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COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Aspen Prize Is Awarded to 2 Florida Colleges for Student Accessibility and Success

By Lily Jackson | APRIL 02, 2019



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This year's recipients of the Aspen Prize, Indian River State College and Miami Dade College (pictured), continue a tradition of winning by community colleges in Florida.

this year Broward College, in Fort Lauderdale, was also a finalist. The winners will receive \$350,000 each, and the finalists \$100,000 each.

That track record is a testament to the remarkable work that all Florida community colleges are doing with students in mind, said Lenore Rodicio, executive vice president and provost of Miami Dade College. It comes down to their focus not only on what students do while enrolled, she said, but also on ensuring they later succeed in the work force or at a four-year institution.

The annual prize once described by Barack Obama as “basically the Oscars for great community colleges” was awarded on Tuesday to two Florida institutions: Indian River State College and Miami Dade College.

Florida has a history of winning the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence. The first Aspen Prize was given to Valencia Community College, in Orlando, in 2011; the third went to Santa Fe College, in Gainesville. And

The “exceptional” list of finalists makes Joshua Wyner, executive director of the Aspen Prize program, optimistic about the future of community-college education, he said.

The award recognizes colleges’ accessibility, completion rate, and student success after entering the work force or transferring to a four-year institution.

Both Indian River State and Miami Dade created clear, guided pathways for students with strong advising from staff members, Wyner said. The institutions did not provide a “smattering of courses that students could take,” he said, but rather a curriculum that transfers well.

‘Room to Grow’

Indian River State, in Fort Pierce, 60 miles away from the closest four-year institution, has taken the bold step of offering bachelor’s degrees. Now it graduates about as many students with bachelor’s degrees — at the highest completion rate of any finalist — as it transfers students to other institutions. The graduation and transfer rates are both about 50 percent, well above the national average for community colleges, which is below 40 percent, said Wyner.

Changes in the college’s culture began 20 years ago, said Andrew Treadwell, its administrative director of legislative and executive communication, and the faculty has worked hard to help students succeed. It was a finalist for the prize in 2015 and a finalist with distinction in 2017.

“They never rest on their laurels,” Wyner said. “They always understand that they have room to grow.”

He said the same goes for Miami Dade College, a second-time finalist. The institution serves more than 100,000 students, and more minority students than any other college or university in the country. The larger a college is, the harder it is to succeed, Wyner said, and the improvements in Miami Dade’s success rate — higher than the Florida College System of community colleges as a whole — indicate crucial success at an “incredible volume.”

Miami Dade's holistic approach to the student experience was a major factor in making it a winner, Wyner said. The college offers students benefits like tax preparation, transportation vouchers, and other nonacademic necessities to allow them to work less and study more, from the moment they enroll to the moment they graduate or transfer.

That includes partnerships Miami Dade has established with four-year institutions that provide a guaranteed transfer after two years.

For 50 years community colleges have been growing and improving, Wyner said, but there is a long way to go.

"There are several hundred colleges who should be recognized for improving the student-success rate, but there are also several hundred who haven't taken the lessons from colleges like this that have moved forward," he said.

The lesson of the awards, he said, is that more can be done.

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