



# A SHARPER FOCUS

2019 Education  
Philanthropy  
Report

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Ascendium®



# OUR EVOLVING MISSION AND MESSAGE

Organizations are like living organisms in some ways. For both, the ability to learn and adapt to changing conditions and new information are the core hallmarks of success. Timely adaptation has certainly been a key to Ascendium's vitality over more than half a century. The postsecondary landscape has shifted repeatedly over that span, and with each shift comes new challenges for learners—particularly those from low-income backgrounds—trying to meet their educational and career objectives. Our job is to do what we can to make those obstacles surmountable, and that means updating our strategies to reflect emerging needs. As obstacles morph over time, we must be nimble and willing to adjust our course in order to fulfill our mission.

We did some significant evolving in 2019. For one thing, it was our first full year operating under the Ascendium banner, and we spent much of the year establishing our new identity. We also unveiled a new funding strategy that features four specific focus areas, which you'll read more about throughout this report.

But as with living organisms, evolution does not mean ditching the existing design altogether. While we have refined our grantmaking strategy, its underpinnings remain unchanged: a commitment to helping more people from low-income backgrounds, especially those in historically underrepresented groups, attain the goals that matter most to them—in postsecondary education, in the workforce, and in life.



**Richard D. George**

Chairman, President & CEO  
Ascendium Education Group

# Our New FUNDING STRATEGY

## Ascendium's Philanthropy Framework Gets an Update

We've launched a new funding strategy, designed to guide our grantmaking for the next three years. The new framework built on our existing funding approach, expanded our engagement into new areas and broadened our geographic scope.

What moved us to refresh our strategy? In the past, when we were still relative newcomers to postsecondary philanthropy, we were most comfortable with a flexible approach that allowed us to explore new issue areas and pivot quickly as we developed new relationships and identified areas of need. But our philanthropy program has grown dramatically over the past decade. As we emerged as leaders in this space, we felt compelled to direct our resources more intensively in areas where we believe we can have the greatest impact. That includes issues in which we have been active for years as well as new ones where we've identified a need for more investment. We're convinced that we can be more effective by being more focused in our grantmaking.

The new strategy reflects other changes as well. In the past, our grantmaking mainly supported projects in our legacy focus states of Wisconsin, Minnesota, Ohio, Iowa, Arkansas and South Dakota. With the launch of the new strategy, we expanded our geographic range; our philanthropy is now national in scope.

After months of research, internal discussion, and conversations with partners, peers and allies, we landed on a strategic framework that includes four focus areas: Expand Higher Education in Prison; Remove Systemic Barriers to Success; Streamline Transitions; and Develop Rural Education and Workforce Training.

## New Frontiers

Two of the focus areas included in the strategy are relatively new to us. In 2016 we funded a higher education in prison (HEP) landscape scan, and based in part on what we learned, we funded several exploratory projects related to HEP in 2017 and 2018. By explicitly making HEP

one of our focus areas, we have signaled our commitment to addressing barriers facing a population whose postsecondary needs have long been neglected, or were at best an afterthought to most of the higher education and corrections ecosystems. That commitment is reflected most prominently in a major initiative we funded in 2019, Optimizing Higher Education in Prison, to which we committed more than \$5 million.

Rural areas have generally not benefitted from the nationwide transformation taking place in postsecondary education. These communities face unique challenges in building strong connections between postsecondary programs and employer needs. Through our new commitment to developing postsecondary education and workforce training programs in rural areas, we aim to support initiatives to close that gap. We are still new as funders in this space, but we see enormous opportunity to help foster meaningful change in partnership with the institutions, agencies and employers that serve these communities.

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Courtesy of Prison University Project

Expand Higher  
Education in Prison



Remove Systemic  
Barriers to Success



Streamline  
Transitions



Develop Rural Education  
and Workforce Training

# Expand High-Quality Higher Education in Prison

While there are a number of higher education in prison (HEP) programs in place across the country, insufficient attention has been paid to program quality and effective service delivery. We fund initiatives to develop and scale proven HEP models; build a body of data to support best practices; and forge connections between prisons, state departments of corrections, educational delivery systems and employers.

Why did we identify HEP as a critical issue worth investing in? Simply put, it's in sync with our mission to elevate opportunity for all through postsecondary education. We believe incarcerated individuals need and deserve the same opportunity to improve their lives as any other learner, while facing some of the most daunting barriers. The prison population in this country has skyrocketed in recent decades. One in every 100 American adults—about 2.3 million altogether—is currently incarcerated, according to the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics. Nearly all of those individuals will return to their communities at some point; 700,000 are released from federal and state prisons each year, and many more exit local jails.

Research has demonstrated that postsecondary education dramatically improves the odds of successful reentry into the

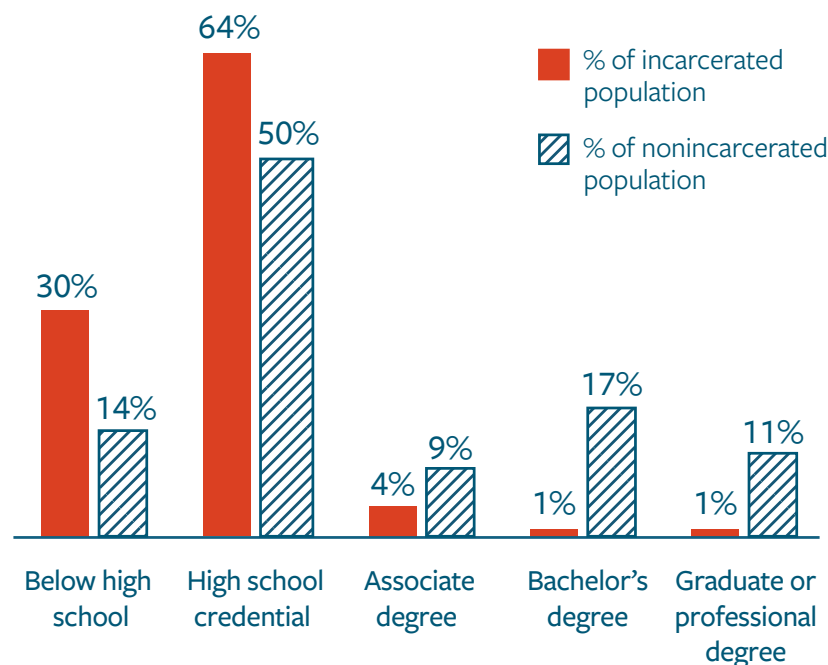
community and the labor force. But access to higher education services in prison is rare, and where it does exist, the quality is often questionable and programming may be disconnected from career opportunities.

Cost is another obstacle. Since enactment of the 1994 crime bill that disqualified state and federal prisoners from receiving Pell Grants, the burden of paying for college has fallen to incarcerated students and their families. And since Pell Grants were the main source of funding for postsecondary programming, college offerings in prison shrank dramatically. While there is momentum toward restoring Pell eligibility—particularly the Second Chance Pell pilot program through which 64 colleges and universities are providing Pell Grants to incarcerated adults—many would-be students in prison are currently excluded based on the combination of financial barriers and lack of program availability at the facility where they are incarcerated.

We deepened our commitment to HEP by making it one of our four focus areas. Our aim is to support initiatives that can help the field better understand what types of HEP programs are effective, how to forge the systemic and institutional partnerships necessary to get them in place, and how to spread and sustain best practices on a broad scale in order to catalyze genuine, large-scale change.

## EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT GAP

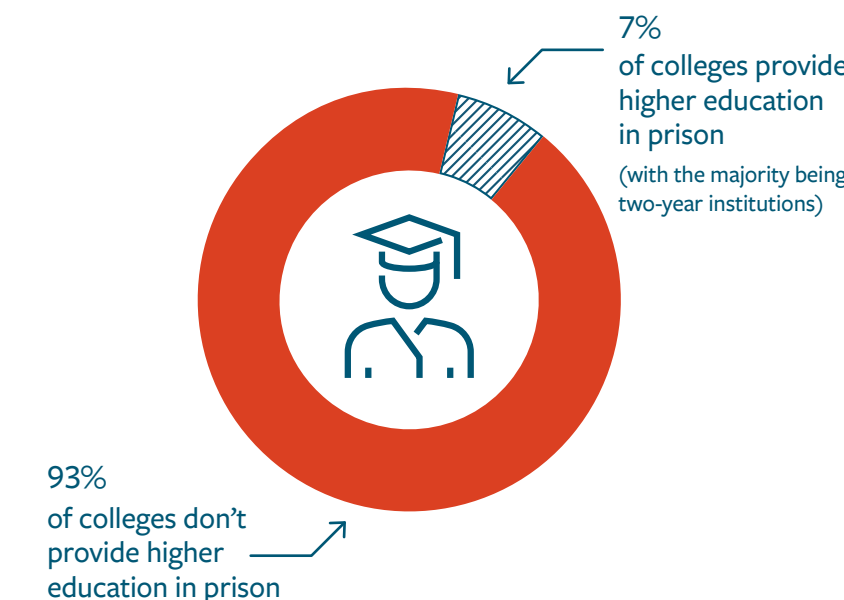
**64%** of the people in prison are academically eligible to enroll in a postsecondary education program



U.S. Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, 2012 and 2014.

## LIMITED PROGRAM AVAILABILITY

Of the approximately 4,500 degree-granting colleges and universities, less than **7%** provide in-prison higher education



Castro, E. L., Padilla, E. A., & Royer, C. E. (2019, Nov.). The landscape of postsecondary education in U.S. Prisons, 2019. Research Brief. Salt Lake City, UT: Research Collaborative on Higher Education in Prison, University of Utah.



Courtesy of Prison University Project

## KEY GRANTS

### Optimizing Delivery Systems for HEP: Postsecondary Pathways for Reentry Transition

\$5.5 million

In July 2019, we issued a request for concepts to find postsecondary institutions and corrections departments poised to take their HEP systems to the next level and help the field learn what it takes to develop the relationships, infrastructure and policies necessary for systemic improvement. Our four-year funding supports three planning grants, subsequent implementation grants and a comprehensive evaluation. We're partnering with these sites:

- The **Minnesota Department of Corrections** will work with the “Just Education” Collaborative at **University of Minnesota’s Institute for Advanced Study, Inver Hills Community College/Dakota County Technical College** and **Augsburg University** as they prepare to launch their “College at Prison” effort.
- The **Iowa Department of Education** will partner with the **Iowa Department of Corrections, Des Moines Area Community College, Iowa Central Community College** and the **University of Iowa** to develop a statewide plan to support workforce-relevant academic and career pathways.

- **City University of New York’s Institute for State and Local Governance** will collaborate with the **New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision**, bringing together key stakeholders across the state to align educational offerings in 47 college and vocational programs at 30 prisons.

### HEP Landscape Project

\$950,000

This two-year grant supports the **Alliance for Higher Education in Prison (AHEP)** in building a national database of higher education in prison programs and associated data. AHEP was formed in 2017 by a board of practitioners and key stakeholders to address a pressing need for a unified HEP learning community that could gather and disseminate best practices and other critical information to the field. Our support of AHEP began with a \$300,000 grant in 2018 to help them hire staff, build infrastructure and forge key partnerships.

In 2019 we awarded AHEP a grant to provide the field with comprehensive information about HEP programs, who they serve, what credentials they offer, and other key reference points that will lead to a better understanding of the HEP landscape. We believe that practitioners, systems and agencies across the country will be able to leverage this information to support their efforts to better serve needs of learners within the criminal justice system. ECMC Foundation and the Sunshine Lady Foundation are also supporting this project.

FOCUS AREA

# Remove Systemic Barriers to Success

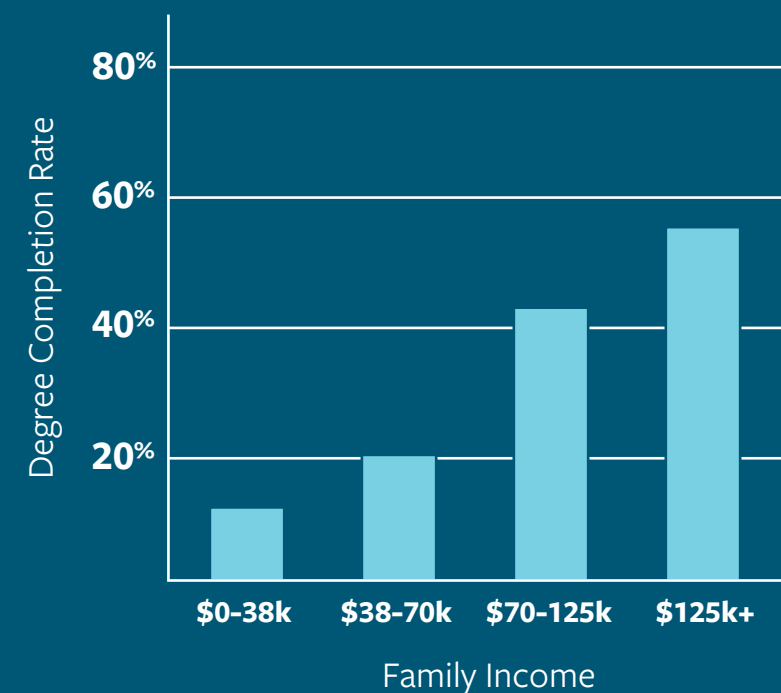
Education and workforce training systems are complex. As they develop, unintended obstacles sometimes emerge in spite of educators' best efforts, and those obstacles tend to disproportionately affect learners with fewer social and financial resources.

Our philanthropy has long focused on reducing or eliminating those types of barriers. We support efforts to identify replicable changes to policies and practices that can dismantle unnecessary barriers, not one learner at a time but for all learners from low-income backgrounds. By addressing stumbling blocks at their roots, we hope to help institutions increase completion rates, shorten the time it takes to obtain a credential, and ultimately help a lot more learners succeed than is possible through a piecemeal approach.

This focus area represents a continuation of Ascendium's longstanding commitment to eliminate obstacles that stand in the way of learners from low-income backgrounds.

## COMPLETION EQUITY GAP

Students from low-income families are less likely to complete a bachelor's degree than their higher-income peers.



Pell Institute, "Equity Indicators Report," 2019.

## KEY GRANTS

### Guided Pathways Implementation in Iowa's Community Colleges

\$1.3 million

This two-year grant supports the **Iowa Department of Education** in implementing a set of guided pathways reforms that will improve student outcomes and reduce equity gaps. The guided pathways model is an integrated, campus-wide approach to student success designed to guide each student efficiently from entry through attainment of a credential with value in the job market. The guided pathways model incorporates clear program roadmaps and transfer pathways, effective advising to help students stay on the path to completion, and program design that is aligned with employment in the student's chosen field. Over a two-year term, all 15 of the state's community colleges are developing work plans and undertaking systemic changes to boost completion.

This grant provides technical assistance to colleges as they plan for long-term implementation, as well as to the department for quantitative and qualitative progress assessments. The grant also supports Iowa in building the capacity and leadership necessary to leverage the data it collects for continuous improvement systemwide.

### Provosts' Student Success Network

\$1.6 million

The American **Association of State Colleges and Universities** (AASCU) represents the nation's access-oriented four-year institutions, which are known to be key drivers of economic

mobility capable of helping shrink wealth and income disparities. Because of their oversight of academic affairs and influence over data and financial decisions, provosts are uniquely positioned to remove institutional barriers.

This three-year grant supports AASCU in developing and delivering guided pathways training for provosts at member colleges. A Provosts' Network for Student Success will create a professional network and a curriculum equipping leaders to leverage their roles for institutional transformation.

### Codifying Career Pathways Initiative

\$2 million

Through the Career Pathways Initiative, **United Negro College Fund** (UNCF) is working with 24 historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and predominantly black institutions to strengthen career outcomes for their students, using a three-pronged approach: guided pathways, curricular enhancements and integrated co-curricular engagement.

This three-year grant supports UNCF in leveraging this initiative aimed at improving student success outcomes at up to 12 HBCUs. The work will increase the capacity these institutions have to serve students from low-income backgrounds and students of color, increasing academic and economic equity for both groups and producing best practices to inform other under-resourced colleges serving similar populations.

**\$108 MILLION**

in 2019 grant commitments



To read more about our grantmaking,  
visit [ascendiumphilanthropy.org](https://ascendiumphilanthropy.org)

## Intersections:

# Our 3 Types of Grants

For several years, we have organized our grants into three categories to reflect our commitment to advancing ideas at every stage in their development, from promising but untested approaches to proven practices deserving to be brought to scale. These categories apply across all four of our focus areas.



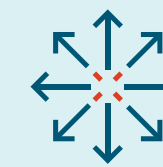
**Exploration grants are limited-term projects designed to help us and our partners learn more about promising innovations.**

**ASU Local:** We awarded **Arizona State University** a **\$1.5 million** grant to test a model for providing underserved young adults in Los Angeles with a clear and affordable path to a bachelor's degree. This project is exploring a model for serving students who are academically qualified for college but don't have a spot at a four-year institution. This one-year initiative combines the scalability of a partially online learning environment with local supports to ensure the success of its learners—many of whom are first-generation college students, a group that historically has not been served well by a purely online experience. It provides local supports—including coaches who work in person with the students around challenges and skills in both college and life—and opportunities to interact directly with professionals in real-world settings.



**Validation grants support independent evaluations to help build the body of evidence to support ideas that merit acceptance as standard practice.**

**Implementing and Evaluating Caring Campus Faculty Engagement:** In 2018 the **Institute for Evidence-Based Change** (IEBC) launched Caring Campus, a program that aims to promote student success by cultivating stronger connections between students and staff. Caring Campus started in a couple of California regions, then expanded to community colleges across the country with the help of funding from Ascendium. In 2019 we provided a **\$1.7 million** grant to support IEBC in building on that success by implementing the program with faculty at 14 community colleges. The three-year funding also supports an evaluation by the Community College Research Center to assess the impact on students, faculty, staff and the institutions overall.



**Scaling grants support the widespread adoption of successful, evidence-backed approaches leading to meaningful systemic transformation.**

**Strong Start to Finish Implementation & Innovation Fund:** This **\$2 million** grant supports **Education Commission of the States** (ECS) in amplifying the impact and reach of **Strong Start to Finish** (SSTF), a national initiative funded by Ascendium since 2016, in partnership with The Kresge Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The initiative's primary focus is to help colleges increase the number of students who complete college-level math and English courses in their first year. The unique pooled funding approach enables SSTF to work at scale in six state systems. Our latest two-year grant—part of a \$5.4 million new investment from the three funders—allows ECS to spur innovation in equity-centered research, practice and policy; provide technical assistance around emergent needs to those six states; and advise other state systems interested in replicating the reforms.



# Streamline Key Transitions

Getting in the door, transferring between institutions, and entering or reentering the workforce are pivotal moments in a learner's academic and career journey. Institutional and system policies and practices can inadvertently make these transitions more difficult than they need to be for some learners.

Transfer between two- and four-year institutions—even within the same system—is a prime example. When curriculums don't align, or information systems are incapable of sharing data effectively, students risk losing credits, momentum and money. The jump from postsecondary education into the workforce also presents challenges, especially when the programming institutions offer does not align with the skills employers need.

We support initiatives aimed at smoothing transitions through better data sharing; improved collaboration between postsecondary institutions and systems; and more effective processes for aligning educational and workforce training programs with labor market demand.

## TRANSFER INTENTIONS DERAILED

Institutions and systems are not aligned to support students' transfer goals.



**80%** of community college students intend to earn a bachelor's degree



**25%** of students transfer to a 4-year college within 5 years



**17%** of students earn a bachelor's degree within 6 years of transferring

Horn & Skomsvold (2011); Hossler et al. (2012); Shapiro et al. (2013).

## KEY GRANTS

Development of a Comprehensive Transfer Blueprint	\$1.1 million
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This three-year grant supports **Kent State University** in collaborating with **Lorain County Community College**, **Eastern Gateway Community College** and **Columbus State Community College** to develop transfer pathways that streamline student progress to a degree. Together, the four colleges are working to reduce barriers to completing a bachelor's degree for their 82,000 students.

The ultimate aim is to develop an effective model that can be shared and replicated at colleges with diverse student populations and campus contexts. Evaluation of the project will take into account academic performance, student and faculty feedback and bachelor's degree attainment by transfer students through Fall 2023.

Strengthening Guided Pathways through Workforce	\$1.1 million
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In 2017 we awarded a \$368,000 grant to the **Aspen Institute** to support development of a publication aimed at helping community colleges better align their academic programs with family wage-sustaining employment opportunities. The resulting publication, *The Workforce Playbook: A Community College Guide to Delivering Excellent Career and Technical Education*, spotlights best practices from 30 high-performing community colleges. Impact is grounded in four key strategies: advancing a vision for talent development; delivering high-quality, relevant programs; taking intentional action to support students throughout their postsecondary journey; and developing mutually beneficial partnerships with employers.

Our 2019 grant supports Aspen in helping community college leaders operationalize the concepts outlined in the *Workforce Playbook* into their implementation of guided pathways reform over two years.

Intersections:

# Strategic Collaborations

Across all four of our focus areas, a recurring theme is a desire to foster strategic collaborations between systems, institutions and sectors. This is illustrated by our **Optimizing Higher Education in Prison Initiative**, which is building bridges between state corrections departments, colleges, employers and community-based organizations to promote development of strong, workforce-relevant programs that will make a difference in the reentry prospects of learners who are currently incarcerated.

Another example is **Applying the Evidence: Expanding Evidence-Based Strategies Across the Minnesota State System**. This **\$560,000** grant supports MDRC and the **Minnesota State System** in promoting campus transformation by providing workshops and coaching on the implementation of multiple measures assessment, among other evidence-based practices. The 18-month project represents large-scale collaboration between two- and four-year institutions in response to a statewide effort to put into practice a set of reforms proven effective at improving student success and shrinking racial and economic opportunity gaps.



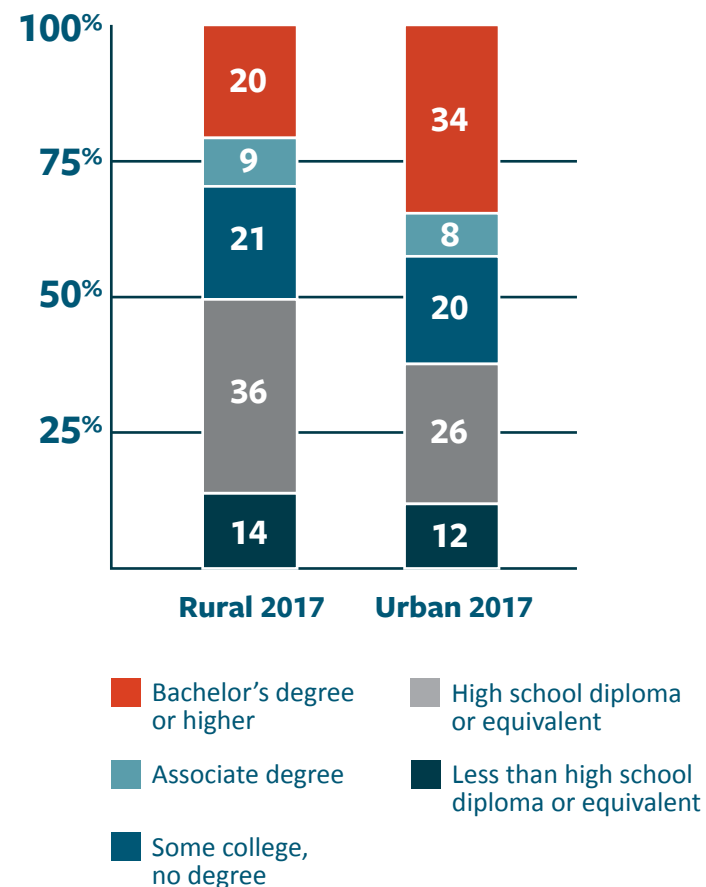
# Develop Rural Education and Workforce Training

As we surveyed the field in the process of developing our new funding strategy, it became clear to us that postsecondary education and workforce training in rural areas had attracted insufficient attention from funders over the years. Including us. So we approach this new focus area fully acknowledging that this is new territory for Ascendium, and we have much to learn.

What we do know is that there are significant, persistent urban-rural disparities in postsecondary success, from enrollment through completion. According to data from the U.S. Census Bureau, only about 20% of working-age adults in rural counties have attained a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 34% in mostly urban counties. These disparities result in shortages of workers qualified for high-skill jobs, resulting in suppressed incomes and local economic growth.

We spent much of 2019 developing our strategic approach to this space, connecting with potential partners, stakeholders, thought leaders and postsecondary providers. We look forward to sharing our investment priorities for this focus area in the coming year.

RURAL ATTAINMENT GAPS



USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2017 American Community Survey.

# Intersections: Increasing Data Infrastructure and Research Capacity


As promoters of evidence-driven reforms, we have a strong interest in helping institutions, systems and policymakers develop knowledge and technology to gather and analyze the data they need to assess impact.

Our **Data Fellows Program Pilot** exemplifies our investment in building data and research capacity. This three-year **\$670,000** grant supports the **Association of Public & Land-grant Universities** and the **Association for Institutional Research** in piloting a program to improve data literacy on campus among faculty and staff. We hope to promote greater use of student data to inform strategic, tactical and operational decisions, with the ultimate aim of improving student success outcomes. Across 12 diverse colleges, Data Fellow teams comprised of 240 staff, faculty and senior administrators are working to ensure that data can be accessed and acted on by a wide range of players beyond the office of institutional research.


# ON THE HORIZON

## Q & A with Vice President of Education Philanthropy Amy Kerwin

Throughout this report, we've talked about the funding strategy we introduced in 2019 and the four focus areas that drive it. So now what? The big changes of 2019 were prelude, setting the stage for a future characterized by greater intentionality and impact. Ascendium's Vice President of Education Philanthropy Amy Kerwin previews our ideas about 2020 and beyond:

 **What's the next step in making the most of the new funding framework?**


We're going to define ways to gauge what we're accomplishing through our grantmaking. To that end, we will introduce investment priorities for each focus area and a corresponding set of metrics designed to help us better understand the effectiveness and impact of our philanthropy.

 **Ascendium talks a lot about "systemic change." How does genuine change on a broad scale grow out of a portfolio of individual grants?**


Armed with insights from the metrics we're developing, we intend to take a more ambitious approach to communicating about the projects

we fund. As part of our commitment to strong communication, we are deploying a new, more streamlined website featuring improved navigation and easier access to the information our audiences seek. We're also exploring other opportunities to connect with the field about the work of our grant partners—such as convenings, sponsorships, targeted media outreach and more.

But raising awareness, while necessary, is not sufficient on its own. The value of dissemination is a stepping stone to real-world adoption. Once an approach is proven to be effective, our job is help make it the norm.

 **2019 was an unusual year as Ascendium focused on developing and implementing the new strategy, but in general the organization's grantmaking has grown dramatically—now more than \$100 million per year. Do you see that trend continuing?**

As our new strategic framework solidifies and we gain more experience and establish connections in the relevant fields, we expect our dollars granted to continue to grow in the coming years.

 **Are there other ways you expect it to grow that are not measured in dollars?**

We also plan to provide more support for policy and advocacy efforts around the issues that affect learners from low-income backgrounds.

Many barriers are best addressed on multiple fronts, and legislation and/or high-level policy-making are sometimes required to effectively tackle the problems faced by the learners we serve.

As we work to gain new insights, we're excited to see what the future holds for Ascendium, for our grant partners and for the people we hope will ultimately benefit from the efforts we support.



# About Ascendium

Ascendium Education Group is committed to helping people reach the education and career goals that matter to them.

We invest in projects 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. Our 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.



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