



Strong Start to Finish: Unique Pooled Funding Approach Supports Continued Developmental Education Efforts

Strong Start to Finish (SSTF) has announced a second round of pooled funding awards totaling more than \$5.3 million to accelerate the developmental education reform movement. The grants expand the initiative's footprint to nearly 5 million undergraduates in 101 universities and 272 community colleges across 12 states. [Read the full news release here.](#)

Developmental education is a critically important issue for postsecondary education and one that most states are trying to tackle. The more states can learn from each other and promote systemwide changes in this field, the more first-year college students will succeed. Strong Start to Finish, launched in 2017, is a revolutionary, collaborative \$13 million project funded by Ascendium in partnership with The Kresge Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Strong Start to Finish connects an emerging network of committed postsecondary leaders and funders working together to establish developmental education practice and policy that works and can be scaled at colleges and college systems across the nation. The goal is to bring equity to education and help more students complete gateway courses in their first year of study. This is the first initiative Ascendium supported under a pooled funding approach. With pooled funding, the funders collectively agree on the effort's goals and desired outcomes and put aside their respective processes in favor of a single, consolidated response from the grantee. Pooling funding for SSTF was a unique opportunity for Ascendium and was especially appealing for the strong signal it sends to the field that three of the nation's largest postsecondary education funders are strategically aligned on scaling developmental education reforms. Critically, pooling funds makes more money available to go further than any one grantmaker alone could fund.

All three funding organizations already had significant investments in developmental education reform, but SSTF was the first opportunity that put all those investments into play in one grant and brought them to scale. [Read more about Ascendium's interest in this groundbreaking project.](#)



Vera Institute of Justice: Unlocking the Promise of Pell for Students in Prison

Ascendium has again partnered with the Vera Institute of Justice, this time on a \$1.1 million grant to support the ongoing development and leadership of corrections education directors as they create statewide systems of quality postsecondary education in prison. This work becomes even more vital as the U.S. Department of Education continues to explore adding more institutions to their Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative. Ascendium is encouraged by the growing momentum to reinstate Pell Grants, as we believe that states must take a systemic approach to educational and career pathways. This is measured by how well formerly incarcerated people are positioned to leverage their earned credentials—in meaningful employment, further educational pursuits and social reintegration.

In 2018, Ascendium awarded a \$180,000 planning grant to Vera to support the expansion of college in prison, particularly in Arkansas, Iowa, Ohio and Wisconsin. In those states, Vera led state corrections leaders, colleges teaching in prison, formerly incarcerated students and other key stakeholders through a strategic planning process that resulted in each state identifying a set of priorities and next steps. The learning and strategic planning tools developed will guide the most recent investment.

One of Ascendium's focus areas of funding includes initiatives that help develop systems and best practices for high-quality postsecondary education in prison. This means collaboration between partners in the field to ask the right questions, share best practices and data, and remove institutional barriers to program quality, accessibility and student success. Our aim is to support efforts that can help the field better understand what types of postsecondary education in prison programs are effective, how to forge the systemic and institutional partnerships needed to get them in place, and how to spread and sustain best practices on a broad scale in order to catalyze genuine systemic change.

Aspen Institute Puts Rural Grant to Work

A three-year project to advance the implementation of college success strategies that improve social mobility and equitable talent development in rural communities has kicked off, thanks in part to a grant made by Ascendium.

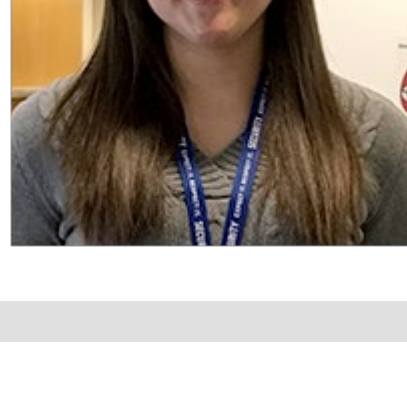
Ascendium recently awarded a \$2.6 million grant to the Aspen Institute to support the research and development of a new suite of curricular tools and resources to advance student success at rural community colleges. The grant also supports the 2021 Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence, which honors institutions that strive for and achieve exceptional and equitable levels of student success.

Earlier this month, Aspen announced the Top 10 finalists for their **2021 Aspen Prize**. Out of the 10 finalists, several are rural-serving community colleges with notable diversity in terms of their mission, demographics and size.

By leveraging Aspen's existing assets, including the Aspen Prize research process and its network of exceptional rural community college leaders, both Aspen and Ascendium will be able to identify challenges and opportunities for student success in rural regions and aid in the implementation of practices by sharing the tools and resources that will be developed through the project.

Ascendium Welcomes a New Member to the Education Grantmaking Team

Angel Bowen, Administrative Coordinator: Angel has been with Ascendium for three years in October as a Loan Counselor; she accepted the Administrative Coordinator position in June. Ascendium is eager to find ways for staff to engage in different aspects of the organization through informal "internships" and special project assignments; this is how Angel first came to the team. Welcome, Angel!

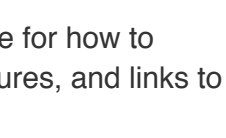


Now Hiring!

We are seeking a **Deputy Director - Learning and Evaluation** with a strong understanding of both qualitative and quantitative methods and demonstrated capacity of translating ideas gained from those methods into action. This role is newly created within the organization to collaboratively work with senior leadership and the program team to develop and implement strategies that bolster the impact of Ascendium's philanthropy and support opportunities for learning across the organization and in the field of grantmaking. This opportunity is located in Madison, WI. [Find more information and apply online.](#)

New MDRC Resource for College Administrators

MDRC has compiled a resource for college administrators as they tackle an immediate challenge: college course placement during the pandemic. Even before the pandemic, many colleges used multiple pieces of info to determine course placement, rather than a single test score. The document, linked above, outlines advice for how to create simple decision rules using high school GPA and other measures, and links to additional resources on multiple measures placement.



Recent Grants

Expand Postsecondary Education in Prison

Expanding Access to Postsecondary Pathways in Louisiana State Prisons

Exploration

Operation Restoration | \$650,000 | 06/2020 - 05/2023

This grant supports Operation Restoration in the planning and implementation of a bachelor's degree program that will leverage technology to support incarcerated students in multiple facilities across the Louisiana state prison system. The organization will also pilot an innovative advising model that trains students with long-term sentences as academic advisors.

Field Support and Development

National Virtual Professional Learning Series for Math Faculty - COVID-19 Response Fund

Scaling

University of Texas at Austin | \$125,000 | 06/2020 - 05/2023

This grant supports the Dana Center at the University of Texas at Austin in developing an intensive, interactive virtual professional learning series for math faculty and delivering it over the summer so that faculty are prepared to provide high-quality learning experiences to students in their fall math courses.

Remove Structural Barriers to Success

Guided Pathways: "What and How To" Educational Series

Scaling

Teachers College, Columbia University | \$1,812,945 | 09/2020 - 07/2023

This grant supports the Community College Research Center in creating a suite of training materials designed for colleges that have not been well served by existing technical assistance providers in the guided pathways reform movement.

Streamline Key Learner Transitions

Redesigning StudentTracker

Scaling

National Student Clearinghouse Research Center | \$1,343,000 | 05/2020 - 12/2021

This grant supports the National Student Clearinghouse in rebuilding StudentTracker, the primary data platform used by educational and institutions to track student-level postsecondary enrollment in the United States. The new StudentTracker will reduce the technological expertise required for users, consolidate data into a single platform, and provide enhanced reports and visualization nationwide.

Support Rural Postsecondary Education and Workforce Training

College and Student Success in Rural Communities

Validation

University of Wisconsin-Madison | \$191,765 | 06/2020 - 09/2021

This grant supports the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Student Success Through Applied Research Lab in completing an analysis of demographic shifts in rural communities and college enrollment trends in rural places facing the greatest demographic shifts. This research will uncover new insights into rural college opportunity and access and will help education leaders and other stakeholders identify practical ways colleges can successfully navigate and respond to these increasing demographic challenges.

Researching Place-based Learning Experiences' Impact on Rural Postsecondary Learners

Validation

University of Montana | \$221,202 | 06/2020 - 05/2022

This grant supports the University of Montana in researching the impact of place-based learning at postsecondary institutions on student outcomes and achievement. Building on promising research in secondary systems, rural place-based learning focuses on integrating local and regional cultures, history and resources into school programming in an effort to promote student success and engagement.

Launching West Virginia Climbs

Exploration

Philanthropy West Virginia | \$750,000 | 06/2020 - 06/2022

This grant supports Philanthropy West Virginia's efforts in building the infrastructure of West Virginia Climbs, a new public awareness and programming campaign aimed at increasing the state's postsecondary educational attainment rate to at least 60 percent by 2030. The West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission (WVHEPC) and other partners will support the implementation activities needed to complete five activities targeted at supporting learners from low-income backgrounds.

On the Go: Find Ascendium Staff in the Field — Virtually

Ascendium Education Group has cancelled all staff travel plans until further notice, due to COVID-19 concerns, but we are supporting and attending virtual events. We hope everyone stays safe and we look forward to participating in live events in the coming months. We will continue to share past virtual events, event recording and resources links and future opportunities to connect with Ascendium staff.

GlobalMindED Virtual Session (Toya Wall, panelist): Higher Education in Prison (Access and Success)
May 22

📌 **Jobs for the Future's Horizons:** Designing a Future that Works
June 8-11

The Hunt Institute (Amy Kerwin, panelist): Webinar, Removing Institutional and Systemic Barriers for Postsecondary Success
July 14

📌 **Education Writers Association:** 73rd National Seminar
July 21-24

Society for Research on Educational Effectiveness (Rebecca Villarreal, panelist): Meet the Funders - Perspectives from Foundations
August 12

📌 Ascendium-sponsored event