

Funding Scope

Where does Ascendium fund?

Nationally. With the launch of our refreshed strategy in May 2019, we transitioned from a regional funder with seven focus states (Wisconsin, Minnesota, Ohio, Iowa, Arkansas, North Dakota and South Dakota) to a national funder.

Who does Ascendium fund and not fund?

We make grants to researchers, educational institutions, workforce training providers and other nonprofit organizations. We are not interested in funding individual programmatic efforts at single institutions for a finite number of students.

What does Ascendium fund?

We remain deeply committed to the postsecondary education space, and are incorporating a focus on workforce entry to help more learners progress to the next step of their educational journey. We intentionally use the term “postsecondary education” rather than “higher education” to indicate our desire to support certificates, apprenticeships and job credentials, not just associate and bachelor’s degrees delivered through traditional higher education channels.

Philanthropic Priorities

What are Ascendium’s funding priorities?

- **Removing Barriers to Student Success at the Institution and System Levels**
 - Through the alignment of policies and practices, our goal is to help institutions and systems reduce or eliminate obstacles to student success, with the ultimate goal of increasing completion rates and shortening the time it takes to get there.
 - Our grantmaking in this space will engage key players across institutions and systems to achieve structural transformation.
 - We’ll continue to focus on transformational change initiatives in developmental education reform, guided pathways and institutional policy changes (e.g., resolving student account holds and leveraging summer enrollment).
- **Streamlining Key Learner Transitions: Matriculation, Transfer and Workforce Entry**
 - Successful transitions at key points in a learner’s journey rely on the navigation of disparate systems. And all too often, these systems are disconnected and misaligned.
 - Our grantmaking in this space will support institutional and labor market efforts that decrease reliance on a learner’s social capital as the driver of success and instead increase the alignment of disparate system policies and practices.
 - This focus area builds on and expands our recent grantmaking, including initiatives in FAFSA completion, summer melt and transfer reform.

- **Expanding High-Quality Higher Education in Prison Programs**
 - We believe postsecondary education can empower incarcerated people and disrupt intergenerational cycles of unemployment and poverty.
 - With the recent expansion of the Second Chance Pell program, we feel a sense of urgency to support the identification and elevation of high-quality higher education in prison models that offer opportunities for scale and for developing meaningful connections between higher education delivery systems, prisons and the labor market.
- **Developing Rural Education & Workforce Training**
 - Disparities in postsecondary success between rural students and their urban peers exist at every point in the pipeline. And funders—including Ascendium—have unintentionally contributed to these disparities through our desire for scaling, which often leads to a focus on large institutions in urban settings.
 - We’ll be looking to identify and support the scaling of successful rural education and workforce training programs. Our definition of scale, however, will be based on rural environments.
 - For purposes of defining “rural” in the context of this focus area, we looked to the classification system used by the U.S. Census Bureau. They classify U.S. counties as “completely rural,” “mostly rural” or “mostly urban.” Approximately 60% of counties are classified as “completely rural” or “mostly rural.” These counties are home to 42 million residents—14% of the total U.S. population. This is our target population.
- **What populations does Ascendium seek to support?**

We aim to remove barriers to completion and help more learners from low-income backgrounds reach the education and career goals that matter most to them. Specifically, we focus on learners from low-income families, especially those in historically underrepresented groups: first-generation students, incarcerated adults, rural community members, students of color and veterans.

Engaging with Ascendium

How can I stay informed about Ascendium’s priorities and work?

The best way to stay in touch with us is to sign up for our [newsletter](#). Each month we share funding opportunities, spotlight work by our grant partners, and indicate where you can find Ascendium staff in the field.

How do I explore funding from Ascendium?

At this time, we do not accept unsolicited requests. There are two ways to explore funding: 1) Respond to funding opportunity announcements, which can be found on our [website](#) when there are open calls; or 2) connect with a program officer and share your ideas. We regularly review invited letters of interest (LOIs) and concepts as a team, and those that best align with our funding strategy are invited to submit a full proposal.

Is there a particular program officer I should connect with?

No. It is possible that in the future we will have specific program officers assigned to specific focus areas, but for now, please reach out using our general [email](#), and our team will follow up as appropriate.