

Ascendium Education Philanthropy



Our philanthropic mission is to elevate opportunities and outcomes for learners from low-income backgrounds so they can better achieve postsecondary education and career success.

At Ascendium, we believe in the power of postsecondary education and workforce training to create opportunity. We support evidence-based practices that remove systemic barriers, enabling institutions to better serve learners from low-income backgrounds and empowering more of those learners to reach the education and career goals that matter most to them.

Our grantmaking focuses on increasing equity for these learners, especially those in historically underrepresented groups: first-generation students, incarcerated adults, rural community members, students of color and veterans.

We believe in investing our resources in system transformation, so we fund initiatives capable of sparking meaningful, scalable change.

Who We Are

Since the formal launch of Ascendium's philanthropy division in 2006, we have grown from a modest funder with a Midwest focus into one of the nation's leading philanthropies in the postsecondary education space.

Who We Fund

Ascendium makes grants to researchers, educational institutions, workforce training providers and other nonprofit organizations.

Where We Fund

We support research and large-scale initiatives nationally, with additional emphasis on seven priority states: Wisconsin, Minnesota, Ohio, Iowa, Arkansas, North Dakota and South Dakota.

Our funding strategy targets initiatives in these focus areas:

Removing Systemic Barriers to Success

Education and workforce preparation systems are complex, and the institutions that comprise them often inadvertently create obstacles to success that disproportionately affect learners with fewer social and financial resources. We support efforts to identify and adopt policies and practices that reduce or eliminate barriers to student success at the system and institutional levels, with the ultimate goal of increasing completion and shortening the time it takes to get there.

Streamlining Transitions

Matriculation, transfer between institutions, and entry or re-entry into the workforce are pivotal moments in a learner's academic and career journey. Institutions can make or break the transfer experience, and too often they implement policies and practices that present obstacles and complicate transfer. As a result, students may lose credits, time and money. We support initiatives to streamline transitions by promoting alignment and sharing of data; improving collaboration between institutions; and helping educational, workforce training and employer systems function in a more complementary and effective way.

Expanding High-Quality Higher Education in Prison Programs

A tremendously disproportionate number of incarcerated individuals come from low-income backgrounds. Access to high-quality postsecondary education programming provides opportunities to disrupt the intergenerational transmission of poverty. While higher education in prison (HEP) is a growing field, to date 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 evidence to support best practices; and forge connections between correctional systems, educational services and labor markets.

Developing Rural 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 both families and entire communities. We support efforts to develop postsecondary and workforce training opportunities in rural areas to reduce disparities and promote educational and career success for people living in rural communities.

The Three Ways We Fund

We fund initiatives at every stage of development, from promising but untested measures to proven practices ready to be brought to scale. We organize grants into these three categories:

EXPLORATION GRANTS

Limited-term grants that help us learn more about promising ideas and approaches.

VALIDATION GRANTS

Grants awarded to support formal, independent evaluations of program impact.

SCALING GRANTS

Funding to support wider application of proven strategies.

Visit ascendiumphilanthropy.org to learn more.

Ascendium Education Philanthropy is the philanthropic arm of Ascendium Education Group, a nonprofit organization working to champion opportunity for everyone as a grantmaker, student loan guarantor and provider of student success products for colleges.

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