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## NEWS RELEASE

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# National Student Success Initiative Honors Valencia Community College

*Valencia recognized for student success initiatives and closing achievement gaps; receives \$25,000 award*

Chapel Hill, N.C. – Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count, a national initiative to help more community college students succeed, and Lumina Foundation for Education today announced that Valencia Community College has been honored with the inaugural Leah Meyer Austin Institutional Student Success Leadership Award. Valencia received the award during the opening of the annual Achieving the Dream Strategy Institute in San Francisco.

Valencia, one of the largest community colleges in Florida with 50,000 students on four campuses, is being recognized for its unique execution of data-informed initiatives to close performance gaps among students from different ethnic and economic backgrounds. “Valencia Community College, its leadership, faculty, staff and students have made tremendous strides in improving success for all students by creating and implementing strategies that have led to systemic improvement,” said Carol Lincoln, national director of Achieving the Dream.

Achieving the Dream is a long-term national initiative that helps community college students complete courses, and earn certificates or degrees. The initiative is built on the belief that broad institutional change – informed by student achievement data – is critical to achieving these results. Achieving the Dream is particularly focused on student groups that have faced the most significant barriers to success, including low-income students and students of color.

“The Valencia campus community is extremely honored to be recognized by Achieving the Dream,” said President Sanford C. Shugart. “Our work with the initiative has required us to make important decisions impacting student success collectively with the entire college community. This type of collaboration, plus detailed planning, has fostered a disciplined process that is yielding better decisions and embedding student achievement goals and activities into the culture of the college.”

### **Valencia – Identifying Solutions that Work**

By digging into its internal research data and studying the intersection between its highest enrollment courses and those in which students were least successful, Valencia identified major achievement gaps across racial and ethnic groups; between college-ready and under-prepared students; and between student performance in mathematics courses compared to courses in other disciplines.

To begin addressing these performance gaps, Valencia chose to focus intervention strategies around six “gateway” courses, including four mathematics courses, an English composition course, and a U.S. government course. The strategies for addressing these courses employ three arrangements of learning

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count is a national initiative to increase the success of community college students, particularly those in groups that have been underserved in higher education.

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communities, implemented in phases beginning in the 2005-06 academic year, to cultivate student success:

- Supplemental learning, including hiring successful students to serve as peer mentors;
- Learning in Community (LinC) which coordinates instruction for students who attend linked courses together; and
- Establishing a Student Life Skills requirement for students who test into all three developmental disciplines (reading, writing and mathematics).

### **Closing the Gaps**

More than 29,000 Valencia students have taken at least one of the six targeted gateway courses since the inception of the new learning communities. The average success rate for all ethnicities in the six courses improved three full percentage points to 66% in 2008 compared to 2004 prior to the creation of the learning communities.

Success rate gaps compared to Caucasian students varied from year to year among the six courses. The success rate for Caucasians held steady from 2004 to 2008. However, Hispanic students, who lagged behind Caucasians in 2004, outperformed them in 2008. African American students also significantly closed the gap in the six gateway courses from 13.4% in 2004 to just a 3.6% gap in 2008.

“The goal is to create conditions for student learning that improve success for all students and eliminate the predictability of success or failure based on demographic factors,” said Shugart.

The Leah Meyer Austin Award, sponsored by Lumina Foundation for Education and administered by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), recognizes outstanding institutional achievement in creating excellence and equity through: 1) committed leadership; 2) documented student success strategies; 3) broad engagement; 4) use of evidence to improve programs, policies and practices; and 5) systemic institutional improvement.

“Lumina Foundation is very pleased to support this award – not only because it recognizes the great work that Valencia Community College is doing to help its students succeed – but also because it honors the passion, foresight and commitment of our good friend and former colleague Leah Meyer Austin,” said Lumina President and CEO Jamie P. Merisotis. “In many ways, Achieving the Dream is the product of Leah’s vision. It’s only fitting that her name be linked each year with colleges that stay true to that vision.” Meyer Austin is a former Senior Vice President at Lumina Foundation for Education and shaped the development of Achieving the Dream.

The winning college may use the \$25,000 cash award for any student success purpose it deems appropriate. Achieving the Dream also gave Special Recognition to Tallahassee Community College (Tallahassee, Fla.) for its community engagement work and Patrick Henry Community College (Martinsville, Va.) for exceptional work in cooperative learning.

**Achieving the Dream** is a national initiative to help more community college students succeed (complete courses, earn certificates and earn degrees). The initiative is particularly concerned about student groups that have faced the most significant barriers to success, including low income students and students of color. ATD focuses colleges and others on understanding and making better use of data. It acts on multiple fronts, including efforts at community colleges and in research, public engagement and public policy. ATD partners include AACC, Community College Leadership Program, Community College Research Center, Jobs for the Future, MDRC, MDC, and Public Agenda.

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