

Ascendium®

# STRONGER TOGETHER

2021 Education Philanthropy Report





## WE'RE STRONGER TOGETHER

“Through the strength of our work together, we have the potential to impact millions of future learners.”



As I sat down to write this letter and reflected on the year, I was struck by how little has changed as a result of the COVID-19 health crisis, yet I was also struck by how much has changed. Our country's postsecondary education and workforce training systems have been — and continue to be — forced to make extraordinary changes to the ways in which they serve students through academic and social support.

An important change since last year is our emerging sense of the toll the health crisis has had on learners from low-income backgrounds. Work from our grant partners has made clear the extent of that toll. For example, a National

Student Clearinghouse Research Center report series highlights declining postsecondary enrollment trends due to the health crisis, particularly for Black and Hispanic learners. Education Commission of the States found that half of the rural respondents from a recent survey indicated that COVID-19 concerns would prevent them from being able to enroll in further education.

At Ascendium, our grantmaking approach recognizes that addressing inequities requires the exploration of promising new solutions, as well as continued evidence-building in support of proven solutions as they're expanded and scaled. To that end,

our 2021 grantmaking included \$119 million in grants aligned with our strategy's four focus areas. We're immensely grateful to our grant partners, both those familiar to us from past work and those new to us this year, for their ability to form collaborations in the development and implementation of critical work in such a challenging environment. We look forward to learning with and from them about the impact of their efforts to close equity gaps.

Now more than ever, postsecondary education is the single most effective way to enhance socioeconomic mobility. This is also why, now more than ever, we need to rely on trust,

collaboration and partnership to advance equitable education and workforce training outcomes for learners from low-income backgrounds. Through the strength of our work together, we have the potential to impact millions of future learners.

### **RICHARD D. GEORGE**

CHAIRMAN, PRESIDENT & CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER  
ASCENDIUM EDUCATION GROUP



# GRANTMAKING STRATEGY

Our grantmaking strategy focuses on driving systemic change that results in more equitable postsecondary education and workforce training outcomes for learners from low-income backgrounds. We're dedicated to addressing barriers to success that limit socioeconomic mobility for learners who are first-generation students, rural community members, veterans, students of color and incarcerated adults.

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Scan this code to read our report online, as well as view additional videos and grant stories.

### OUR GRANTMAKING PROCESS

We believe our grant partners' time and resources are best spent focused on their primary work — not on completing complex grant applications and report templates. To that end, we challenged ourselves to provide increased clarity and transparency about what we fund and why. We're grateful to the grant partners who responded to our request for feedback on how we fund and are excited to introduce a refined process in early 2022.

We are committed to being open and transparent about our grantmaking strategy and the grants we have made. For more information and a comprehensive list of our grants, visit [ascendiumphilanthropy.org](https://ascendiumphilanthropy.org).

### OUR FUNDING APPROACH

Our three-pronged funding approach gives innovators the space to explore untested approaches and gives researchers the time to validate emerging best practices. It also facilitates the scaling of evidence-based approaches that can lead to changes at institutions, in systems and, ultimately, in the experiences and outcomes of learners. **Exploration grants** support limited-term projects designed to help us and our partners learn more about promising innovations. **Validation grants** support research and evaluations to help build the body of evidence to support ideas that merit acceptance as standard practice. **Scaling grants** support the widespread adoption of successful, evidence-based approaches leading to meaningful systemic transformation.

We created our new Learning and Impact team to help us better understand the internal and external impacts of our philanthropy by:

- Ensuring a collective understanding of the context in which we operate, our efforts and results.
- Using evidence to strengthen our decisions about grants and strategy.
- Communicating lessons learned to internal and external stakeholders.





## GRANTMAKING THROUGH OUR STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

Our strategic framework is designed to focus our grantmaking in key areas so that more learners from low-income backgrounds can succeed. Investment priorities in each focus area guide the grants we make and the impact we hope will be achieved.

## OUR FOCUS AREAS

### Remove Structural Barriers to Success

Reduces or eliminates institutional or systemic barriers for learners from low-income backgrounds, especially in underrepresented groups.

### Streamline Key Learner Transitions

Supports efforts that streamline transitions through better data sharing, improved collaboration and more effective postsecondary education and workforce training systems.

### Expand Postsecondary Education in Prison

Addresses barriers facing currently incarcerated adults who don't have equitable access to high-quality postsecondary education.

### Support Rural Postsecondary Education and Workforce Training

Supports efforts to better understand rural learners and postsecondary providers so that more rural learners from low-income backgrounds can meet their goals.

### Field Support and Development

We also make grants to organizations doing work that cuts across our four focus areas. These grants support collaboration and information sharing through practitioner professional development, seed funding for innovative ideas and strategic media partnerships.



## Remove Structural Barriers to Success

We want to see an educational system that gives everyone the opportunity to succeed. At Ascendium, we continue to prioritize investing in the widespread adoption of evidence-based institutional and system policies and practices that drive equitable opportunities for upward socioeconomic mobility. The urgency of this work has been further driven home by the COVID-19 health crisis, which has disproportionately impacted learners from low-income backgrounds and deepened existing disparities in opportunity and achievement.

Over the past year, we've been focused on funding opportunities that respond to the immediate challenges of postsecondary systems, institutions and the learners they

serve, while also seeking to leverage shifts that occurred because of the health crisis to rebuild more equitable systems. We've sought opportunities to harness technology to identify and dismantle barriers to student progress. Our hope is that the outcomes and impacts generated by these initiatives encourage more institutions and systems to make structural changes.

We are optimistic about the shifts many colleges and universities made this year to better serve learners from low-income backgrounds. We look forward to supporting efforts to maintain and build upon this progress.

### FEATURED GRANTS

#### Strategically Financing Structures to Remove Barriers | \$3 million

Many colleges and universities make significant investments in initiatives to improve equitable student outcomes, but these initiatives are often rolled out in siloed divisions, without integration into budget development and long-term financial strategies. The National Association of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO) seeks to address this problem by creating a network of postsecondary education leaders equipped to transform their institutions through strategic finance. Building on lessons learned from a previous Ascendium planning grant, this effort will address barriers to success systematically — producing frameworks, tools and models that will change how colleges analyze, prioritize and fund initiatives committed to equitable student outcomes.

#### Curricular Analytics | \$2 million

Rigid and confusing sequences of courses and prerequisites can pose barriers to successful progression and on-time degree completion. At research universities, especially, refining course offerings and streamlining curricular structure require compelling data to engage faculty in reforms. This grant supports the Association for Undergraduate Education at Research Universities (UERU), housed at Colorado State University, in verifying the relationship between curricular structure and equitable learner outcomes. Working with institutions to use the open-source suite of software called Curricular Analytics, UERU can examine the negative impact of complex curricula on equitable student success and help academic leaders drive data-informed change.

#### Developmental Education Reform | \$3.3 million

Placement in developmental education math and English courses presents a significant barrier to completion for learners from low-income backgrounds, first-generation students and students of color. An extensive body of evidence points to more effective placement practices and curricular onramps that help more learners reach equitable outcomes. That's why we've provided funding to the Minnesota State system, the Partnership for College Completion (in collaboration with the Illinois Community College Board) and The Campaign for College Opportunity. These grants will help postsecondary leaders in Minnesota, Illinois and California build and implement equitable policies and practices to improve persistence and completion rates for these students.





## Streamline Key Learner Transitions

Transfer remains an important priority for us as we aim to smooth transitions in a learner's journey to and through postsecondary education. Through our grantmaking in this focus area, we fund initiatives that reform policy and practice to improve transfer and application of credit at the system, state and regional levels.

We do this through investments to facilitate better data sharing within and across sectors.

We also do it through investments to improve collaboration between institutions and help education, workforce training and employer systems function in more complementary and effective ways. We hope these efforts will increase the number of learners from low-income backgrounds who successfully move between education providers without losing credit, slowing momentum, increasing cost or delaying credential completion.

Over the past year, we've supported and learned from leaders who are developing high-quality education and workforce training solutions for learners from low-income backgrounds to quickly find pathways to good jobs through continued education. By investing in infrastructure projects to facilitate more robust data sharing and collective action, we aim to bolster efforts to substantially increase education and career success for students with fewer financial resources.

We know transitions can be challenging, and as the COVID-19 health crisis continues to create uncertainty for postsecondary education institutions and learners, the strain felt by students and their families is intensified. We're excited about the collaborative efforts underway to build the infrastructure that will allow students to make those transitions with greater ease, no matter their circumstances.

### FEATURED GRANTS

#### STEM Transfer Partnerships | \$1.2 million

While STEM degrees can provide a path to a living wage and upward mobility, learners from low-income backgrounds are less likely to graduate with a degree in a science, technology, engineering or mathematics field than their higher-income peers. This investment supports the University of Washington in implementing a transfer partnerships framework through a statewide consortium of two- and four-year colleges. Ten pairs of institutions will test the impact of collaborative transfer partnerships at the departmental level. The insight gained about the unique barriers low-income transfer students face within STEM fields is expected to generate long-term structural improvements in transfer policy and practice.

#### Examining Faculty Decision-Making in Course Equivalency and Transfer \$1.1 million

Postsecondary institutions and systems continue to wrestle with the fact that learners from low-income backgrounds, first-generation students and students of color experience disproportionately poor transfer outcomes, which directly contributes to degree completion disparities. Faculty decisions about which courses transfer play an outsized role in this process, so it is vital to ensure faculty decisions are made as consistently and as free from bias as possible. This grant supports MDRC in assessing faculty behavior and motivations related to course equivalency decisions. Through evidence-building of these behaviors and motivations, the initiative aims to increase credit transferability and decrease time to degree for transfer students, which helps ease the financial strain these students feel upon graduation.



## AMPLIFYING FINDINGS ACROSS THE FIELD TO SUPPORT CHANGE

We support efforts to build an evidence base that can lead to change so that more learners from low-income backgrounds can achieve their education and career goals. Yet our goal goes beyond the creation of an evidence base. It is, instead, to get the actionable information produced by our grant partners into the hands of practitioners, researchers, other funders and policymakers. We do this through many channels.

### NEWSLETTER

We share resources created by our grant partners, project spotlights and learning opportunities offered by our partners via our Education Philanthropy newsletter.

### MEDIA PARTNERS

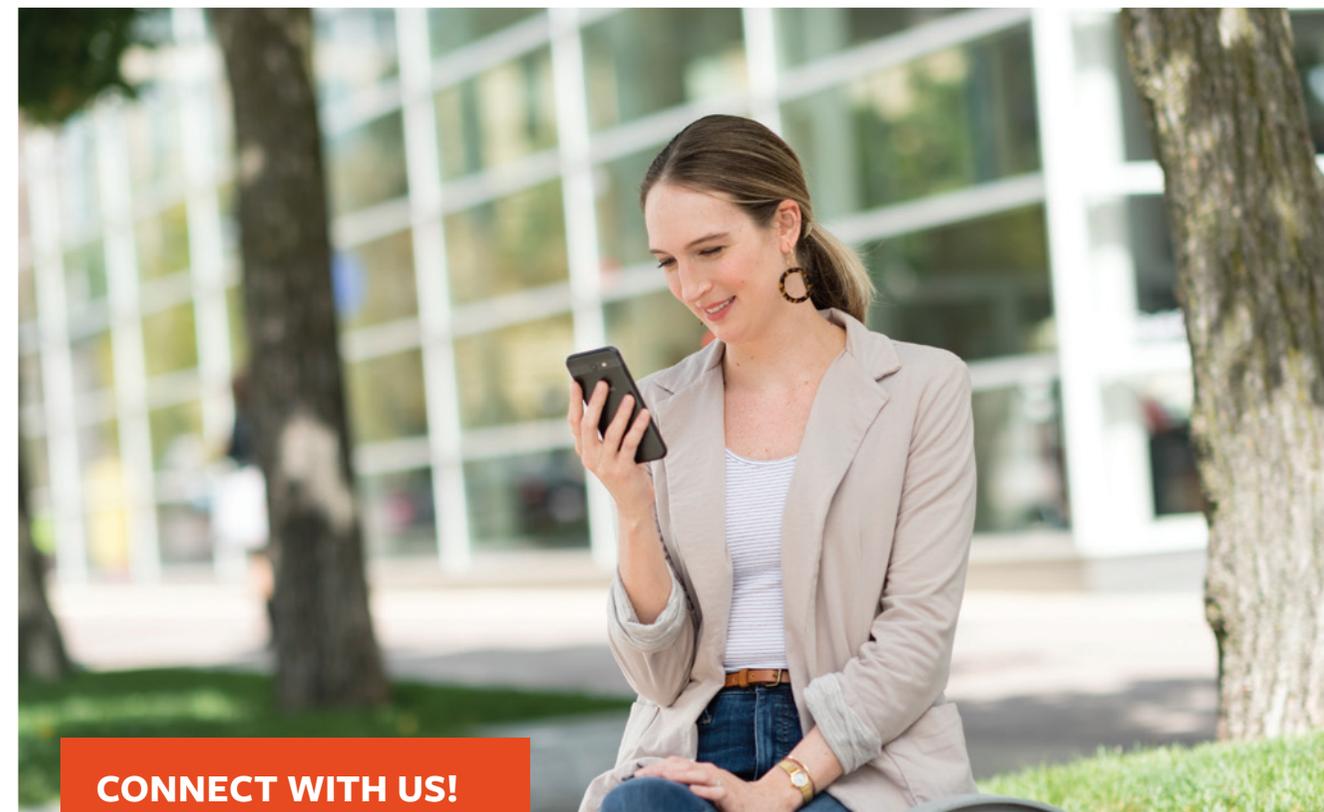
We also provide support to media partners who are committed to amplifying the issues our education philanthropy is committed to addressing. Their coverage brings needed attention to inequities, the people in the field working to address them and the lives of the learners they impact.

### SOCIAL MEDIA

We launched our social media channels in 2021 as another vehicle to connect, share and converse with others about our education philanthropy, including initiatives we're supporting and other topics of interest in the field.

### SHARED LEARNING

While the COVID-19 health crisis required flexibility for virtual and hybrid conferences in 2021, we supported many sponsorships, fellowships and events that created space for networking and shared learning, often showcasing the work of our grant partners.



**CONNECT WITH US!**



#AscendiumEP @AscendiumEP



## Expand Postsecondary Education in Prison

For justice-impacted people already disadvantaged in the job market, postsecondary education is key to successful reentry into the community and labor force. While access to high-quality postsecondary education in prison remains an issue, there are signs of progress.

The upcoming restoration of Pell Grants for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated

adults in the 2023-24 academic year presents a unique opportunity to strengthen and support quality postsecondary education programs in preparation for the new students eager to enroll. Meanwhile, pandemic-related restrictions have caused postsecondary education prison providers and state corrections officials to rethink the use of technology in prison and adopt new learning platforms and approaches.

We're excited to support efforts that rise to meet this moment. That includes supporting partners working to implement new practices and scale what's proven to work, building a body of evidence through research and evaluation and supporting strong multi-sector statewide partnerships. It also includes supporting work to harness new technologies and ready institutions to use Pell Grants in a way that maximizes the benefit to incarcerated learners.

Already, more states are seeing the benefits of coordination and collaboration in this space. By working together, we can continue to make access to high-quality postsecondary education in prison more equitable, leading to increased success for incarcerated learners and their families.

### FEATURED GRANTS



Courtesy of Launchcode.

#### Ready for Pell | \$4.7 million

Postsecondary education in prison programs are gearing up for the reinstatement of Pell Grants. Ascendum designed this two-year initiative to provide technical assistance to 20 postsecondary education in prison providers and two state systems. It will allow them to implement best practices in the design and delivery of their programs and facilitate statewide coordination efforts to maximize credential offerings. To aid in the creation of an infrastructure to assess the impact of these programs, the initiative will support the building of program-level data collection capacity. A third-party evaluation will surface and share lessons learned to inform efforts to scale access to Pell Grants in prisons.

#### Massachusetts Prison Education Consortium Expansion | \$810,700

When incarcerated learners are transferred from one facility to another, their progress toward a degree or credential is often slowed or even halted. We believe prison system-wide approaches are necessary to best support the success of these learners. With support from Ascendum, the Educational Justice Institute at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology is designing a scalable, sustainable and replicable model of postsecondary education delivery throughout the Massachusetts prison system. This new model will unite the disparate courses offered throughout the correctional system into a coordinated network of transferable credits and focus on minimizing the impact of facility-to-facility transitions.



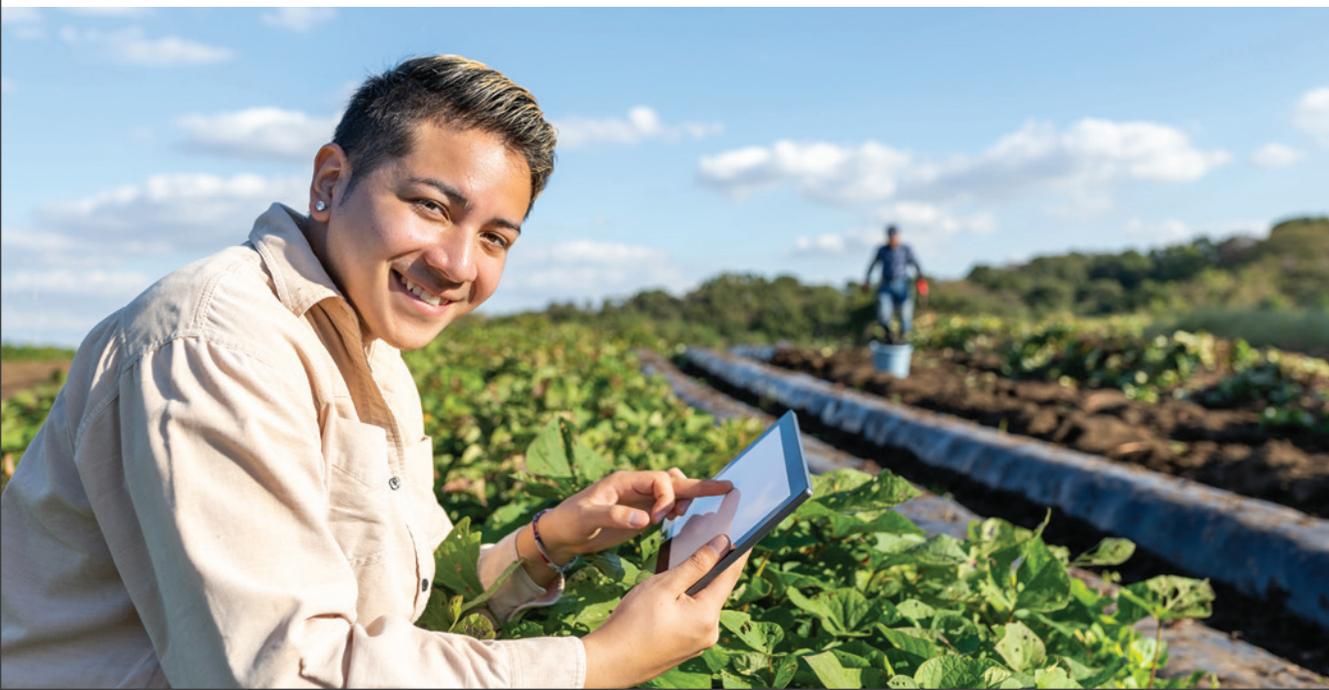
## Support Rural Postsecondary Education and Workforce Training

At the heart of Ascendium's philanthropy is a commitment to those students and institutions frequently overlooked by postsecondary education reforms in America. Education reforms — and coverage of those reforms — often focus disproportionately on urban institutions with greater numbers of students. This distorts what we understand about both colleges and their students. It also exacerbates America's growing urban-rural divide.

We're extremely grateful to the group of experts with personal and professional experience in rural postsecondary education who joined us this year to develop a National Rural Postsecondary Research Agenda. Produced through the collaborative effort of a diverse group of researchers and organizations, this Ascendium-supported agenda focuses on generating research and knowledge that

can help practitioners and policymakers remove systemic barriers faced by rural learners, particularly those from low-income backgrounds. We envision that the agenda will lay the groundwork for applied research collaborations that yield actionable insights for those studying and providing postsecondary education in rural areas of the U.S.

By funding this and other data infrastructure projects, we hope to change the narrative about rural postsecondary education and the research surrounding it. We regularly engage with partners and field leaders to better understand how we might support rural institutions during this unique moment in time, and we're striving to better understand the ways in which rural learners have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 health crisis.



### FEATURED GRANTS

#### Training Low-Income Workers for Remote Opportunities | \$535,000

The COVID-19 health crisis has decimated low- and middle-skill jobs in rural Maine, and many residents in these areas lack the technical remote working skills needed to be competitive in accessing high-wage, high-mobility jobs. That's where The Foundation for Maine's Community Colleges comes in. With Ascendium's support, The Foundation will build and implement a statewide training program to prepare rural residents for success in such roles. Over three years, the program will train 700+ learners and establish an employer-driven Maine Advisory Council on Remote Working. It's all in service of increasing credential completion and job placement for rural learners through capacity building, networks and evidence building.

#### Building Rural Community Learning Systems | \$750,000

Rural communities nationwide, while possessing many assets, have largely been left out of national initiatives designed to improve postsecondary education and workforce training outcomes. That's why we're supporting Columbus, Indiana-based CivicLab in launching and providing training and technical assistance to a cohort of six to eight rural community partnerships. These partnerships, comprised of postsecondary institutions, workforce systems and other community stakeholders, will build the capacity of rural communities to help more learners from low-income backgrounds earn in-demand degrees and credentials.

#### Leveraging Arkansas Community Colleges to Support Economic Development \$240,000

Over the past two years, with Ascendium's help, Rural Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) has supported the development of 11 workforce collaboratives nationwide committed to building and implementing workforce pathways that allow rural learners from low-income backgrounds to earn credentials and successfully transition to the workforce. This grant supports Rural LISC in providing technical assistance to the Arkansas Association of Community Colleges to help institutions statewide serve as leaders for regional workforce development partnerships. As a result, community colleges will be able to better train employers to use local/regional labor market data to create pathways that lead to employment and upward socioeconomic mobility for rural learners.



## LOOKING AHEAD TO 2022



“We’ll continue to emphasize providing support to our partners beyond grant dollars.”



Scan this code to view a personal message from Amy.

### Q&A WITH AMY KERWIN

Our 2021 report showcases the amazing work of our grant partners during yet another challenging year. Building on this momentum, we are looking ahead to 2022 with a sense of optimism. Ascendium’s Vice President - Education Philanthropy Amy Kerwin shares her thoughts on what’s in store next.

#### *Will your focus areas change during 2022?*

Our work in our four focus areas is far from complete! When we set our focus areas in 2019, we crafted them to be fairly broad, recognizing that we had much to learn about the most significant challenges in each area and the types of investments needed to optimize impact in addressing those challenges.

We’re now at the midpoint of our strategy and have taken the time to reflect on what we’ve learned thus far — from connections with field leaders, learnings produced by our grant partners and the impact of the COVID-19 health crisis on institutions, systems and the learners they serve. We’ll use these reflections to further refine and narrow our investment priorities in each focus area to guide us through the remainder of this strategy.

#### *In what ways is Ascendium operationally evolving to support grant partners?*

Throughout the year, we gathered feedback from our grant partners about our grantmaking processes. We have identified opportunities to be more transparent about what, why and how we make grants. Early in 2022, we’ll be implementing a refined grantmaking process

from concept to letter of inquiry to full proposal, as well as updated grant reporting requirements post-award. To help us assess whether we successfully make our processes less burdensome for grant partners, we’ll formalize a grant partner feedback loop and adjust our new processes as needed.

We’ll continue to emphasize providing support to our partners beyond grant dollars. We can do that by introducing our grant partners to other funders and connecting them with other partners or subject matter experts. We can also leverage our Strategic Communications team and our strategic media partners to amplify what we and our partners are learning.

#### *Will your team be growing in 2022?*

Yes, I’m excited about adding several new members to the team to support the expansion of our grantmaking in 2022. We’ll be looking to fill several program officer roles on our Education Grantmaking team, new positions on the Learning and Impact team and a senior program officer to support Ascendium’s place-based giving in our home state of Wisconsin.



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