

Building Evidence to Increase Rural Learner Success: Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) and Glossary of Key Terms

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

How do I access Ascendium’s grant portal?

Please see Appendix A for more information about accessing Ascendium’s grant portal. Appendix A is located at the end of the RFP document.

Will I receive a confirmation email when my Letter of Intent (LOI) is submitted to the grant portal?

Yes. You will receive a confirmation email after your LOI has been received in the grant portal. If you do not see an email, please be sure to check your Spam folder.

Does the principal investigator need to be designated as the organizational contact in the grant portal?

No. While the principal investigator may be the designated organizational contact, anyone working on the LOI may be listed as the primary organizational contact.

Who will see my application?

Your LOI will be reviewed by Ascendium’s internal Education Philanthropy team as well as our partners at American Institutes for Research (AIR). Full proposals will be reviewed by Ascendium’s internal Education Philanthropy team, AIR and a panel of external peer reviewers with expertise in postsecondary education and workforce training research.

What kinds of organizations qualify to submit LOIs?

Eligible applicant organizations include public and/or nonprofit academic institutions, private nonprofit organizations and state or local government agencies. Applicants may represent partnerships between organizations and/or institutions.

Organizations outside of the U.S. are not eligible for funding.

We are particularly interested in supporting researchers and research teams led by individuals and organizations reflecting the regional diversity of rural communities, especially those populations who have been historically underrepresented in research initiatives.

As a researcher, do I have to be affiliated with an organization to submit a LOI?

Yes. We require that applicants be affiliated with an organization that can support the necessary Institutional Review Board (IRB) and is capable of receiving grants.

What does it mean to be “affiliated” with an organization?

We expect that affiliations with an organization will be demonstrated through current employment with the organization, a contract for service (e.g., contracted as a consultant), Board service or other relationships that authorize researchers to use the organization’s processes for securing IRB approval and managing grant activities.

Does the “Lead Applicant” refer to the “Principal Investigator” or the “Organization”?

“Lead Applicant” refers to the “Principal Investigator.”

Can I submit more than one LOI?

We ask potential partners to prioritize responding to the goal that best aligns with their research interests and capabilities. Each lead applicant (or principal investigator) should submit only one LOI; however, applicants can be listed as collaborators on other submissions.

Are organizations/institutions limited in the number of proposal submissions that will be accepted?

We are open to reviewing multiple LOIs from the same organization if the principal investigator (or “lead applicant”) is different for each. Each principal investigator may submit only one LOI; however, there may be other principal investigators from the same institution/organization that may apply with a separate LOI.

If an eligible organization is already funded by Ascendium for unrelated projects, are we still eligible?

Yes.

How many LOIs will be invited to submit full proposals?

We have not determined how many LOIs will be invited to submit full proposals. We will invite proposals for projects that strongly align with our goals and review criteria (see next question).

What are the criteria you will use for evaluating LOIs and proposed projects?

Ascendium will consider several factors when evaluating LOIs and full proposals. Guiding questions during the review process will include the following.

- How does the project relate to the outlined goals?
- Is the methodology aligned with the research question(s)?
- Does this work center equitable outcomes and focus on rural learners from low-income backgrounds?
- To what extent do the findings from this work translate to action?
- Is the project team’s composition and experience well-suited for this project?
- Are the costs of the project aligned with the proposed work?

What kinds of activities will this grant not fund?

Grant funds may not be used to support lobbying or other attempts to influence legislation or the implementation of services and programs.

Can we use funds to support payments to graduate assistants?

Yes. Funds can be used to support payments to graduate assistants completing work directly related to the proposed research initiative. However, funds cannot be used to seed new graduate assistantships or provide funding to affiliated assistants for work not related to this initiative.

Can funds be used to support dissemination activities?

Yes. The project budget can include resources for dissemination activities (including publication, design and distribution). Ascendium expects that project deliverables and outcomes will be accessible to the public via a cost-free channel. If submitting to a journal that is limited by a paywall, the core results/products/implications must also be publicly available.

Can funds be used to support a program itself or is it limited to covering only evaluation activities?

Grant funds should be used for research and evaluation activities only, with the exception of programmatic costs necessary to support robust evaluation or research design. Please describe in the LOI any programmatic costs required to enable your proposed research project.

Do you fund proprietary data sets?

Funding proprietary data sets will be considered for this effort. Ascendium encourages the use of available tools and data already accessible by a researcher or research team.

What are the expected award amounts?

Ascendium expects to award grants in amounts up to \$500,000.

If our proposed timeline is less than three years, are we still eligible for up to \$500,000 in funding?

Yes. Several factors will be considered when reviewing proposed budgets, including timeline and activities.

Can we fund an extension of existing work?

This effort can support the expansion of an existing project or body of work. In the LOI, include language about how this work will build on current efforts and why this expansion aligns with the goals of this initiative.

When should projects start and end?

We anticipate notifying grant recipients at the end of January 2023 and expect that projects will begin as early as March 2023. We're flexible on project start dates, but we expect all projects to be underway in 2023 to allow for cross-project learning among the community of grantees. We expect to fund projects for a period of up to three years, with all proposed project deliverables occurring within the grant period.

How many awards does Ascendium anticipate making?

Ascendium has allocated \$4 million to the Building Evidence to Increase Rural Learner Success initiative. We have not determined a specific number of projects that will be funded. We anticipate awarding grants up to \$500,000.

What is Ascendium's indirect cost policy?

Ascendium recognizes there are organizational costs involved in implementing an effective grant project. To help offset these indirect costs, grantees may request indirect costs up to 15% of total direct project expenses.

Direct expenses are costs involved in delivering project services. Examples of direct project expenses include salaries, fringe benefits, travel, supplies and materials, trainings and meetings and consultants.

Indirect costs are organizational costs not directly tied to the project budget but required to support general organizational operations. Examples of indirect costs include executive and support staff salaries (e.g., human resources, accounting, IT staff, etc.), organizational equipment and technology, rent and utilities.

Must research projects have a specific geographic focus?

No. Ascendium welcomes research projects that focus on rural learners and/or institutions from rural communities throughout the U.S., including tribal nations and U.S. territories.

Does Ascendium require a certain level of researcher?

Ascendium does not require researchers to have a certain level of tenure or research level to be eligible for funding. Proposals will be evaluated on the researcher's or research team's relevant education, experience, and ability to execute the research plan outlined in the proposal.

What are the learner-level outcomes Ascendium has prioritized in this RFP?

Ascendium is interested in generating evidence about policies, practices and/or programs that increase persistence in and completion of high-quality postsecondary education and training and successful transition to high-quality jobs. Please see the Glossary of Key Terms within this document for more information about how we define **postsecondary education progress and success** and **labor market success**.

Is there a preferred methodological approach?

No. Projects may be structured as, but are not limited to, evaluations and original qualitative, quantitative or mixed-methods studies. Regardless of approach, each project should align with one of the two goals noted previously. Projects should also clearly identify how findings can inform and catalyze action affecting policies, programs and/or practices that contribute to improved outcomes for rural learners from low-income backgrounds.

Will IRB approval be needed prior to proposal submission?

No. However we expect that your proposal will include a timeline and plan for securing IRB approval, as needed.

Do I need to attach a bibliography to the LOI?

We encourage you to include citations within your narrative responses. You are welcome to attach a bibliography to your LOI, though it is not required.

What are the reporting and/or convening requirements for awarded grantees?

Selected partners will be expected to complete annual reports to capture progress, elevate challenges and identify emerging themes and/or findings.

Additionally, to advance cross-project learning, selected partners will be expected to meet for at least 1 ½ days with all research partners during the grant period. The specific date for the convening will be determined once awards are made. Participants will not be responsible for the cost of travel.

What are the deliverables required?

Ascendium invests in research that helps to build a body of evidence about how to ensure rural learners from low-income backgrounds can achieve their postsecondary education and career goals. We expect this investment in research will catalyze action affecting policies and practices grounded in high-quality evidence and research. Potential partners will be expected to use funding to produce original research and data products that will be available to the public. We expect partners will create and disseminate one to three deliverables tailored for key audiences. Potential deliverables could include, but are not limited to, the following: research reports or briefs, policy briefs, fact sheets, blog posts, data visualizations, infographics or maps.

Who do I contact if I'm having technical difficulties or if I have questions about the LOI?

- If you are having technical difficulties accessing or submitting your LOI via Ascendium's grant portal, please email questions to grantsmanagement@ascendiumeducation.org. Please write "Building Rural Evidence" in the subject line of your email. We will attempt to resolve technical issues as quickly as possible.
- If you have general questions about this opportunity (e.g., eligibility requirements, clarifying questions about the research goals), please email questions to AIR at ruralevidence@air.org.

What does Ascendium mean by research that centers equity?

We are open to the many permutations of what advancing equity, along related concepts like diversity, inclusion and justice, means within your research project. One approach — more tied to the concepts of diversity or representation — emphasizes broadening who does the research. Others may focus on ensuring results are

disaggregated by important subgroups or examining whether an intervention reduces the race or class-based gaps in key outcomes. Others may call for a more fundamental rethinking of research practices, like who sets research questions and how the questions are set. Below, we link to several resources on these topics.

Some resources as you consider responses include:

- We All Count: <https://weallcount.com/>
- Chicago Beyond’s Why Am I Always Being Researched?: <https://chicagobeyond.org/researchequity/>
- Democratizing Evidence In Education: <https://www.democratizingevidence4.us/>
- MDRC’s Equity Resources: <https://www.mdrc.org/pub/equity-resources>
- Equitable Evaluation Initiative: <https://www.equitableeval.org>

What other grant opportunities are available now and in the future through Ascendium to support rural postsecondary education and workforce training?

Please visit Ascendium’s [Support Rural Postsecondary Education and Workforce Training](#) web page to learn more about our funding priorities, existing grant partners and upcoming philanthropic efforts to elevate rural postsecondary education and workforce training.

Glossary of Key Terms

Evidence-based	For Ascendium, an evidence-based policy, practice or program is one based on the best available body of facts or information indicating whether a belief or proposition is true or valid. Evidence varies in its credibility, and the strongest evidence generally comes from a portfolio of high-quality, credible sources. Where feasible and appropriate, well-designed and well-implemented experimental and quasi-experimental evaluations produce the most credible evidence that an intervention caused a positive, statistically significant difference in meaningful outcomes.
Labor market success	Ascendium recognizes that defining and measuring “labor market success” can be complex and vary by context. We encourage applicants to use measures that demonstrate learners and/or workers have successfully transitioned to the labor market, including earnings and employment.
Low-income	Ascendium recognizes that defining “low-income” can be complex and vary by context. For research projects focused on postsecondary institutions, we welcome Pell-eligibility or Pell-recipient as a proxy for defining low-income learners. We are also open to other definitions that make sense for your context. In some cases, other measures — such as eligibility for means-tested federal programs like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) — may serve as proxies for defining “low-income.”
Postsecondary education and training	Any higher education or training that culminates in a degree and/or credential and prepares learners for future employment and/or continued education.

Postsecondary education progress and success	<p>Ascendium recognizes that there are many measures of postsecondary education progress and success. We are particularly interested in studies of policies, programs and/or practices that seek to improve commonly accepted and meaningful outcomes, like persistence and completion of a degree or credential. Competitive applicants will understand the outcomes most valued by their intended audience/user and incorporate those into their evaluation design. For example, if the policy, program and/or practice to be evaluated will be implemented by a community college in a state with performance-based funding, the study may examine the effect of the reform on the outcomes rewarded in that state’s formula.</p>
Rural	<p>Ascendium recognizes that defining “rural” is challenging, given that no singular definition currently exists. Ascendium has invested in two resources that we encourage applicants to review and use in guiding their research and project design.</p>
Rural-Located Institution (RLI) Definition and Map	<p>A team of researchers from the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s Student Success Through Applied Research Lab has explored the geography of postsecondary opportunities and developed a map of RLIs using U.S. Census and USDA commuting zones data. For more information, visit https://sstar.wisc.edu/services-research/geography-of-opportunity/.</p>
Rural-Serving Institution (RSI) Definition and Map	<p>A team of researchers at the Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges developed an evidence-based framework and accompanying mapping tool of public and private rural-serving institutions. The RSI metric accounts for multiple measures of locale and rurality, credentials conferred in fields of particular importance to rural communities and a measure of an institution’s economic impact in its region. For more information, visit https://www.regionalcolleges.org/project/ruralserving.</p>