

Building Evidence to Increase Rural Learner Success

Accepting action-oriented research projects that address gaps in evidence for rural learner postsecondary education and workforce success.



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Overview

About Ascendium Education Group

Ascendium Education Group is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization committed to helping people reach the education and career goals that matter to them. Ascendium invests in initiatives designed to increase the number of students from low-income backgrounds who complete postsecondary degrees, certificates and workforce training programs, with an emphasis on first-generation students, incarcerated adults, rural community members, students of color and veterans. Ascendium's work identifies, validates and expands best practices to promote large-scale change at the institutional, system, and state levels, with the intention of elevating opportunity for all. For more information, visit <https://www.ascendiumphilanthropy.org>.

Our Commitment to Rural Postsecondary Education and Workforce Training

Ascendium supports efforts that can help the field better understand rural learners from low-income backgrounds and postsecondary education and workforce training providers. We do this by (a) supporting investments in high-quality action-oriented research, (b) building the capacity of rural postsecondary education and workforce providers and (c) catalyzing investment in partnerships. For more information, visit <https://www.ascendiumphilanthropy.org/our-grantmaking/support-rural-postsecondary-education-and-workforce-training>.

Background

Disparities in postsecondary achievement among learners in rural communities exist at every point in the talent pipeline — from the beginning of their journey through postsecondary education and training to the opportunities made available to them in the workforce. For example, 48% of individuals within rural commuting zones ages 25 and older have not attended college, compared to 37% in non-rural commuting zones. This underscores disparities in postsecondary education attainment between rural and non-rural communities.ⁱ Disparities early in the talent pipeline fuel a shortage of skilled workers, which affects the economic health of families and communities that call rural areas home.

Although approximately 18% of the U.S. population lives in rural communitiesⁱⁱ, national policy conversations and initiatives have not adequately included rural postsecondary education and workforce training. There is currently insufficient research to provide institutional leaders, policymakers, workforce providers and others critical information needed to strengthen postsecondary education and workforce outcomes for rural learners from low-income backgrounds.

Through this opportunity, Ascendium will invest in applied research that generates actionable knowledge, yields evidence-based insights and helps scale practitioner and policymaker approaches to removing systemic barriers uniquely faced by rural learners from low-income backgrounds, especially first-generation students, incarcerated adults, students of color and veterans.

The Opportunity: Request for Proposals

This Request for Proposals (RFP) invites researchers committed to generating evidence about the strategies that can improve opportunity and outcomes for low-income learners in rural areas to apply for grants of up to three years and \$500,000. Research projects selected for funding through this RFP will be those that:

- Generate evidence about the policies, practices and/or programs that increase persistence in and completion of high-quality postsecondary education and training.
- Generate evidence about the policies, practices and/or programs that promote pathways from postsecondary education to high-quality jobs.
- Provide insight on optimal frameworks and conditions for scaling evidence-based strategies across communities and organizations seeking to support and improve postsecondary education and workforce outcomes in rural areas for low-income learners.
- Demonstrate the applicability of anticipated research study results to specific actors (e.g., institutional leaders, state and local policymakers, intermediary partners and funders) who are positioned to bring about change for low-income learners in rural areas.

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 SNAP or TANF – may serve as proxies for defining “low-income.”

Ascendium has two primary goals for the research projects funded through this RFP. All proposed projects should center research questions that address one or both goals. Successful proposals will demonstrate the applicability of anticipated results for practitioners and other key actors — including state and local policymakers, intermediary partners and funders — positioned to bring about equitable change for low-income learners in rural areas.

Goal 1: To close gaps in existing evidence on policies, practices and programs that are effective in providing rural learners from low-income backgrounds with successful pathways through postsecondary education and the workforce.

Although effective and evidence-based models, programs and practices exist that improve postsecondary training and employment outcomes, few have been validated in rural contexts. The unique contexts of rural communities make the adoption of evidence-based strategies and approaches studied in non-rural and urban areas challenging. With large swaths of our population living in rural areas, understanding which strategies improve outcomes for rural learners from low-income backgrounds is essential. Thus, this RFP seeks to solicit proposals that contribute new, actionable knowledge on effective programming and models that account for both the constraints and assets of rural communities and ecosystems to promote postsecondary education and workforce success for rural learners from low-income backgrounds.

Research in this area will generate new evidence about the policies, programs and/or practices that increase student success for rural learners from low-income backgrounds. Selected projects will use rigorous methods to investigate the effectiveness of those efforts to improve postsecondary education progress and success, as well as labor market success and upward socioeconomic mobility of rural learners from low-income backgrounds. We anticipate that evidence generated through this work will support state and local policymakers, practitioners, intermediary partners and funders and their efforts to invest in, adopt and implement equitable student success strategies. These strategies would not only leverage the unique strengths and resources of rural communities, but also offset crucial constraints that rural communities often face. The rural population, even among learners from low-income backgrounds, is not monolithic and reflects the racial and ethnic diversity of America. Proposals will ideally consider that heterogeneity and may even examine to what extent evaluated policies, programs and/or practices reduce, exacerbate or do not affect any class- and race-based gaps in learner-level outcomes.

Goal 2: To strengthen understanding of how postsecondary education and workforce training providers successfully implement evidence-based solutions in support of rural learners from low-income backgrounds.

Rural postsecondary education and workforce training providers operate in unique environments that can challenge implementation of student success efforts, including low population density, limited resources, infrastructure constraints and shifting economic conditions. Providers, policymakers and funders in rural areas need guidance on the adaptation necessary to ensure the successful implementation of student success strategies that benefit rural learners from low-income backgrounds.

Research in this area will identify innovative, promising approaches or strategies to support postsecondary education and workforce training providers' consideration of resource allocation, partnerships and capacity building that reinforce the successful implementation of evidence-based solutions. Findings should empower state and local policymakers, practitioners, intermediary partners and funders across postsecondary education and workforce training sectors, either to refine current systems, processes and procedures or to design new ones.

Joining a collaborative community

Ascendium has partnered with American Institutes for Research (AIR) to support the management of this RFP. In partnership with AIR, Ascendium will group all awarded research projects into a cohort with the intention of cultivating a collaborative community to share ideas and address shared challenges. Ascendium and AIR will support awardees in optimizing dissemination and actionability of research findings. Selected partners will be expected to engage in collaborative activities, including convenings designed to foster collaboration and peer learning.

Applicant Eligibility

Eligible applicants include public and/or nonprofit academic institutions, private nonprofit organizations and state government agencies. Applicants may represent partnerships between researchers/research teams and organizations, including research-practice partnerships.

We are committed to investing in research led by individuals and organizations representing the regional diversity of rural communities in meaningful ways. We strongly encourage applications from project teams representing the following.

- Rural-located and/or rural-serving institutions and training organizations.
- Researchers from historically underrepresented groups and/or from institutions that serve underrepresented groups, such as:
 - Minority-serving institutions.
 - Historically Black Colleges and Universities.
 - Hispanic-serving institutions.
 - Tribal Colleges and Universities.
 - Asian American- and Pacific Islander-serving institutions.
 - Open-access institutions.

Defining Rural-Located and Serving. Ascendium recognizes that clearly defining “rural” is challenging, given that no singular definition currently exists, and has invested in two resources that we encourage applicants to review and use in guiding their research and project design.

- **Rural-Located Institution (RLI) Definition and Map.** 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/](https://sstar.wisc.edu/services-research/geography-of-opportunity/).
- **Rural-Serving Institution (RSI) Definition and Map.** 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>.

General Project Guidelines

Ascendium aims to fund a portfolio of research projects that (a) generate evidence about the programs, policies and/or practices that increase the postsecondary education and workforce training success of rural learners from low-income backgrounds, and (b) center equity within study design and implementation.

Ascendium anticipates awarding grants up to \$500,000 and three years in length to support the execution of research and dissemination.

Projects should employ rigorous methods aligned with the goals of the research and adhere to the proposed budget and project timeline.

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, and 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. Specificity of the short-, medium- and long-term outcomes for low-income learners in rural communities is preferred. Note that we recognize that long-term goals may be realized beyond the project timeline.

Process Timeline

The following is the timeline of the RFP process.

Please note that Ascendium reserves the right to modify the following timeline to accommodate appropriate review and consideration of all submissions in full. Applicants will be notified of any such modifications that may affect the timeline.

Timeline	
Sept. 8, 2022	RFP released
Sept. 19, 2022	Informational webinar
Oct. 7, 2022	Letter of Intent (LOI) due by 5 p.m. CST
Oct. 31, 2022	Finalists invited to submit a full proposal
Dec. 9, 2022	Full proposals due by 5 p.m. CST
End of January 2023	Applicants notified of final decisions

Application Process

The application process for this RFP consists of two phases: invitations for Letters of Intent (LOIs) and invitations to submit a full proposal.

Phase 1: LOI

Interested researchers must submit an LOI that addresses the following requested sections and content requirements.

- **Key organizational information.**
 - Project title.
 - Primary contact information.
 - Project start and end date/estimated duration.
 - Other funding/supporting sources for this project, if applicable.
 - *May we share this information with other funders who may be interested? [Yes/No]*
- **Project narrative.** A brief narrative that describes your proposed research and its importance to the field, including the following (2,500 words):
 - What program, policy and/or practice your research intends to examine, clearly stated research question(s) and an explanation of how the question(s) responds to one or both of the goals outlined in this RFP.
 - How your research will build evidence about programs, policies and/or practices that improve outcomes for rural learners from low-income backgrounds.
 - How your project complements existing research that addresses gaps in evidence-based strategies supporting rural learners from low-income backgrounds.
 - How the proposed project centers equity — including how the evidence generated from this work will contribute to and inform strategies that advance equitable outcomes for rural learners from low-income backgrounds and other underserved populations, including first-generation college students, learners of color, adult learners, veterans and others. (See separate FAQ and Glossary of Key Terms for more information on how Ascendium defines equity-centered research).
- **Proposed methodology.** A high-level overview of the methodological approach and brief rationale for why the proposed methods and research design are appropriate to address questions stated previously. If your research project specifically investigates effectiveness of a specific program or reform (aligned to Goal 1), share briefly how the research design will support causal inference (1,000 words).
- **Research outputs.** In a brief narrative, address the following questions in ways that best describe how your research will be used (1,000 words).
 - Who is the intended audience of your research findings? Please be specific.
 - What research deliverables (e.g., briefs, blogs, journal articles, etc.) will you produce to ensure what has been learned is usable for those audiences?
- **Anticipated outcomes.** In a brief narrative, address the following questions in ways that best describe anticipated outcomes of your research (1,000 words).
 - What new learnings or insights might your research produce that will benefit rural learners from low-income backgrounds?

- How might you envision your research being put into practice by state and local policymakers, practitioners, intermediaries and/or funders? What actions might these audiences take?
- How might this research inform policies, practices and/or programs that may be implemented through organizations, institutions and/or systems to advance equitable persistence, completion and job placement for rural learners from low-income backgrounds?
- **Project team.** Describe your project team, as well as any key project partners with whom you plan to engage. Be sure to include the following.
 - Names and organizational affiliation.
 - Curriculum Vitae (CV) for the Principal Investigator.
 - Relevant qualifications for all project team members, including education and training in the methods proposed, as well as prior experience with these methods.
 - Professional and/or personal experience in rural postsecondary education.
 - Proposed partners/collaborators.
- **Project estimated budget.** Provide an estimate of the approximate budget needed to complete the work proposed.

LOIs will be due by 5 p.m. CST on Friday, Oct. 7. LOIs must be submitted using Ascendium’s grant portal. Please note that you will need to register for an account on the grant portal before accessing and submitting the LOI. We encourage you to complete the registration process early as it may take up to two business days for registration requests to be reviewed and approved. Please see Appendix A for more details on how to access the grant portal.

Webinar

Ascendium and AIR will host an informational webinar about this RFP on Monday, Sept. 19 at 2 p.m. CST. You can register for the webinar at <https://www.accelevents.com/e/increase-rural-learner-success>.



Phase 2: Full Proposal

Ascendium will invite selected researchers to submit a full proposal, building on information in the LOI. Instructions for expanding on the following topics will be shared with those invited to submit a full proposal.

- Research Design and Project Timeline
- Research Dissemination Design
- Plan for Overcoming Potential Barriers
- Needed Supports
- Grant Budget and Budget Narrative

Review and Selection Process

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?

Reporting and Evaluation Expectations

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. Participants will not be responsible for the cost of travel.

Communications and Dissemination

Grantees will be required to submit interim and final reports to keep Ascendium and AIR aware of progress. Ascendium and AIR anticipate working closely with selected partners to identify national conferences, convenings or other opportunities as a means of sharing findings with targeted audiences during and after the grant period.

ⁱ Hillman, N., Colston, J., Bach-Hanson, J., & Peek, A. (2021). *Mapping rural colleges and their communities*. University of Wisconsin–Madison. https://mappingruralcolleges.wisc.edu/documents/sstar_mapping_rural_colleges_2021.pdf

ⁱⁱ Trading Economics. (2022). *United States–Rural Population* [Data set]. <https://tradingeconomics.com/united-states/rural-population-percent-of-total-population-wb-data.html>.

Appendix A

A Guide for Submitting a LOI for Building Evidence to Increase Rural Learner Success

Creating an Account in Fluxx

Before you can submit a Letter of Inquiry (LOI) for the **Building Evidence to Increase Rural Learner Success** funding opportunity, you first need to register an account within our grant portal, Fluxx. Ascendium strongly encourages potential applicants to complete this step early in the application process as it may take up to two business days for registration requests to be reviewed and approved. All users who will be accessing the application should register; you may have up to three contacts, as well as an Authorized Signatory and Authorized Financial Contact.

To register, follow these steps.

1. Navigate to <https://ascendium.fluxx.io/>.
2. Click **Register Now**. The registration form displays.
3. Complete all required fields. Required fields are bolded.
Make sure to select Yes from the drop-down menu under *Are you requesting grant portal access to apply for a current open funding opportunity?*
4. Click **Submit Request**. A message will display thanking you for submitting your registration request. We'll review your request and email you login credentials and instructions within two business days.

Submitting Your LOI in Fluxx

Once you have access to your grant portal account, you can submit your LOI.

1. Navigate to <https://ascendium.fluxx.io/>.
2. Log in using the credentials and instructions provided in the registration approval email. The Welcome page displays.
3. Select **Funding Opportunities** from the navigation pane.
4. Click **Apply Now** to begin your LOI submission. An application displays in the foreground.
5. In the Before you begin section, select **Building Evidence to Increase Rural Learner Success** from the drop-down menu.
6. To complete the LOI, click **Edit** within the selected application. Once the application is complete, click **Save and Close**.
Note: The portal doesn't autosave, so click **Save and Continue** often to save your work. If you start and then need to finish your LOI at another time, click **Save and Close**. Return to **Applications** to view your saved LOI.
7. When ready to submit, click **Submit**. A pop-up window displays.
8. Click **OK**. The application now displays in the **Applications Submitted** section in the navigation pane. If the application does not immediately display in this section, refresh the screen.