



# Empowering Possibilities

2020 Education Philanthropy Report

Ascendium®



**“We applaud our partners’ responsiveness to the changing needs caused by the COVID-19 health crisis and their adaptability and creativity.”**

## Focused on Empowering Possibilities

This last year will forever be marked by the significant and widespread challenges caused by the COVID-19 health crisis, as well as the country’s social and political divisions. Considering these events, Ascendium determined the best course of action was to remain focused on our mission and stay true to our strategy, while being flexible and responsive to the quickly evolving needs of our partners and the people they serve. Our philanthropic mission is to break down obstacles and drive innovation in postsecondary education and workforce training systems, so learners from low-income backgrounds are given the greatest opportunity to meet their educational and career goals. This combination of steadiness and flexibility is a defining characteristic of Ascendium’s philanthropy, and it aligns with our drive to empower possibilities in an evolving world.

We adopted our philanthropy framework in May 2019, and 2020 was the first full year under this strategy. We are excited about the \$111.4 million in new grants made in 2020 and the impactful work our partners have underway. In addition, we applaud our partners’ responsiveness to the changing needs caused by the COVID-19 health crisis and their adaptability and creativity. We recognize the tremendous efforts put forth, despite the challenges 2020 presented, to help more low-income learners succeed.

We are hopeful and energized by the work that began in 2020. While the year ahead will continue to bring challenges, we remain steadfast in our mission and strategy to support innovative ideas, create an evidence base to support the implementation of new models and expand and replicate the widespread adoption of proven best practices. We hope our efforts will spark sustainable, systemic changes in postsecondary education and workforce training systems. These improvements create equitable opportunities for learners from low-income backgrounds, helping them attain their goals — in postsecondary education, the workforce and life.



**Richard D. George**

Chairman, President & Chief Executive Officer  
Ascendium Education Group



## CONTENTS

President’s Message .....	1
Our Strategy .....	2
Ascendium’s Strategic Framework .....	4
Remove Structural Barriers to Success .....	6
Streamline Key Learner Transitions .....	8
The COVID-19 Health Crisis: Resilience and Flexibility in the Face of Adversity .....	10
Expand Postsecondary Education in Prison .....	12
Leveraging the Power of Collaboration to Make Systemic Change .....	14
Support Rural Postsecondary Education and Workforce Training .....	16
Looking Ahead .....	18
A Culture of Giving .....	20

## Our Strategy

Last year, we announced the launch of an exciting new framework to guide our efforts over the next three to five years. The strategy was built on our years of experience and lessons learned from past efforts, as well as input from partners who provided critical insights from the field. The drive to implement this strategy was the belief that we could be more effective by focusing our grantmaking in the areas where we can have the greatest impact.

The foundation of our strategy is a framework that includes four focus areas to support learners from low-income backgrounds. We are specifically focused on those who are first-generation students, rural community members, veterans, students of color and incarcerated adults. Field support and development projects are also supported by our strategy, covering a wide range of related efforts across four focus areas.

For each of these focus areas, we have defined a set of investment priorities that guide the grants we make. To assess the progress of our strategy on the changes we seek, we monitor data points related to first-year persistence, degree and credential completion, time to completion and job placement.

### Empowering Possibilities

We hope our work contributes to a future where more learners from low-income backgrounds reach their educational and career goals, equity gaps are eliminated and all postsecondary learning is valued and validated. We strive to bring about systemic change through strategic investments in capacity building, data infrastructure, partnerships and networks, evidence building and policy change. Our core belief is that education is transformative — it is the key to enabling possibilities in individuals and our country.

Ascendium believes in transparency and access to detailed information about our grantmaking strategy and grants we have made.



Visit [ascendiumphilanthropy.org](https://ascendiumphilanthropy.org) for additional information, including a comprehensive list of our grants.

# Ascendium's Strategic Framework

This overview explains our grantmaking process, three-pronged funding approach and investment priorities, which inform grantmaking in our four focus areas.

## OUR GRANTMAKING PROCESS

### Who We Fund

Ascendium awards grants to researchers, postsecondary education providers, workforce training providers and other nonprofit organizations that seek to create large-scale change, rather than discrete programs that serve a finite number of students.

### Where We Fund

Ascendium is headquartered in Madison, Wisconsin, but our reach is nationwide. We partner with organizations that serve learners throughout the United States.

### How We Fund

We fund initiatives at every stage of development, from promising but untested practices to proven approaches ready to be brought to scale. To succeed, initiatives need support at every stage.

## OUR FOUR 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 educational 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.



Courtesy of Reentry Campus Program

## OUR THREE-PRONGED FUNDING APPROACH

### Exploration Grants

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

### Validation Grants

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

### Scaling Grants

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

## OUR INVESTMENT PRIORITIES

For each of our four focus areas, we identified a set of investment priorities that guide the grants we make and the impact we hope will be achieved.

## FIELD SUPPORT AND DEVELOPMENT

Provides funding for field support and development projects broadly supporting efforts across our four focus areas to assist organizations working towards a common goal. The large and complex issues we are focused on require

a comprehensive approach. These grants support collaboration and information sharing through professional development, convenings and strategic media partnerships.

## Remove Structural Barriers to Success

Students today are different — they are often older, more diverse, working one or more jobs and raising families — yet many of the systems designed to support these students are the same as when they were first established. Today’s learners, especially those with fewer financial resources, are disproportionately affected by barriers from outdated educational systems.

We’re working to change this. Our investment priorities are designed to help remove barriers caused by policies, procedures or practices in postsecondary education systems. These barriers all too often prevent learners from low-income backgrounds from completing their education and career goals.

Evidence exists about specific student success reform initiatives that drive improved outcomes for students. Less is known about the financial

considerations of these reforms, including the costs to implement and sustain them. Our investment in the creation of a network focused on the incorporation of student success reforms into strategic finance models will help to drive equitable student success. Given the financial implications of the pandemic, engaging chief business and financial officers in student success efforts is even more critical.

We are optimistic about the shifts many colleges and universities made in the midst of the COVID-19 health crisis to better serve learners from low-income backgrounds. We look forward to exploring opportunities to maintain and build upon this progress in the coming year.



## INVESTMENT PRIORITIES

- Engage diverse change agents in institutional transformation
- Support the adoption of institutional and system practices that set up learners for success
- Support the implementation of learner-centered policies at the institution, system and state levels

## FEATURED GRANTS

### Governing Board Success Academy ▲ \$2.1 million

Prioritizing learner success and institutional change is an important outcome of our investment priority to **engage diverse change agents in institutional transformation**. The John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education, in partnership with the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, is providing professional development to governing board leaders so they can learn more about and implement equitable student success practices. This project aims to prepare governing boards to understand policies and practices contributing to student success, create shared definitions and expectations, adopt key student success metrics, address institutional culture and build a continued commitment to student success.

### Guided Pathways: “What and How To” Educational Series ▲ \$1.8 million

Guided pathways is a whole-college redesign of the student experience. It involves changes to program structure, new student intake, instruction and support services. We **support the adoption of institutional and system practices that set up learners for success**, and the Community College Research Center at Teachers College, Columbia University is creating training materials to do just that as part of the guided pathways reform movement. Designed for institutions that have not yet engaged in the movement, this project equips technical assistance providers with the materials they need to deliver their own workshops and professional development to further guided pathways across the nation.

### Scaling Community College Baccalaureates in a Changing Landscape ▲ \$300,000

Understanding policies and practices to **support the implementation of learner-centered policies at the institution, system and state levels** is challenging work, but with big rewards: improved outcomes for learners from low-income backgrounds. We partnered with The Joyce Foundation to support New America’s examination of the role that community college baccalaureates play in meeting employer demand for degrees while supporting equitable access to bachelor’s degrees. This research provides valuable guidance to institutional leaders and policymakers interested in enacting community college baccalaureates as a strategy to meet workforce demands.

## Streamline Key Learner Transitions

Leveraging workforce training systems, transferring between institutions and entering or re-entering the workforce are pivotal moments in a learner's academic or career journey. Institutions and systems may have policies and practices in place that make these transitions more difficult than they need to be for some learners.

Our investment priorities are designed to improve these transitions for students from low-income backgrounds. Therefore, to bolster diverse pathways following high school, we continued to support apprenticeships and expanded efforts in several states to connect workforce training to associate and bachelor's degree paths. We also supported completion efforts for students with some college credit, but no degree. The goal is to have them successfully return to college and complete their degree.

To help achieve equitable student transfer outcomes, we funded efforts to provide technical assistance to two- and four-year institutions. Through their pairing, they can work together to develop new transfer pathways for degrees leading to high-demand careers.

We also supported the exploration of how philanthropy and the public sector can work together to scale high potential postsecondary education to employment initiatives. We're hopeful that these collaborations and projects will benefit learners from low-income backgrounds as they continue their journey.



### INVESTMENT PRIORITIES

- Explore diverse pathways to technical education and workforce training
- Ease transitions between, and returning to, postsecondary providers
- Smooth transitions between postsecondary education and the workforce

### FEATURED GRANTS

#### Tools of the Trade Apprentice Scholarships ▲ \$375,000

We recognize there are many roads to reach successful entry into the workforce — that's why we support work to **explore diverse pathways to technical education and workforce training**. Our Tools of the Trade Scholarship supports construction and industrial trade apprentices attending a Wisconsin Technical College System institution. Each spring, Ascendium awards scholarships to 250 apprentices to help cover the cost of their equipment, work attire and other related expenses so they can overcome financial barriers and reach their goals.

#### Constructing a Predictive Analytic Model to Adult Learner Pathways ▲ \$260,000

The Graduate! Network leads a national movement to increase college completion among adults. Their work aligns with our investment priority to **ease transitions between, and returning to, postsecondary providers**. The Graduate! Network is quantitatively and qualitatively analyzing their data to construct a predictive model of patterns in adult learner pathways to degree completion. The analyses will inform intervention strategies about how best to support adult learners with some college, but no degree, and provide a series of policy and practice recommendations for re-engaging adult learners.

#### Supporting a Multi-State Education-Workforce Data Infrastructure ▲ \$500,000

When postsecondary and workforce systems share data, learners receive relevant education that meets economic and workforce needs, as well as their own goals. Our investment priority to **smooth transitions between postsecondary education and the workforce** supports work that leads to improved outcomes for these learners, like this project by the Coleridge Initiative. They are delivering ongoing applied data training to state agency staff and building new analytical products to inform the design and development of effective education and training policy and practice.



## The COVID-19 Health Crisis: Resilience and Flexibility in the Face of Adversity

The COVID-19 health crisis has had a substantial impact on people across the entire socioeconomic spectrum; however, long-term education impacts are most likely to be felt by learners from low-income backgrounds. Ascendium is concerned about these learners because they are at a greater risk of having their postsecondary education and workforce goals derailed by the sudden shift to predominately online learning models and lack of access to student support services.

When the health crisis began, Ascendium engaged in discussions with our partners and peers. We responded quickly by providing flexibility and support to our partners as they dealt with the implications of the crisis.

We modified grant deliverables and provided extensions to grant partners as needed. We also collaborated with new partners on several crisis-related initiatives, including a grant to provide faculty teaching entry-level math courses with training to adapt their teaching to online delivery.

Ascendium will continue our focus on supporting organizations driving systemic change through this health crisis, ultimately helping learners from low-income backgrounds make their educational and workforce goals a reality — even if it does take a little longer.

### Maintain Momentum for Student Success Initiative

◀ \$10 million

We launched a \$10 million initiative to sustain vital postsecondary education reform work and minimize widening equity gaps during the COVID-19 health crisis. In 2020, we awarded five grants totaling just over \$4.5 million to postsecondary education networks and membership organizations that substantially serve low-income learners. The initial grants made under the initiative allow our grant partners to continue engaging their members in reform work and allow services and offerings to be adapted for remote and online learning. Future grants made under this initiative, continuing in early 2021, will remain focused on helping membership organizations and networks continue to advance reforms to assist learners from low-income backgrounds.

## Expand Postsecondary Education in Prison

Postsecondary education dramatically improves the odds of successful re-entry into the community and labor force. Yet access to postsecondary education in prison programs is an obstacle for incarcerated people, and the programs that do exist are often disconnected from possible career opportunities.

The success of incarcerated students in the postsecondary education in prison field has long been impacted by their ability to access relevant learning materials, both in person and through electronic delivery platforms. This impact was heightened as a result of the COVID-19 health crisis. We funded a research effort to better understand how learning material review policies within departments of corrections impact student success.

We're excited about efforts we supported to provide meaningful, in-depth technical assistance, training and advising to new and existing college sites and their state corrections system partners. We also supported the development of innovative new models for the delivery of postsecondary education in prison, including the pilot of an advising model that trains incarcerated people with long-term sentences as academic advisors.

Our investment priorities will continue to support the development of high-quality, collaborative postsecondary education in prison programs, leading to increased access and success for incarcerated learners.



Courtesy of Prison University Project



We celebrated the lifting of the 26-year ban on Pell Grants for incarcerated learners. Once implemented, over 460,000 incarcerated people will have the opportunity to access postsecondary education, making it more important than ever to ensure that the expanded access is to high-quality programs. We look forward to continuing to work with partners to develop and scale high-quality postsecondary education in prison models that meet this moment.

### INVESTMENT PRIORITIES

- Develop and scale high-quality postsecondary education in prison delivery models
- Develop a better understanding of incarcerated learners through data and research
- Support strategic partnerships between postsecondary education, correction systems, employers and community-based organizations

### FEATURED GRANTS

#### Expanding Access to Postsecondary Pathways in Louisiana State Prisons

📌 \$650,000

We believe our investment priority to **develop and scale high-quality postsecondary education in prison delivery models** aids in the expansion of those programs and helps incarcerated learners succeed. Operation Restoration is doing this type of work through their project to create a bachelor's degree program that leverages technology to support incarcerated learners across the Louisiana state prison system. They are also piloting an innovative advising model that trains incarcerated learners with long-term sentences as academic advisors.

#### Transforming Higher Education Policy and Practice in Prisons and Beyond

📌 \$800,000

To **develop a better understanding of incarcerated learners through data and research**, The Education Trust is working to close opportunity gaps that disproportionately affect students of color and students from low-income families. Through a fellowship program, they are working closely with three formerly incarcerated learners to better understand factors that influence incarcerated student success. The voices of these fellows will directly inform the structure of a series of institutes, which will provide equity-focused professional development to higher education faculty, leaders and prison education providers.

#### Preparing Incarcerated Learners for Careers in Technology

📌 \$1 million

We can achieve greater progress through the power of partnerships. Our investment priority to **support strategic partnerships between postsecondary education, correction systems, employers and community-based organizations** creates equitable access to high-quality postsecondary education for incarcerated learners. LaunchCode Foundation is expanding access to their foundational coding and web development training and employment program to incarcerated learners in several Missouri prison facilities. The goal is to refine an innovative model to improve employment outcomes for incarcerated adults, while providing a pathway to further education.





## Leveraging the Power of Collaboration to Make Systemic Change

We're determined to elevate opportunities and outcomes for learners from low-income backgrounds so they can achieve their postsecondary education and career goals. There is no easy solution — these learners face obstacles at nearly every stage in their postsecondary journey. Our philanthropy aims to transform complex systems and remove barriers to create better paths to postsecondary success and increased socioeconomic mobility.

Making systemic changes that fundamentally transform postsecondary education and

workforce training can only be achieved through the efforts of many people and organizations. In addition to our grant partners, we aim to collaborate with other philanthropic organizations and funders to advance our common cause. Collectively, we can contribute additional resources and amplify efforts.

A key element of our approach has been to leverage strategic collaborations across systems, institutions and sectors. An example of this is our \$750,000 grant to support West Virginia's Climb, a new public awareness and programming campaign

aimed at increasing the state's postsecondary education attainment rate. Supporting these partners as they complete the work they started is a good example of a collaboration aligned with our strategy. We will continue to explore new approaches, working with existing and new partners, leveraging the collective power of many organizations to advance our mission.



We partnered with several media entities in 2020 on field support and development projects to foster collaboration and raise awareness of issues in our four focus areas. This included The Chronicle of Higher Education, Education Writers Association and Rural Matters. We are encouraged by the results and view this as an effective way to share information supporting the field.

## Support Rural Postsecondary Education and Workforce Training

Disparities in postsecondary success between rural students and their urban and suburban peers exist at every point in the pipeline, from enrollment to completion. These disparities contribute to a shortage of skilled, qualified workers, which affects the economic health of families and entire communities.

We listened to and learned from key stakeholders in rural communities during 2020. One output of this is an investment in the development of a national rural postsecondary education research agenda. Informed by a Rural Research Working Group consisting of practitioners, researchers and philanthropic organizations, this agenda will raise key questions from rural stakeholders and guide our future investments in this space.

Another takeaway from our listening and learning journey was the complexity of the concept of “rural.” There are multiple definitions

and no single list of institutions located in rural areas or serving primarily rural students. We supported efforts to create a comprehensive list of all postsecondary education institutions operating in rural communities across the country. This important work serves as a useful tool for practitioners, researchers, funders and policymakers.

Others in this field are further along and doing important work in communities across the country to increase education and workforce outcomes for rural learners. We’re excited about these projects, as well as those we supported in 2020, to strengthen the connection between rural communities, postsecondary education and the workforce, and we look forward to the lessons coming out of these efforts.

## INVESTMENT PRIORITIES

- Better understand rural learners and postsecondary providers through high-quality research
- Build the capacity of rural postsecondary providers to support learners from enrollment to workforce entry
- Catalyze investment in and support for rural learners and providers through partnerships

## FEATURED GRANTS

### College and Student Success in Rural Communities

📌 \$200,000

The University of Wisconsin-Madison’s Student Success Through Applied Research (SSTAR) Lab conducts original research and evaluation on issues related to college opportunity and student success. We supported the SSTAR Lab in analyzing demographic shifts in rural communities and college enrollment trends in rural places. This research aligns with our goal to **better understand rural learners and postsecondary providers through high-quality research**. Their research creates a better understanding of rural-located institutions and enrollment trends. It also creates a definition of “rural institution” and a list of institutions that meet this definition. This dynamic list will be available for use by other researchers and practitioners.

### Catalyzing Rural Community Colleges Through a Design Challenge 📌 \$1.3 million

We support our partners as they work to **build the capacity of rural postsecondary providers to support learners from enrollment to workforce entry**. Education Design Lab is doing this through their three-year design challenge to develop and pilot new solutions in rural postsecondary education. They seek to answer how they can improve the ability of rural community colleges to be a critical engine of growth in their local communities. Education Design Lab is partnering with five rural community colleges to collaboratively structure, design and evaluate these transformative new programs. The goal is to build infrastructure that can be continued beyond the pilot.

### Building Pathways to Quality Jobs and Financial Security in Rural America 📌 \$1.3 million

We support projects that **catalyze investment in and support for rural learners and providers through partnerships** because when we partner, the impacts can be far greater. The Local Initiatives Support Corporation’s Rural Works initiative is a national network of workforce intermediaries committed to modernizing and redeveloping pathways from postsecondary education and training to employment. Eleven communities in the network are receiving support to strengthen and expand their workforce development programs, resulting in 30 new postsecondary pathways expected to benefit more than 4,000 individuals during the project.





**“As the country recovers from the COVID-19 health crisis, we will be exploring ways to enhance and operationalize the execution of our strategy to promote postsecondary education and workforce training systems that are even better, and more equitable, than what was in place before the crisis began.”**

**Amy Kerwin**

Vice President-Education Philanthropy

## Looking Ahead

Our report provides a comprehensive view of who we are as a philanthropic organization. Simply put, we believe in the power of postsecondary education and workforce training to create opportunities for upward social mobility for learners from low-income backgrounds. To this end, we award exploration, validation and scaling grants in four focus areas. We support strategic collaborations and initiatives to improve education and workforce training systems to create lasting change.

We will continue this approach with our strategy in 2021, supporting and building off the successful efforts of our grant partners and capitalizing on the momentum generated by their sustained and focused efforts.

In addition, there are several other noteworthy elements of our strategy that we're moving forward with in 2021 that are designed to enhance and strengthen our efforts.

### Continued Support for Needs Arising from the COVID-19 Health Crisis

We are expecting continued challenges and hardships in 2021 and beyond for both the organizations we support with our grantmaking, as well as for learners from low-income backgrounds. We will continue our grantmaking efforts under the Maintain Momentum for Student Success Initiative to help organizations further their student success reform efforts.

Given the evolving needs arising from the crisis, we'll continue working in close collaboration with our partners and peers to respond to new needs as they arise.

### Increased Emphasis on Learning and Impact

In the upcoming year, we will be devoting resources and taking steps to ensure we are skilled at sharing and retaining what we're learning from our grantmaking. The goal is to purposefully strengthen our strategy and philanthropic operations to deliver an even greater impact for low-income learners. We believe learning is a critical component to achieving better results for low-income learners in the dynamic and complex postsecondary education and workforce training systems.

### Enhanced Communications and Collaborations

We will be expanding our communication efforts to deliver helpful and insightful information about our activities in a more timely manner through an expanded set of communication channels. In addition, we intend to create more opportunities to shed light on important topics and provide a voice to partners by organizing collaborative events where information and ideas can be shared.

We're excited about the future. We're driven by the role we play as an organization in empowering possibilities.

## A Culture of Giving

Our strong desire to provide support and assistance to those in need is a trait common to Ascendum Education Group's employees. That's why we have our Ascendum Cares corporate giving program. While our philanthropic mission as a national education philanthropy is clear, we also recognize the importance of flexibility and responsiveness to the needs of the communities in which our employees live and work. Ascendum is headquartered in Madison, Wisconsin, where most of our employees are located. We also have operational groups in Aberdeen, South Dakota, Eagan, Minnesota, and Indianapolis, Indiana, along with numerous employees spread out across the country.

The Ascendum Cares corporate giving program benefits from widespread participation and the generous giving of our employees. Guided by employee efforts in this last year, Ascendum donated more than \$1 million in support for several local nonprofit organizations providing services aligned with Ascendum's philanthropic mission. This included the adoption and support of several local education-related nonprofits, support for COVID-19 health crisis relief efforts and support for a number of local social justice organizations. In addition, Ascendum's 265 employees donated over 550 hours of their time to more than 40 organizations under our paid Volunteer Time Off program. Giving also extended beyond work hours, where employees volunteered over 5,000 hours of their own time to nonprofit organizations in their communities. Our deeply rooted culture of giving is a tremendous source of pride and motivation for our employees.



Ascendum employees volunteering at The River Food Pantry in Madison, Wisconsin early in 2020.



2501 International Lane | Madison, Wisconsin 53704  
[ascendiumphilanthropy.org](http://ascendiumphilanthropy.org)