

Optimizing Delivery Systems for Higher Education in Prison

Postsecondary Pathways for Re-Entry Transition

About Ascendium Education Group

Ascendium Education Group (formerly Great Lakes Higher Education Corporation & Affiliates) is the nation's largest student loan guarantor as well as a leading postsecondary education and workforce training philanthropy and provider of student success services for colleges and universities. Ascendium's philanthropy program provides funding to educational providers, researchers and nonprofit organizations to elevate opportunities and outcomes for learners from low-income backgrounds so they can better achieve postsecondary educational and career success. Our grantmaking focuses on increasing equity for low-income populations, especially those in historically underrepresented groups: first-generation students, incarcerated adults, rural community members, students of color and veterans.

Our Commitment to Higher Education in Prison

In 2017 and 2018 Ascendium made a series of exploration grants in higher education in prison (HEP) to help us further understand existing programs, prevailing challenges to the field and opportunities for new investment. After more than two years of listening and learning, we're launching an initiative to expand access to high-quality higher education in prison via traditional and alternative pathways. HEP is one of four focus areas in Ascendium's new funding strategy, and results from this initiative will guide our future work in that space.

Our HEP focus is informed by three key facts: (1) Despite the growing number of HEP programs, the vast majority of incarcerated people do not have access to postsecondary education opportunities; (2) too often the educational opportunities that are available in prisons lack integrity (many programs provide low-quality instruction, offer irrelevant credentials and lack student supports) and there is limited data capacity to inform continuous improvement; and (3) the two complex systems that come together to deliver HEP (prisons and colleges) are often bogged down by bureaucratic inefficiencies and outdated practices that prevent them from maximizing their partnership to aid in student success.

Summary

Ascendium Education Group seeks to support the development or expansion of high quality prison-based¹, postsecondary education programs that demonstrate the impact of well-designed systems of delivery to: (1) fully support incarcerated learners along a defined educational and re-entry pathway; (2) increase the program's student enrollment capacity; and (3) improve student success outcomes (persistence, credential completion, successful transfer of credits and/or meaningful employment).

¹For purposes of this initiative, "prison" and "prison-based" refer to: (1) prisons under state and federal jurisdiction and operation (including community-based organizations/work centers), and (2) locally operated jails and detention centers. Privately operated prisons are not eligible to apply.

Why

The close but inverted relationship between educational engagement and criminal conviction begins at the primary grade level. Hardest hit are people of color and those from disadvantaged backgrounds who must contend with unforgiving disciplinary policies, under-resourced classrooms and a lack of wraparound supports. This fateful mix of educational inequities most often leads to early educational disengagement—so pervasive, that we've given it a name: *the school-to-prison pipeline*.

Ninety-five percent of incarcerated individuals will be released back to their communities. In addition to confronting strong stigma and a myriad of barriers to social reintegration, they will face a punitive job market, where 9 out of 10 positions within the past year have gone to those with college degrees. But today, only 6% of the incarcerated population have more than a high school diploma and though the necessity of postsecondary education in prison is becoming more widely understood, the vast majority of incarcerated individuals do not have access to those opportunities.

But access alone isn't the only issue to be addressed. There is still much to be understood about the quality of prison-based postsecondary education programs and the extent to which they are equitably and efficiently designed to drive student and re-entry success. Historically, evaluative research on postsecondary education in prison programs emphasized a correlation between credential obtainment and recidivism. It is with this very narrow lens that many prison-based postsecondary education programs were designed.

However, as the field continues to evolve and hold itself accountable to more student-centered ideas of program quality and design, the need to identify and/or scale prison-based postsecondary education systems of delivery that support incarcerated learners along a well-crafted pathway to academic and re-entry success is paramount. This is especially true as the re-instatement of Pell Grants hangs in the balance, potentially proliferating higher education in prison programs throughout the country. This means that re-entry success can no longer just be considered a matter of reduced recidivism, but instead a measure of how well formerly incarcerated people are positioned to leverage their earned credentials—in meaningful employment, further educational pursuits and social re-integration.

The Opportunity

Higher education in prison functions at the nexus of two complex and reliably flawed institutions in service of a particularly vulnerable population of students. Current postsecondary program offerings and support services are often inadequate, disjointed and poorly timed. In addition, inefficient and outdated operational practices as well as ill-defined partnerships and low data proficiency, undermine student success and limit program enrollment capacity. And while individual program provision is an important marker for any change initiative, even a well-crafted educational and career pathway is undermined by institutional dysfunction. However, when institutions combine quality program design with attention to systemic operational elements (e.g., internal processes, clarity of goals, activities and roles, etc.), the likelihood of producing intended student outcomes increases.

Through a multi-year initiative, Ascendium would like to partner with higher education institutions and state/local departments of corrections to redesign their postsecondary education delivery systems to meet a core set of criteria focused on refining institutional policies and practices, deepening external partnerships and improving programmatic quality.

The goal of this initiative is not to support the growth or development of individual programs. Our aim is to support efforts that can help us—and the field—learn what it takes to build the relationships and infrastructure necessary for the kind of systemic improvement, both academic and operational, that can be replicated and scaled. Over a one-year planning period, partnering institutions will develop a systemic postsecondary education delivery strategy, including a solid plan to address the criteria outlined below, to be implemented in one or more academic/career programs over the subsequent two to three years.

Our theory of change is that if—at a minimum—participating sites successfully address the criteria, they will have effectively developed a delivery system that more intentionally meets the needs of students at key points of transition, thereby increasing rates of student success (credential completion, successful college transfer and/or meaningful employment).

The following criteria were developed by leveraging Ascendium’s strong partnerships with postsecondary institutions and extensive discussions with experts in the field. They are intended to prompt scrutiny of existing, perhaps outdated or low-quality modes of operation and inspire innovation in program design/redesign. However, these criteria are not intended as an all-inclusive list of the key quality characteristics or as a set of best practices. Developing a list that would have broad applicability across varying state and local contexts is impractical. Therefore, the following criteria are intended to meet the field where it is while pushing toward its more equitable future. It is our hope that through transformational leadership and systems change efforts, these criteria will be widespread and reflective of the vast majority of postsecondary education programs.

Criterion #1 Partnerships that Perform

- College/prison/community partnerships (between state/local departments of correction, postsecondary education, workforce development, employers and community-based organizations) will be highly coordinated, have shared accountability and mutually defined goals around student success as outlined in a memorandum of understanding.
- College/prison/community partnerships will function to support students through key re-entry/transition points on their educational/career journey.
- Intradepartmental collaboration toward the implementation of postsecondary education programs (particularly within the administering organization) will be well-defined, with clearly outlined activities, roles and responsibilities.

Rationale: Designing and delivering a high-quality, prison-based postsecondary education program requires coordination within and across multiple complex organizations. The effectiveness of these cross-sector/departmental collaborations is not a matter of simple agreement, but instead is the product of a shared vision and commitment as well a well-defined accountability, governance and communication structure.

Criterion #2 Data Infrastructure

- College/prison/community partnerships will have data infrastructure in place to collect and glean insights from relevant student and programmatic data.
- College/prison/community partnerships will have a shared definition of student success that extends through post-release and focuses on indicators of credential completion, successful college transfer and/or meaningful employment.
- College/prison/community partnerships will have a data-sharing agreement in place and a plan to collect relevant disaggregated data on student success. Data collection strategies should include leading and lagging indicators of completion, transfer of college credit and employment (e.g., retention, persistence, credit accumulation, lateral and upward transfer, post-release services participation rate, job obtainment, etc.).

Rationale: Systemic transformation of prison-based postsecondary education delivery necessitates a culture of continuous improvement made possible in part by a robust data collection and interpretation practice. Recognizing the challenges and impracticalities of post-release longitudinal data collection, it is important to set feasible, reliable, attainable data collection goals, while proactively removing barriers to data sharing.

Criterion #3 Sustainable, Scalable

- Newly developed or refined institutional practices will be piloted on individual or multiple postsecondary education programs, but will be adaptable and scalable across programs.
- Sustainability should focus on developing institutional norms and practices that last beyond the grant-funded period.

Rationale: Ascendium’s funding is designed to catalyze scalable solutions by providing strategic support for a limited period of time. The goal of this project is not only to serve students in a particular postsecondary program but to institutionalize practices that will scale across programs.

Criterion #4 Meaningful Credentials

- Credentials will position students to further educational attainment or employment by ensuring:
 - Credit transferability and college admissions access
 - Collateral sanctions are not barriers
 - Immediate relevancy in the job market where the student will be released (as identified via a continuous evaluation of industry/program viability)

Rationale: The provision of prison-based postsecondary education programs aim to restore some measure of educational equity to students who failed in and were failed by our country’s broken educational system. For incarcerated individuals who are returning home, student success means they can easily leverage their credentials to ease their reintegration back into the community and work toward economic participation. For students who are not returning home, their personal educational aspirations and contributions to the collective learning community within the prison is an equally valuable measure of success.

Criterion #5 High-Quality Delivery & Instruction

- Students will have real-time contact with instructors, whether as the primary mode of delivery or within a blended/hybrid model that leverages technology in a meaningful way.
- Students will have consistent access to advisors or coaches to help navigate the degree/credential process and options throughout their educational journey.
- Students will have access to tutoring as well as the supplies, materials and resources (including technology) they need to succeed academically.
- Instructors will be well-qualified (teaching only in their area of expertise) and have routine access to education-specific training and resources.
- Enrollment practices and patterns will be reviewed on a routine basis to ensure equitable access to learning opportunities as demonstrated through racially diverse and inclusive classrooms.

Rationale: The positive impact of meaningful support services on student success is well documented. Furthermore, recent studies concerning online education show that students in these programs graduate at a significantly lower rate than students who have access to in-person or blended modes of delivery.

Eligibility

Who can apply?

- Eligible entities administering prison-based, postsecondary programs include: (1) public/private, nonprofit colleges and universities; (2) community and technical colleges; (3) state/federal prison systems or local jails; and (4) independent 501(c)(3) organizations.
- All lead entities should apply in coordination with their implementation partners, specifying the roles and responsibilities of each partner organization.
- Lead entities must have the ability to access, coordinate and consolidate data to appropriately track project outcomes.

What types of postsecondary education programs are eligible?

- Postsecondary degree programs (associate and bachelor's) offering transferable credits and vocational/career technical programs providing relevant industry recognized credentials.
- Innovative postsecondary programs that accelerate student success and/or offer more flexible pathways are encouraged. Examples include, but are not limited to:
 - Credit for prior learning (including military experience)
 - Open educational resources
 - Stackable credentials
 - Apprenticeships
 - Career and technical and/or liberal arts integration
 - Programs that emphasize participation and support of veterans, rural students and/or students of color

- We are seeking to support a diverse range of program offerings and college/prison/community partnership structures within a variety of geographical contexts. Applying with multiple academic/career program options for consideration is recommended. Programs operating within both men’s and women’s correctional institutions are encouraged to apply.

Should you apply as a Pilot Program or an Expansion Initiative?

- *Pilot Programs* are new/emerging efforts that need to build program and system infrastructure that will be ready to launch after no more than one year of planning and can provide disaggregated student success data throughout the implementation period.
- *Expansion Initiatives* are existing programs that are ready to refine system infrastructure to serve additional students (e.g., expanding access in particular programs or adapting programs to different sites) after no more than one year of planning and can provide disaggregated student success data throughout the grant period.

Evaluation

As with all of our funding initiatives, Ascendium is committed to generating evidence about what works. The HEP field is particularly ripe to benefit from the examination and dissemination of effective practices. By applying for this grant opportunity, you agree to engage with our external evaluation partner throughout the duration of the project.

Funding Amounts and Timeline

This grant initiative consists of two phases: planning and implementation. The first step begins with an LOI submission (see next section). Selected applicants may be invited to submit a full proposal of up to \$150,000 for an initial one-year planning phase. The planning phase will provide sites with an opportunity to develop a plan for comprehensively addressing the grant criteria. After the planning phase and upon submission of a plan and comprehensive budget, funding of up to \$800,000 will be awarded to successful planning sites.

Please note the following (estimated) timeline:

- LOI Submission Window: June 25 – August 1, 2019 at 5 p.m. EDT
- LOI/Proposal Webinar: July 17, 2019 at 2 p.m. CDT ([Click here to register](#))
- LOI Decision Notification: Week of August 26, 2019
- Full Proposals Due: October 1, 2019
- Final Award Decisions: October 31, 2019

Letter of Interest

As noted above, up to \$150,000 may be awarded to each site during the planning phase to support the development of a plan to comprehensively address the grant criteria. During the implementation phase, funding of up to \$800,000 may be awarded to each successful planning site.

There are two steps to apply for a planning grant:

The **first** step is to email philanthropy@ascendiumeducation.org by **August 1, 2019**. The email should contain three document attachments, described below.

1. **Letter of Interest** (not to exceed five pages) including the following:

- Applicant Information
 - Organization Name and Address
 - Indicate whether, if selected for funding, a fiscal sponsor will be required
 - Primary Contact* Name, Position Title, Email Address

**All correspondence during the application review process will be sent via email to the Primary Contact noted here*
- Response to the following questions (please label your answer to each question, Question One, Two, etc.)
 - **Question One:** Why this opportunity? What are your ultimate goals and how would this opportunity further them? Are you applying as a pilot program or an expansion initiative?
 - **Question Two:** Describe the core leadership team for the project including who will have final authority over the project, how it will be managed and the roles and responsibilities of each team member.
 - **Question Three:** Describe the project implementation partners, including an explanation of their roles and responsibilities.
 - **Question Four:** Which technical/academic program(s) have been selected for the project and what are the related employment/transfer options?
 - **Question Five:** Describe the metrics you will use to track progress toward the goals stated in the RFC and the grant objectives to: (1) fully support incarcerated learners along a defined educational and re-entry pathway (2) increase the program’s student enrollment capacity and (3) improve student success outcomes. Qualitative indicators tracking progress on key organizational/operational changes should be noted in addition to quantifiable student success metrics such as:
 - Number of students enrolled
 - Grade point average
 - Term-to-term retention
 - Credit accumulation

2. Completed **Current Progress Toward Required Criteria** chart (Attachment A, page 8)

3. Planning period **Budget Estimate Summary** (Attachment B, page 10)

The **second** step is for the Primary Contact (noted in LOI) to register for an account in the Ascendium Grant Portal (ascendium.fluxx.io). The portal is currently undergoing upgrades that will be completed this summer, in time to invite and receive full proposals. Please complete this step no later than August 1, 2019. For help registering, follow the instructions in our [Grant Portal User Guide](#).

For questions about this grant opportunity, please email philanthropy@ascendiumeducation.org.

Attachment A

Current Progress Toward Required Criteria

Please indicate your current state with respect to the criteria listed below. Choose “Does not exist,” “Exists but requires improvement” or “Exists and functions well” for each item. Applicants will have an opportunity to provide additional information if invited to submit a full proposal.

	Does not exist	Exists but requires improvement	Exists and functions well
Criteria #1 Partnerships that Perform			
College/prison/community partnerships (between corrections, higher education, workforce, employers and community-based organizations) are highly coordinated, have shared accountability and mutually defined goals around student success as outlined in a memorandum of understanding			
College/prison/community partnerships function to support students through key re-entry/transition points on their educational/career journey			
Intradepartmental collaboration toward the implementation of higher education programs (particularly within the administering organization) is well-defined, with clearly outlined activities, roles and responsibilities			
Criteria #2 Data Infrastructure			
College/prison/community partnerships have data infrastructure in place to collect and glean insights from relevant student and programmatic data			
College/prison/community partnerships have a shared definition of student success that extends through post-release			
College/prison/community partnerships have a data-sharing agreement in place and a plan to collect relevant disaggregated data on student success (i.e., number of students enrolled, grade point average, term-to-term retention, credit accumulation)			
Criteria #3 Sustainable, Scalable			
Newly developed or refined Institutional practices will be piloted on individual or multiple postsecondary education programs, but will be adaptable and scalable across programs			
Sustainability focus is on developing institutional norms and practices that last beyond the grant-funded period			

	Does not exist	Exists but requires improvement	Exists and functions well
Criteria #4 Meaningful Credentials			
Credentials position students to further educational attainment or employment by ensuring: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Credit transferability and college admissions access • Collateral sanctions are not barriers • Immediate relevancy in the job market where the student is released (as identified via continuous evaluation of industry/program viability) 			
Criteria #5 High-Quality Delivery and Instruction			
Students have real-time contact with instructors as the primary mode ² of delivery			
Students have consistent access to advisors or coaches to help navigate the degree/credential process and options throughout their educational journey			
Students have access to tutoring as well as the supplies, materials and resources (including technology) that they need to succeed academically			
Instructors are well-qualified (teaching only in their area of expertise) and have routine access to education-specific training and resources			
Enrollment practices and patterns are reviewed on a routine basis to ensure equitable access to learning opportunities as demonstrated through racially diverse and inclusive classrooms			

²Includes blended/hybrid modes of delivery.

Attachment B

Budget Estimate Summary

Please complete the following budget estimate for the one-year planning period beginning February 2020 and concluding February 2021.

Up to \$150,000 will be awarded for the planning period. Applicants invited to submit full proposals will be eligible to receive grants of up to \$800,000 over three years.³

Item	Budget
Personnel	
Travel	
Supplies/Materials	
Trainings/Meetings	
Other Expenses	
Indirect Expenses	
Subcontractors & Consultants	
Sub Award–Direct Sub-Grantee Costs	
Sub Award–Indirect Sub-Grantee Costs	
Total	

Estimate of Other Funds* to Achieve Project Goals

Directly Related Investments from Project Partners	
Directly Related Local Philanthropic Investments	

**Supplemental investments by project partners or other philanthropic organizations are not required, but will strengthen your application.*

³After the planning period, a new three-year budget will be required.