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Lake Area Technical Institute Honored For Its Focus On Excellence In Education

Early September of this year, South Dakota's Lake Area Technical Institute was named one of the 10 finalist community colleges by the Aspen Institute's College Excellence Program.

Lake Area Technical Institute now enters the last stage of the competition for the \$1 million prize fund that will be awarded in December in Washington, D.C. to the first-ever national winner and up to three runners-up. This is the first national recognition of extraordinary accomplishments at individual community colleges, and follows on the April project launch and previous White House Community College Summit that attracted participation and endorsement from President Obama, as well as luminaries in American education, labor, business and civil society.

"Lake Area Technical Institute has one of the best graduation rates in America," said Josh Wyner, executive director of the Aspen Institute's College Excellence Program.

"LATI deserves credit for helping so many of its students complete degrees that employers value. We are very impressed with this small, highly-effective college."

LATI stands out among community colleges, in part, for connecting its graduates to jobs. In fact, 98% of its graduates secure jobs or pursue further education.

That achievement is reflected in the strong partnerships the college has with South Dakota employers. The college is an important gateway to economic stability for its students and the State of South Dakota, serving large numbers of veterans and those receiving federal Pell Grants. Nearly half of all college students attend community college, with more than six million students — youth and adult learners — enrolling in America's nearly 1,200 community colleges every year.

Community colleges are also educating rapidly growing lower-income and Hispanic student populations, and for millions of Americans, represent their most promising path to education that leads to professional employment.

With four-year colleges and universities costing from \$10,000-\$60,000 per year per student, community colleges are growing at over four times the rate of four-year colleges, serving as the most affordable option in higher education for millions of people in this country.

The growth in community colleges reflects a consensus in the public about the importance of higher education. The Gallup Organization and Lumina Foundation recently released a poll showing that 95% of Americans believe that a college degree is important to financial security.

"Practically everyone can see the link between having a college degree and economic stability. Recognizing and encouraging community college excellence is critical to helping more Americans get there," said Wyner.

The 10 community colleges selected to be

finalists reflect the diversity of America — from Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College to Florida's Miami Dade College, the largest institution in American higher education, with nearly 100,000 students, and from Walla Walla Community College in Washington to West Kentucky Community and Technical College in Paducah, KY. Other top 10 schools, besides LATI, include Mott Community College in Flint, MI; Northeast Iowa Community College in Calmar, IA; Santa Barbara City College in Santa Barbara, CA; Southwest Texas Junior College in Uvalde, TX; and Valencia College in Orlando, Fla. Cecilia Rouse, a Princeton University professor and former member of President Obama's Council of Economic Advisers, chaired the national selection committee.

She noted that the finalists "impressed us with their efforts to help students succeed in college as well as to ensure that their programs would prepare students to compete successfully in the labor market. These community colleges are demonstrating that improving student achievement can be accomplished, even in the most economically distressed communities in our country."

The 10 finalists were selected by a nine-member Finalist Selection Committee, comprised of former community college presidents, respected researchers and policy experts. They identified institutions that deliver exceptional and improving completion, labor-market, and learning outcomes, following a review of new data collected from applications submitted by eligible institutions in June. The grand prize winner and runners-up will be selected by a "prize jury" co-chaired by John Engler, former Michigan Governor and current President of the Business Roundtable, and Richard Riley, former Secretary of Education and Governor of South Carolina. Aspen's Wyner emphasized that this competition offers an unprecedented opportunity to spotlight and celebrate excellence at a time when community college success is more important to the nation than ever before.

"It's pretty simple, but the stakes are high," he said. "In an era where a college degree is the ticket to the middle class, real educational opportunity for our citizens and real economic growth for our country will depend on our community colleges."

The Aspen Prize is funded by the Joyce Foundation, the Lumina Foundation for Education, the Bank of America Charitable Foundation, and the 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, projects targeting a new generation of college leaders, 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 two-fold: to foster values-based leadership, encouraging individuals to reflect on the ideas 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. For more information, visit www.aspeninstitute.org.