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West Kentucky Community and Technical College Named Top Five Community College In America By Aspen Institute

Highlighting the need to improve student learning and graduation rates in community colleges — leading to good jobs — the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program announced West Kentucky Community and Technical College as a “finalist with distinction” for the first annual Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence, chosen from an original pool of over 1,000. ** (see list below)** The announcement follows a rigorous, yearlong effort by the Aspen Institute to assemble and review an unprecedented collection of data on community colleges and the critical elements of student success: student learning, degree completion and transfer, equity and employment/earnings after college.

This is the first national recognition of extraordinary accomplishments at individual community colleges. The Prize celebrates these top performers both to elevate the community college sector nationwide and help other institutions understand how to improve outcomes for the seven million students — nearly half of all undergraduates in post-secondary education — working toward degrees and certificates in community colleges.

WKCTC President Barbara Veazey thanked the Aspen Institute and its donors for creating the award and bringing recognition to community colleges across the nation. “This recognition shows that set criteria have been used, data has been evaluated and specific results have been shown for the work done by so many outstanding community colleges,” Veazey said. “We have tried to give a voice to the many success stories we share each day, but this recognition has allowed them to be shared at a national level.”

The announcement made today at the National Press Club in Washington, DC, involved leaders from across the fields of education, business, labor and philanthropy, including Second Lady Dr. Jill Biden, a longtime educator; Secretary of Education Arne Duncan; Aspen Institute President and CEO and Steve Jobs’ biographer Walter Isaacson; John Engler, former Governor of Michigan and President of the Business Roundtable; and highly respected former Secretary of Education and South Carolina Governor Richard Riley. The naming of the winner follows an announcement of the ten finalists in September and the project’s unveiling at the White House Community College Summit in October 2010.

About West Kentucky Community and Technical College

WKCTC’s graduation/transfer rate significantly exceeds the national average, achieved through an astonishing 23 percent improvement over five recent years. The college achieves excellence by focusing equally on improving student learning in core skills – overhauling reading instruction and remedial math – and thoughtfully connecting programs to regional jobs, from credentials that fuel a large health care sector to the nation’s first marine technology associate’s degree.

“West Kentucky Community and Technical College’s jump in graduation and transfers is astonishing. It’s incredibly rare in higher education. And the improvements are serving students equitably. The three year graduation and transfer rate for minorities is twenty four percent above the national average. These results are inspiring,” said Aspen’s Wyner.

WKCTC responds aggressively to meet the demands of the local economy. The regional health care industry relies heavily on graduates of WKCTC’s nursing and allied professions programs, and the college consistently develops and improves programs with an eye on the specific skills that lead to employment.

Improving student learning has helped WKCTC graduate more students with the knowledge they need to secure jobs or transfer to four-year schools. National experts called WKCTC’s processes for assessing and improving learning outcomes “excellent.” They were especially impressed with professors’ efforts to use and act on learning gaps revealed by commonly administered tests, and a curriculum-wide initiative to boost students’ reading skills. Partly as a result of this program, evidence shows that students who transfer to four-year schools from WKCTC do better in their junior and senior years than other Kentucky students.

“By working across the college to improve student learning and skills, West Kentucky has accomplished amazing things for its students,” said Wyner. “College leaders and instructors across campus take responsibility for improving student learning and work hard to identify and eliminate barriers to student success. Their record shows one thing very clearly: the strategy is working.”

Each “finalist with distinction” will receive \$100,000. The Finalists with Distinction are: Lake Area Technical Institute (Watertown, SD); Miami Dade College (Miami, FL); Walla Walla Community College (Walla Walla, WA); and West Kentucky Community and Technical College (Paducah, KY). Valencia College, the Prize winner, will receive \$600,000.

The Aspen Prize is funded by the Joyce Foundation, Lumina Foundation, Bank of America Charitable Foundation and JPMorgan Chase Foundation. The Aspen College Excellence Program aims to identify and replicate campus-wide practices that significantly improve college student outcomes. Through the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence, the New College Leadership Project and other initiatives, the College Excellence Program works to improve colleges’ understanding and capacity to teach and graduate students, especially the growing population of low-income and minority students on American campuses.

The Aspen Institute mission is twofold: to foster values-based leadership, encouraging individuals to reflect on the ideals and ideas that define a good society, and to provide a neutral and balanced venue for discussing and acting on critical issues. The Aspen Institute does this primarily in four ways: seminars, young-leader fellowships around the globe, policy programs, and public conferences and events. The Institute is based in Washington, DC; Aspen, Colorado; and on the Wye River on Maryland’s Eastern Shore. It also has an international network of partners. For more information, visit <http://www.aspeninstitute.org/>