

From: [Johnette McKown](#)
To: [Lindsey M. Vanek](#)
Subject: FW: Strengthening Program Value to Improve Students' Lives and Develop Talent
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From: Aspen Institute College Excellence Program <cep.info@aspeninstitute.org>
Sent: Thursday, December 4, 2025 9:30 AM
To: Johnette McKown <jmckown@mclennan.edu>
Subject: Strengthening Program Value to Improve Students' Lives and Develop Talent

External Message

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An Opening Note

In the 15 years since the Aspen College Excellence Program launched, many of the student outcome challenges we have worked on have improved. Most notable: graduation rates have improved by 13 percentage points in community colleges and six percentage points in four-year institutions. The result—hundreds of thousands more students graduating with college degrees and certificates every year—is worth celebrating.

This accomplishment has been buoyed by a national reform movement that has made an implicit assumption: graduating from any program of study is better than not graduating at all. That is, in many senses, true. Research demonstrates that

college graduates earn more than those without a college degree, are more likely to repay student loans, and experience better health and other life outcomes.

At the same time, not every college credential delivers adequate post-graduation value. Aspen has been especially focused on strengthening the value of community college credentials, meaning those that lead to a job with sustaining wages immediately after completing community college or after successful transfer and attainment of a bachelor's degree. While those outcomes are not the only things that matter, they are the primary goals of the vast majority of community college students.

Now, a focus on post-graduate success is building across the country. Several states have adopted legislation that ties a portion of community college funding to students' post-graduation success in attaining good jobs and earning bachelor's degrees. In 2025, for the first time, federal legislation conditioned eligibility for student loans on college programs demonstrating that graduates earn more on average than those with a high school diploma. More higher education systems and philanthropies are focusing on the connections between higher education and workforce preparation.

And an increasing number of community colleges are implementing College 3.0 reforms, which focus on access, completion, and post-graduate outcomes, at impressive scale. Jason Wood, the former president of Southwest Wisconsin Technical College—the 2025 Aspen Prize winner—emphasized in his recent [Dallas Herring Lecture](#) that if colleges want students to leave better off than when they started, they need to offer programs of value that lead to good jobs.

Post-graduation success has always been prominent in Aspen's community college work, from the [Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence](#) to our Playbooks on [Transfer](#) and [Workforce](#) to our [Transfer Intensive](#) and [Presidential Fellowships](#). And, for the past three years, Aspen and the Community College Research Center (CCRC) have been researching how 10 community colleges in our Unlocking Opportunity network are working to improve their students' post-graduate success. We have just released [a practice guide reflecting our findings](#), with actionable guidance on how to advance eight separate strategies designed to move many more students into high-value programs and reduce the number of students in low-value pathways.

The guide reflects how network community colleges achieved concrete Unlocking Opportunity goals. Some strategies focused on enhancing program onboarding and improving advising for dual enrollment students before and after community college entry—efforts that build on important completion-oriented reforms on which so many colleges have focused for years. But what is particularly exciting are intensive efforts to improve programs of study—to look beyond whether students start and finish community college to ensuring that the programs students complete actually lead directly to good jobs or to transfer and a bachelor's degree (which usually means a good job).

Early in this work, some feared that identifying and reforming low-value programs meant shutting them down. While that is occasionally necessary, colleges that identified programs that failed to lead most students to good jobs or bachelor's degrees mostly did not shut them down. Instead, they worked to strengthen the programs: working with partners to align curriculum with employer needs, revamping curriculum to align with the skills held by the most successful graduates, and building stronger transfer pathways to bachelor's degrees. The practice guide includes case studies from colleges that have successfully strengthened program value in a variety of ways, enabling more community college graduates to have fulfilling lives and more employers to have the talented workers needed to fill available good jobs.

The importance of continuously strengthening the post-completion value of programs is not, of course, limited to community colleges. The change in federal standards for student loan eligibility noted above extends to four-year programs, and there are discussions in some states to extend post-graduation accountability to public universities. Aspen is interested in learning more about work to strengthen program value at four-year institutions. If you are aware of substantial efforts to do so—including those that have led to measurable changes in post-completion success in labor markets or graduate degree attainment—please share them with us at cep.info@aspeninstitute.org.

Thank you for reading. We are grateful for all you are doing (and will do) to ensure that all students have a better chance at economic and social opportunity.

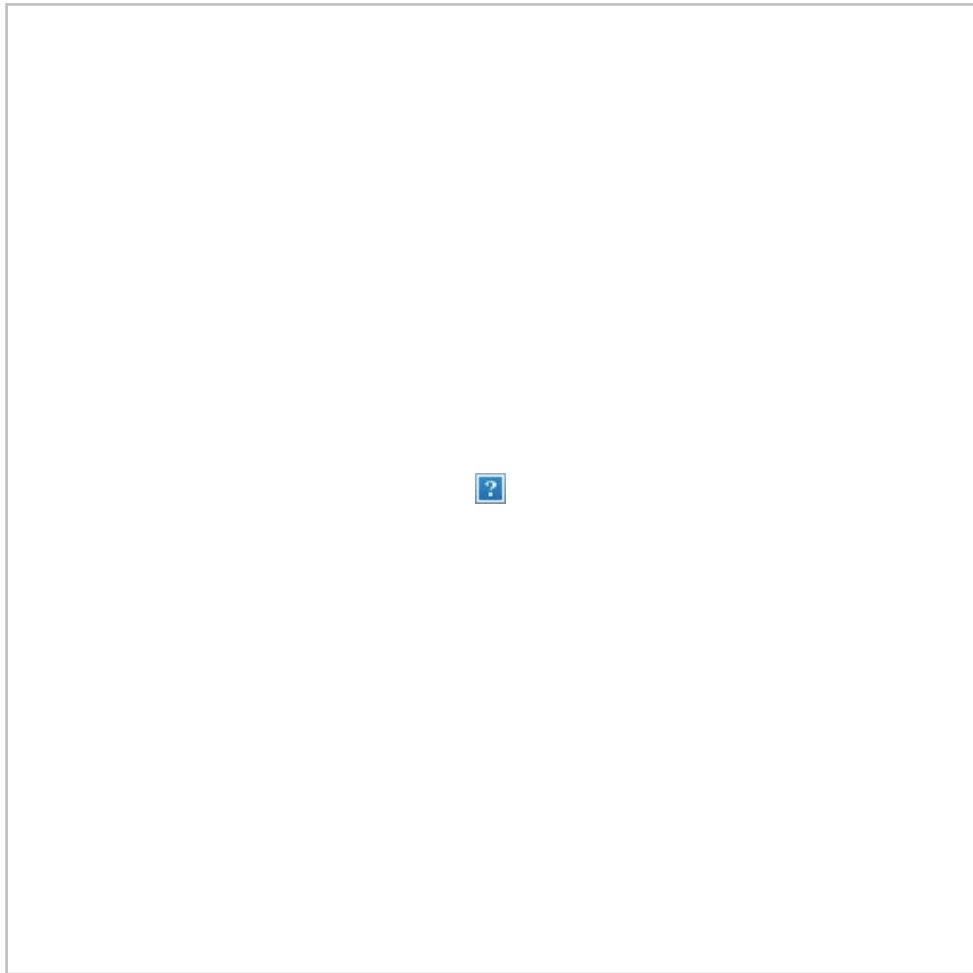


Best,
Josh Wyner



Founder and Executive Director, Aspen Institute College
Excellence Program

New Resource: Unlocking Opportunity Practice Guide

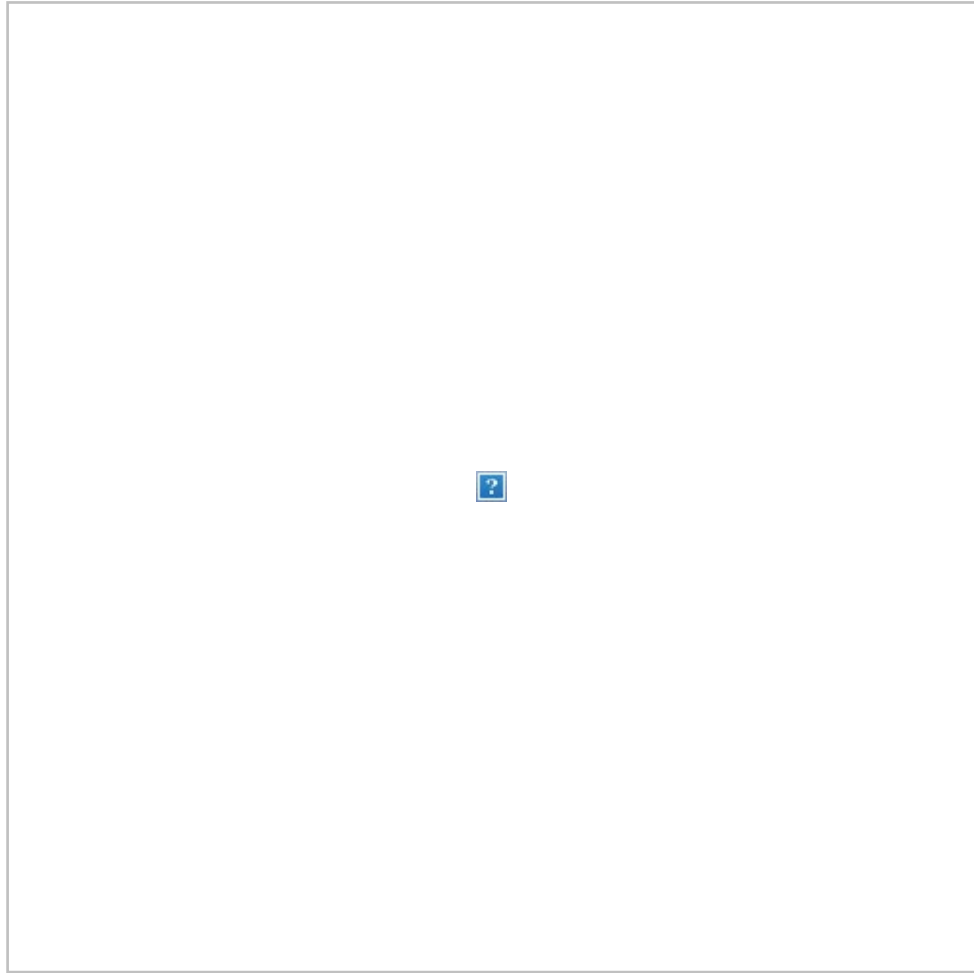


Aspen and CCRC have just released [*Unlocking Opportunity: Eight Strategies for Community Colleges to Improve Post-Completion Outcomes*](#). Designed for college presidents, senior teams, and other institutional leaders working to strengthen post-graduate outcomes, the guide is built on the eight strategies that the initial 10 Unlocking Opportunity colleges have used to increase the number of students on pathways aligned to post-graduate success by more than 20,000.

Organized around three reform areas—strengthening workforce programs, improving bachelor’s degree pathways, and enhancing program onboarding—the guide includes case-making language and data that leaders can use to support the reform strategy, case studies, and outlines of high-level action steps to guide leaders through the process.

Unlocking Opportunity has been generously funded by Arnold Ventures, Ascendium Education Group, Bank of America, ECMC Foundation, JPMorganChase, Lumina Foundation, and the Strada Education Foundation.

Interactive Version of the Transfer Playbook Now Available



For over a decade, Aspen and CCRC have together released multiple reports and guides detailing transfer student outcomes across the country and providing comprehensive guidance to improve bachelor's attainment rates among students who begin at community colleges. Earlier this year, we released the latest installment. The second edition of The Transfer Playbook sets forth a three-part strategy that universities and community colleges can use to achieve that goal, including by building stronger four-year programs of study/maps and better advising systems. This month, we've released an interactive, [digital version of The Transfer Playbook](#), making it easier for college leaders, faculty, advisors, and transfer partners to explore strategies, key practices, and case studies. The interactive version remains free of charge.

Aspen Partners with NCII on Rural Guided Pathways Work for Community College Leaders and Teams

Rural community colleges occupy an important place in higher education, offering opportunities for rural residents to advance their careers and earnings

and providing entire regions with the talent needed to drive forward economies and democratic engagement. The work of these colleges is especially important to resolving place-based gaps in educational attainment. For example, while 37 percent of urban and suburban Americans have a bachelor's degree, that is the case for only 25 percent of those in rural communities.

To help senior leaders at rural community colleges enhance their capacity to implement scaled student success reforms, Aspen is partnering with the National Center for Inquiry and Improvement's (NCII) [Rural Guided Pathways Project](#). The multi-year initiative supports 28 rural community colleges in implementing evidence-based, institution-wide reforms grounded in the guided pathways framework to ensure that more students earn credentials and move on to living-wage jobs or transfer to a four-year institution with junior status. Aspen is working with NCII to adapt and deliver leadership curriculum and other actionable resources for participants. Based on these materials, Aspen will develop a Leadership Toolkit for rural Texas community colleges, which will be used for statewide professional development. Aspen's work with the Rural Guided Pathways project is generously funded by the Greater Texas Foundation.

In the Media

Josh Wyner and Southwest Wisconsin Technical College's Chief Student Services Officer Holly Clendenen share how the Aspen Prize-winning college stays laser-focused on post-graduate success, in a joint [op-ed in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel](#).

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