduation Rate	Similar to three-year graduation rate as described above for the combination of Blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans.
Minority Credentials Awarded per 100 FTE Undergraduate Students	Similar to undergraduate credentials awarded per 100 FTE undergraduate students as described above for the combination of Blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans.
Median Family Income of Location	2015 median family income of the Census defined Public Use Microdata Area (PUMA) where each college is located. In some cases, the defined PUMA for calculating median family income includes bordering PUMA's as well (densely populated inner city locations, or where an institution lies on the border of their defined PUMA). PUMAs are roughly 100,000 to 150,000 residents - smaller than counties in densely populated areas and larger than counties in sparsely populated rural areas.

<sup>5</sup> Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence Round 1 Eligibility Model (2019): [http://highered.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/2019\\_Round\\_One\\_Model\\_Description.pdf](http://highered.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/2019_Round_One_Model_Description.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> The Aspen Prize Selection Process: <http://highered.aspeninstitute.org/aspen-prize-program/selection-process/>