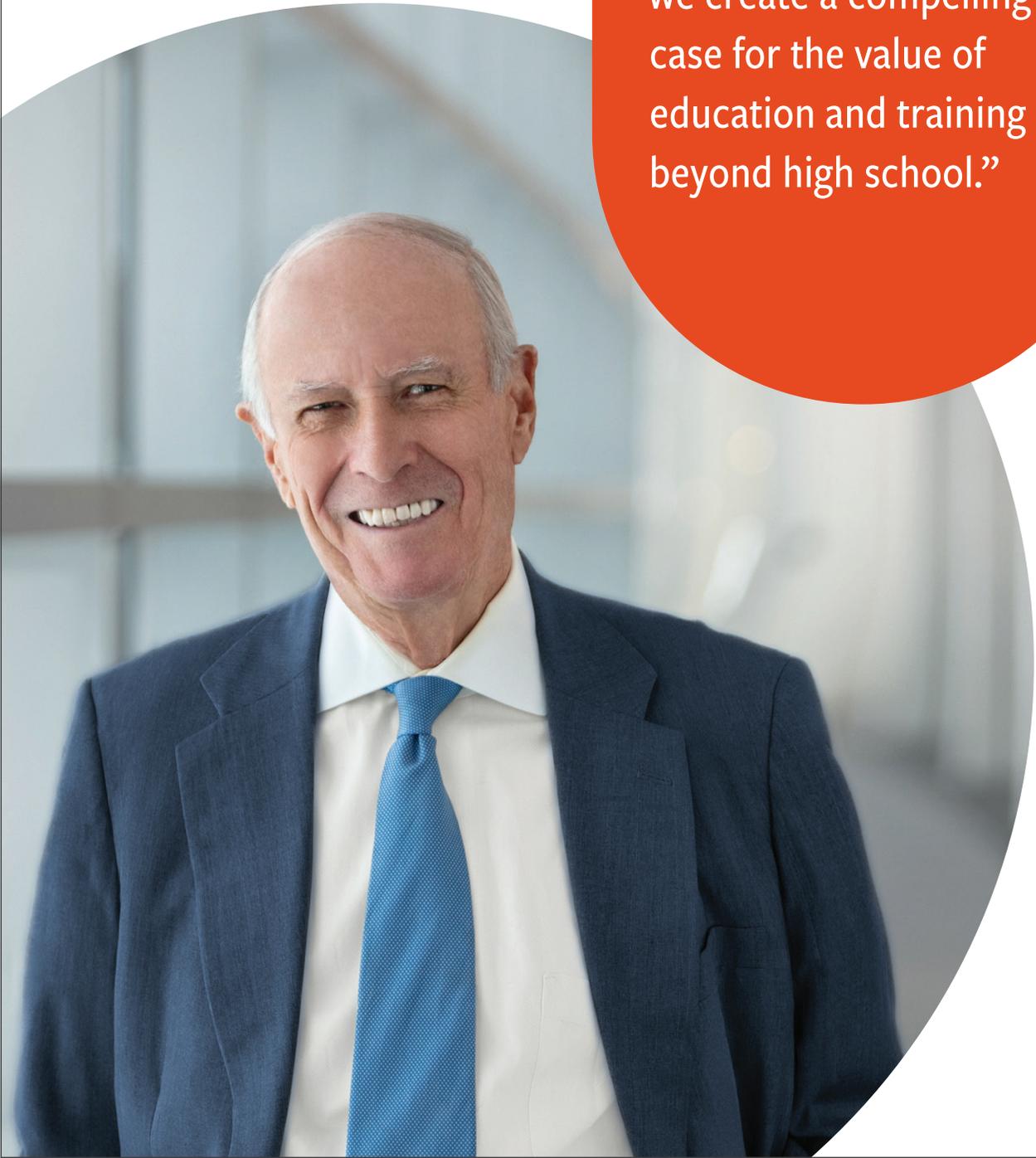


2023 Education Philanthropy Report

# From Learning to Action





“We must focus on tangible, long-term outcomes that matter to learners and employers. In doing so, we create a compelling case for the value of education and training beyond high school.”

## Turning Insights Into Success

As 2024 gets underway, it's clear that postsecondary education is facing some tough challenges, including the erosion of public confidence in college. Amid these difficult circumstances, I find renewed conviction in the power of postsecondary education and workforce training to transform lives.

Our philanthropy aims to improve outcomes for those who need postsecondary education or workforce training the most to achieve upward mobility. We do this by identifying key barriers for learners, supporting innovation, and generating an evidence base.

Our goal is to spur the adoption of what works at scale, informing policy decisions and funding at state and local levels. In 2023, we made nearly \$101 million in new grants toward this aim. Our decades of experience have taught us valuable lessons about the diverse paths learners from low-income backgrounds take to achieve success, reinforcing the understanding that a one-size-fits-all approach is inadequate. The evidence our partners develop is critical to ensuring that providers are delivering the best possible education and training.

The evolving landscape of postsecondary education and workforce training demands a collective effort to address the declining

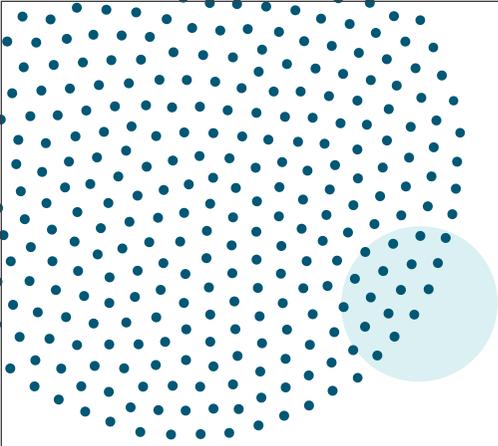
perception of the cost-to-value proposition for a degree or credential across the U.S. It is incumbent upon us to adapt and innovate postsecondary education and workforce training programs, providing more cost-effective paths aligned with the expectations and needs of learners from low-income backgrounds and employers. We must focus on tangible, long-term outcomes that matter to learners and employers. In doing so, we create a compelling case for the value of education and training beyond high school.

Equipped with the knowledge gained over the years, we must actively apply these insights to support those working to enhance postsecondary education and workforce training programs. Together, we can ensure that learners from low-income backgrounds have the opportunity to succeed.



**RICHARD D. GEORGE**

Chairman, President, & Chief Executive Officer  
Ascendium Education Group



# What Drives Our Philanthropy

The theme of this year's report is From Learning to Action. This reflects our belief about the most important role we can play as a funder: identifying needed areas of innovation, testing promising solutions, and then scaling the adoption of those with the strongest evidence.

This report shares numerous examples of how we've applied this approach. At the core of our philanthropic strategy is an assessment of what's needed given the barriers faced by learners from low-income backgrounds and the evolving world around us. We strive to make "the right grant at the right time" based on what we know and don't know.

In 2023, we deployed nearly \$101 million to grant partners, including significant investments to partners responding in real time to emerging opportunities.

- We sought out the most promising approaches for delivering the skills and credentials needed for high-demand jobs in critical industries. With federal infrastructure and green energy investments driving growth in well-paying jobs, we hope to ensure access to training that will give learners a solid economic footing in these sectors.



- We similarly seized the opportunity created by the reinstatement of Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated learners. Our goal is to catalyze the creation of high-quality postsecondary education in prison offerings — including those that provide seamless pathways for learners to access continued education or good careers after release.

As we undertake a refresh of our strategy in 2024, our commitment to "learning while doing" through our grantmaking and other activities will remain at the core. Look for more information about the strategy refresh later in the report.

We're proud of the efforts our grantmaking has made possible. We're also grateful to our grant partners whose tireless work on behalf of learners from low-income backgrounds inspires us and fuels the urgency with which we move forward.

**KEITH WITHAM**

Vice President – Education Philanthropy  
Ascendium Education Group



Scan this code to access our report online and see exclusive content.

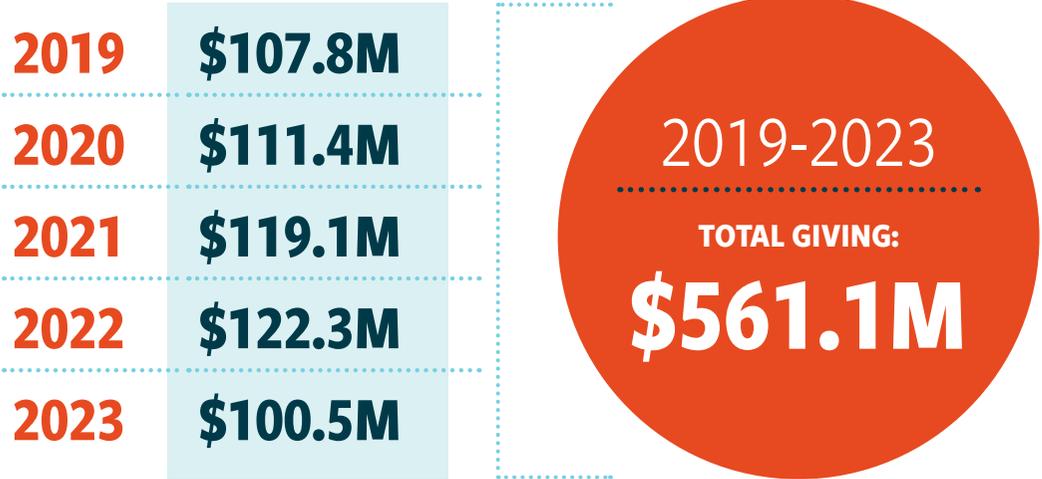
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# Five Years of Grantmaking, Five Years of Impact

We've scaled our funding to support partners in their efforts to drive systems change. Here's a look at our grantmaking over the last five years.

## Annual Giving



**Total Giving:** Includes our strategic grantmaking and other giving, such as corporate gifts, sponsorships, memberships, and grant funding to Strada to support its philanthropic efforts.

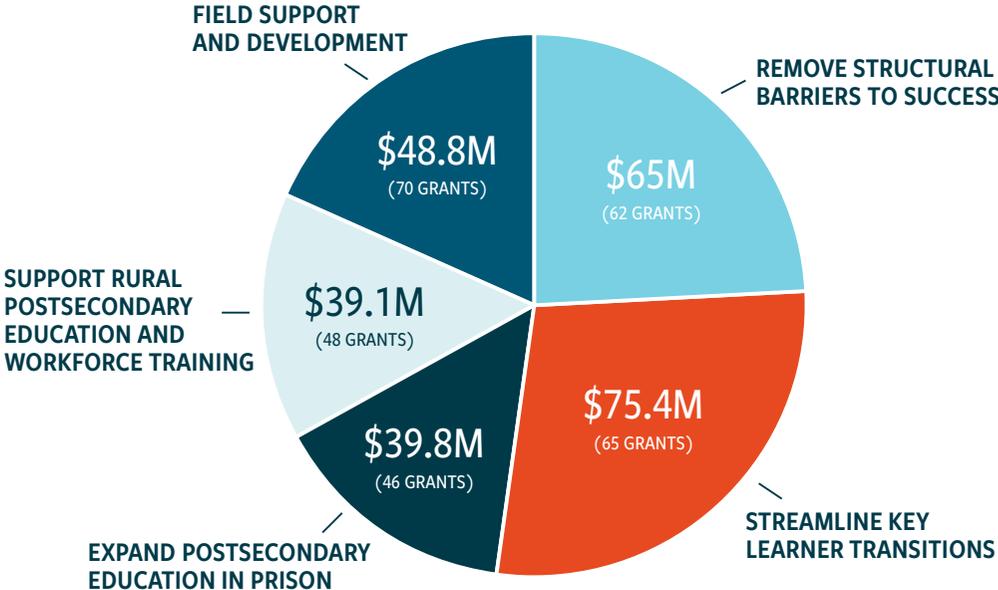
## Strategic Grantmaking

Grants awarded across all of our focus areas.

	GRANT DOLLARS	GRANTS
2019	\$20.6M	26
2020	\$44M	65
2021	\$48M	57
2022	\$70.5M	59
2023	\$85M	84



### BY FOCUS AREA 2019-2023



### BY CATEGORY 2019-2023



# How Our Grantmaking Contributes to Helping Learners

When we make grants to partners, we're consistently thinking about how we can maximize positive outcomes for learners from low-income backgrounds so they can achieve upward mobility. Ascendium contributes to change through the **exploration, validation, and scaling** of practices and models that can spark sustainable improvements to postsecondary education and workforce training systems.

Our **exploration** grants allow us and our partners to learn more about promising innovations that address persistent barriers for learners. As a funder, we're committed to spurring innovations where needed and then helping set up those reforms for effective evaluation. Many of our exploration grants involve piloting direct services to learners so that we and our partners can see what works and for whom.

Our **validation** grants support rigorous evaluations of promising innovations, reforms, or solutions. The insights from these grants help us understand where to invest further. They also guide others in their decision-making about where to allocate limited resources and which interventions are likely to bring about the desired results.

Our **scaling** grants aim to catalyze the widespread adoption of the most effective reforms and solutions. We know that even with strong evidence, not all solutions reach all learners who could potentially benefit from them. Scaling grants both directly support the expansion of proven models and target the enabling conditions necessary for their broader adoption.

 **Visit the All Grants page on our website to browse the grants we've made and learn more about the purpose of each grant.**

## A GROWING FOCUS ON VALIDATION

This year, we focused on growing our research and evaluation capacity to expand our investments in validation grants featuring an impact evaluation component.

We know well-constructed evidence is a critical tool for systems change. Rigorous, independent evaluation provides reliable information that practitioners and policymakers can use to make better decisions about how to allocate limited resources.

Through all our grantmaking, we hope to catalyze the adoption of the most effective solutions so that they reach the most learners possible. We can only accomplish that by creating evidence that others can use to drive large-scale change.



# Opportunities for Action

Each year brings new opportunities to change systems so that more learners from low-income backgrounds can achieve upward mobility. 2023 was no exception. It presented significant opportunities, from Pell Grant reinstatement for incarcerated learners to widespread efforts to better align postsecondary education with workforce needs and to close equity gaps in

completion rates. Our flexible but focused funding strategy enabled us to identify and respond quickly to the most urgent opportunities to advance our mission. This year, and every year, we aimed to seize the moment to make meaningful, lasting change.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION

### Strengthening the Field’s Capacity to Serve Incarcerated Learners

**OPPORTUNITY:** The reinstatement of Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated learners has opened the door to more equitable access to postsecondary education in prisons.

**WHY IT’S IMPORTANT:** High-quality postsecondary education in prison creates opportunities for lifetime autonomy and success.

- Of the nearly 2 million people currently incarcerated in the U.S., more than 600,000 re-enter society each year, seeking skills and employment (Source: National Institute of Justice).
- In building the field’s capacity to serve these learners better, we’re considering how to increase access to high-quality postsecondary education in prison and how to link those programs to post-release education and employment.

According to the Prison Policy Initiative, the U.S. spends about \$182 billion annually to incarcerate nearly 1% of its adult population. Historically, however, few resources go toward providing incarcerated individuals with access to high-quality postsecondary education. This is where philanthropy plays a crucial role.

July 2023 marked a turning point as the U.S. lifted its 26-year ban on Pell Grants for incarcerated learners. After many years preparing the field for this moment, Ascendium and its partners dedicated much of 2023 to exploring avenues to use new funding effectively.



Strengthening postsecondary education in prison involves reinforcing existing initiatives and fostering the emergence of new leaders and facilitators to advance the field.

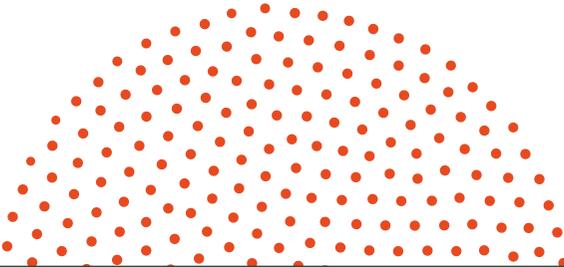


#### Building Capacity and Sustainability

Strengthening postsecondary education in prison involves reinforcing existing initiatives and fostering the emergence of new leaders and facilitators to advance the field. The **Alliance for Higher Education in Prison** is actively expanding its capacity to serve as a national resource and support center for postsecondary education in prison programs. This collaborative network will act as a convener and ensure that all stakeholders can engage in ongoing discussions on enhancing the quality and accessibility of postsecondary education in prison.

#### Paving the Path to Meaningful Employment Post-Release

Incarcerated learners’ success post-release depends upon the support they receive to gain a foothold in the workforce, including ensuring that the skills they gain while incarcerated apply to good jobs. That’s why we support the **LaunchCode Foundation’s** Unlocked Labs initiative, which empowers incarcerated learners with essential computer programming skills and facilitates their placement into technology-related jobs upon release. We’re eager to learn from models like LaunchCode that offer incarcerated learners a real chance for upward mobility and sustained employment.





### Strengthening Partnerships

Unlocking the potential of Pell Grant restoration requires forming strong partnerships to address the unique challenges of administering college programs behind bars. One such challenge involves facilitating the completion of a paper Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), a process distinct from the online application commonly used by non-incarcerated students. The **National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators** provides critical technical

assistance to financial aid officers and directors of postsecondary education in prison programs. Our intermediary grant partner, **Jobs for the Future**, supports 22 state systems and colleges through the Ready for Pell initiative. Participants receive financial and technical support toward enhancing postsecondary education in prison programs and building the capacity to leverage Pell Grants for eligible students. Together, these collaborative efforts seek to remove barriers and maximize the positive impact of Pell Grant restoration for incarcerated learners.

 [View our report online to learn more about initiatives to support incarcerated learners.](#)

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION

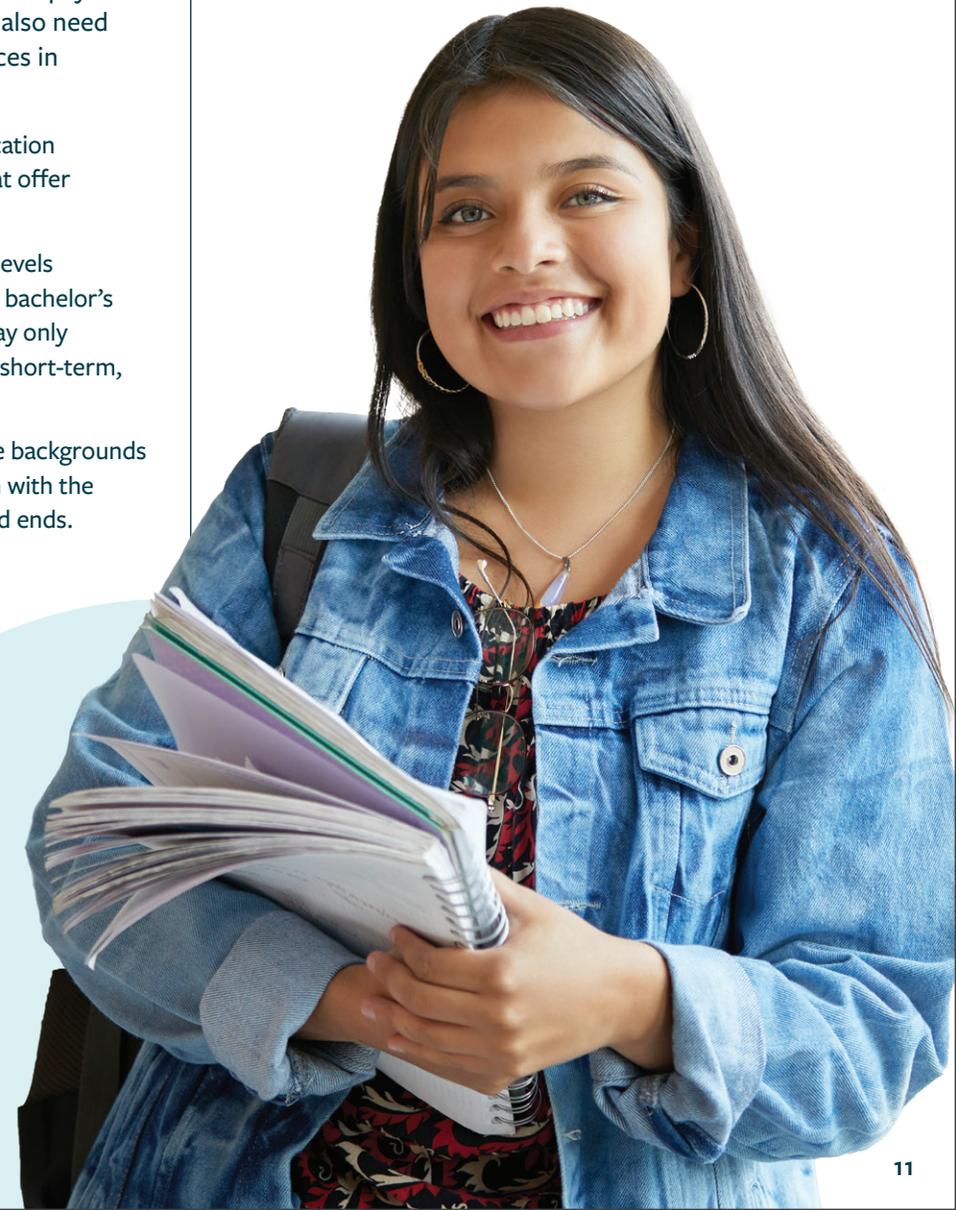
### Improving Career Connections for All Postsecondary Options

**OPPORTUNITY:** Learners have more options than ever for postsecondary education and workforce training, but not all offer the same likelihood of career success.

**WHY IT'S IMPORTANT:** Learners from low-income backgrounds need to know which option offers the best path to reach their goals and whether their investments of time and money will pay off. Policymakers, employers, and others also need to know where to invest their resources in developing the future workforce.

- There are many postsecondary education and workforce training pathways that offer a path to good career outcomes.
- There are good jobs that require all levels of training — from those requiring a bachelor’s or advanced degree to those that may only require a set of skills learned from a short-term, highly focused training program.
- Too often, learners from low-income backgrounds end up in programs that do not align with the needs of employers, resulting in dead ends.

Significant federal infrastructure and green energy investments add to the unmet demand for skilled workers in critical industries. Ascendium made significant investments during 2023 in identifying and validating promising training programs that provide learners with in-demand skills and connect them directly to employment in those sectors.



### Creating Accelerated Pathway Options for Young Adults

More learners are looking for guided, quick, and affordable pathways to employment. They also need pathways that put them on a route to a meaningful career with living wages. **Propel America** is exploring how to grow its “jobs-first” postsecondary education model that allows young adults to participate in accelerated, credit-bearing training to prepare for jobs in healthcare. Learners complete an industry-recognized credential that also counts for college credit, all while receiving career training and support that helps them get a good job upon completing the program.

### Studying Programs for Effectiveness and Outcomes

Typically, sectoral training programs provide specific skills required for jobs in certain industries. **Economic Mobility Corporation** is evaluating programs from two well-established nonprofit sectoral training providers — Project QUEST and Per Scholas — to see their impacts on the education and labor market outcomes for learners from low-

income backgrounds. Their evaluation also includes identifying key factors that are associated with positive education and workforce outcomes from those programs.

### Providing Funds to Expand a Proven Model

Project QUEST provides services to prepare learners for job readiness, placement, and retention in high-demand career pathways. Project QUEST strives to ensure the success of its learners by providing wraparound services and support to help them overcome barriers to success. With a 30-year history, Project QUEST has undergone rigorous external evaluations demonstrating its effectiveness in helping learners find employment and increase wages. **Project QUEST** will expand its evidence-based career training and job coaching services to more learners from low-income backgrounds.

### Education and Career Connections are Especially Important in Rural Places

While job growth in some rural areas presents opportunities for upward mobility, not all rural communities are experiencing the same trend or have the resources to seize growth opportunities. This year, Ascendium invested significantly in grants to trusted partners working in rural communities focused on creating opportunities for upward mobility.

### Developing and Strengthening New Training Pathways

For training pathways to be effective, they need to align with local labor market needs and lead to well-paying jobs in their regions. **Goodwill Industries International** is developing new training pathways that connect to local labor needs, particularly for young adults with low incomes in rural areas. They are doing this by coordinating efforts among workforce training providers and supporting learners as they complete training aligned with high-demand jobs.

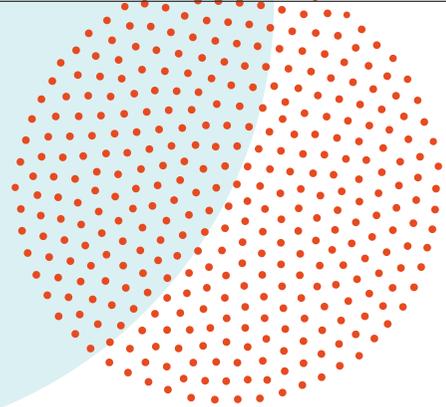
### Building Opportunities for Training

**The Families and Workers Fund** will scale career training programs aligned with workforce demands generated by federal investment in green energy and infrastructure. While the growth of new jobs in these industries could infuse new energy and economic opportunity into rural areas, realizing that potential will require the rapid development of new training pathways that are affordable and accessible for rural learners. The Fund will focus on helping rural communities build those training pathways and pair training with support to help learners access and complete them.

 [View our report online to learn more about grants that bolster postsecondary education and workforce connections to good jobs.](#)

While job growth in some rural areas presents opportunities for upward mobility, not all rural communities are experiencing the same trend or have the resources to seize growth opportunities.





## OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION

# Supporting Reforms That Effectively Reach All Learners

**OPPORTUNITY:** Learners from low-income backgrounds face circumstances that may cause them to drop out before earning a degree. Their success depends on redesigning postsecondary education institutions and systems to meet their needs.

**WHY IT'S IMPORTANT:** Addressing the barriers to success for learners from low-income backgrounds is essential to ensuring their opportunity for upward mobility.

- Today's students are often older, more diverse, working one or more jobs, raising families, and struggling to make ends meet.
- Our grantmaking focuses on identifying the most persistent barriers faced by learners from low-income backgrounds and then exploring and testing the most promising solutions for removing them.
- We engage networks of institutions transforming themselves to be more student centered. This includes reshaping how they deliver courses, advise students, set schedules, and revise policies that may disproportionately impact learners from low-income backgrounds.

In the initial months of college, students often experience a mix of excitement and anxiety. These months can be a pivotal period for today's students, with the potential to shape their entire college experience. We recognize the significance of supporting initiatives that enable students to establish early momentum and swiftly overcome challenges, considering these efforts integral to our grantmaking.

To ensure the sustained academic well-being of learners from low-income backgrounds, postsecondary education institutions must adopt strategies focused on retaining students from pre-enrollment through early course successes. The good news is there's a growing range of innovative and promising strategies and evidence of what works.

 [View our report online to learn more about initiatives to close completion rates.](#)

## Tackling Early Student Attrition

In collaboration with the **Institute for Evidence-Based Change** and **RAND Corporation**, Ascendium is actively supporting community colleges in Texas in implementing student-centered practices that enhance learners' sense of belonging. Decades of research show that learners who feel connected to their postsecondary institution are more likely to persist and complete their education. Through these initiatives, we hope to explore strategies for capturing and addressing early student loss that can be shared with and adopted by other campuses.

## Improving Student Placement Strategies

Traditional practices of placing incoming students into introductory, or "gatekeeper," English and math courses based solely on standardized test performance can inadvertently hinder the success of many learners, particularly those from low-income backgrounds. In contrast, adopting multiple measures assessments, using a variety

of assessment tools, has been correlated with higher completion rates and more equitable student outcomes. This is why we support **MDRC**, in collaboration with the **Community College Research Center (CCRC) at Teachers College, Columbia University**, in scaling the adoption of multiple measures assessment systems for student placement in math and English.

## Examining Barriers for English-Language Learners

English-language learners constitute a diverse and rapidly expanding subgroup of students, often hailing from low-income backgrounds. The journey to equip these learners with essential language skills and credentials faces significant obstacles, including curricular misalignment, operational inefficiencies, and ineffective classroom practices. Research initiatives by **WestEd** and **CCRC** are laying the foundation for broader efforts to fundamentally change how English-language learners are provided the opportunity and support to succeed in postsecondary education.



Initiatives that enable students to establish early momentum and swiftly overcome challenges are integral to our grantmaking.



## OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION

# Building Urgency and Inspiring Change Through Strategic Media Partnerships

As we move from learning to action, distributing information to the people who can advocate for and make systems change is key. Media is vital for creating policy and institutional change, helping to build urgency around issues critical to improving postsecondary education and workforce training outcomes. High-quality storytelling and reporting can help build urgency around the most pressing problems and make clear the stakes for addressing them. And when media highlights problems alongside evidence-based solutions, successful practices have the potential to scale up.

In short, effective media can help create the conditions for large-scale change.

This is why we have continued investing in media partnerships, ending 2023 with 15 partners across our focus areas. These partnerships include support for nonprofit news, podcasts, documentaries, and newsletters.

Our media grants highlight strategies that work and inspire others to take notice and action. By partnering with media organizations, we can support and disseminate innovative solutions, all while amplifying the voices of the learners our grantmaking aims to serve.

## The three goals of our media partnerships show our commitment to turning information into action.

1

**Supporting Narrative Change:** We aim to support media storytelling that connects people on many levels, including emotionally. When media elevates low-income learners' voices, they can speak directly to the reader to help make real what could otherwise feel abstract or insurmountable.

Supporting narrative change also means connecting personal stories to larger conversations and, ideally, increasing public engagement with underrepresented issues. **Open Campus** is one example of this approach. Their in-depth reporting explores voices and issues shaping postsecondary education and workforce training. Through our partnership, they are increasing their coverage of rural communities and prisons.

2

**Informing the Public Agenda:** Narrative change can create the conditions for systems change when stories reach organizations, networks, and members of the public who can advocate for and scale solutions. Media with that kind of reach can communicate the stakes of particular issues and shape the social context in which policymakers and the public evaluate which issues to act on.

For instance, **Three Frame Media** is producing a short film to change the social mobility narrative for student parents and adult learners.

3

Their film intends to celebrate and elevate their belonging in postsecondary education, changing the public's perception of these learners while highlighting programs, policies, and ideas supporting their success.

### **Creating Policy and Institutional Change:**

For public backing to become policy and institutional change, momentum is critical. Media amplification can encourage policymakers, communities, and government agencies to push the needle to solve complex, persistent problems.

The **Hechinger Report** and **The Chronicle of Higher Education** are two partners leveraging media amplification to make a national impact. Both publications provide information by elevating reforms, relevant research, and best practices so that key stakeholders can change systems to better serve learners.

**Our media partnerships aim to support media organizations and networks' long-term capacity to produce high-quality content that shares information and inspires action.**

When media highlights problems alongside evidence-based solutions, successful practices have the potential to scale up.

## Partnering to Catalyze Change

We are incredibly grateful to the many grant partners we've had over the years. As we support research organizations, colleges, workforce training providers, and large-scale initiatives, we recognize and celebrate these partners' critical work to support learners from low-income backgrounds. To maximize the impact of our grantmaking, we aim to be more than a source of funding. We strive to be a true collaborator.

### Building Relationships

One of the ways we do this is by connecting applicants and grantees to other funders. On average, nearly half of the projects we've funded since 2020 also receive funding from other sources.

We engage in co-funding for many reasons.

- To support projects with a larger budget that exist outside of, yet complementing, our current strategic priorities.
- To support grant partners, especially newer or smaller organizations, in building diversified funding streams and relationships with other funders.
- To amplify the message that funders send to the field about what's important.

- To help advance a cohesive vision for systemic reform.
- To learn more about topics related to our strategy.

### Investing in Infrastructure

We also proactively invest in infrastructure to support more funder collaboration in areas where Ascendium is unique in having an explicit focus. Historically, incarcerated and rural learners have benefited less from large national reform efforts funded by philanthropies. To build the supportive infrastructure for this mission-critical work, we are currently engaged in planning phases to do the following.

- Convene funders with interests in or related to rural and postsecondary education in prison.
- Identify common investment priorities.
- Explore options for collaboration.

### Identifying Areas of Innovation and Investment

Our philanthropic investment strategy is catalytic, lending momentum to key issues at the right moments. Rather than providing sustained funding at an increasingly larger scale, we learn

from our grant partners by asking them about areas primed for innovation and investment. Pooling funds allows us to leverage our philanthropic investment in these areas to build local capacity, including data, leadership, and infrastructure for collaboration. These capacities are critical for our partners and their constituents to leverage broader private and public resources and strengthen their collective impact.

One example of pooled funding in action is the Families and Workers Fund. The Fund is a national, multi-donor pooled fund focused on supporting low- and middle-income families and workers. As part of our contribution to the Fund, we support their work on powering climate and infrastructure

To maximize the impact of our grantmaking, we aim to be more than a source of funding. We strive to be a true collaborator.

careers in rural communities. We also serve on the Powering Climate and Infrastructure Careers for All Advisory Board, where we have learned more about the issues impacting workers and learners who are interested in new career opportunities in clean energy and infrastructure but have systemically been unable to get a foot in the door. The Fund has allowed us to be in community with other funders, frontline leaders, grantees, and experts who are working toward developing and supporting job pathways that enable economic security and mobility for workers and families.

We see such partnerships as a promising agent for accelerating our mission and igniting change.



## Refining Our Strategy to Maximize Impact

At Ascendium, we strive to balance focusing on our grantmaking strategy with responding to the evolving world around us. To ensure we stay aligned to the most urgent needs and opportunities and to maximize the potential impact of our grantmaking, we'll launch a refreshed strategy in 2024 to guide our grantmaking over the coming years.

Our refreshed strategy will build upon the learning and impact we've achieved over the past five years. We're examining both where we've seen progress and where we need to renew our commitment to address the thorniest and more enduring barriers facing learners from low-income backgrounds. Our ultimate goal is to embark on the next chapter of our philanthropy with a clear focus on outcomes and a strong theory of change to guide our grantmaking.

Even as we refresh our strategy, some things won't change. We will maintain our commitment to focus resources and strategies on ensuring opportunity for the diverse population of learners from low-income backgrounds, including rural and incarcerated learners. Our broad philanthropic approach will also remain. We will continue to invest in promising early-stage ideas in postsecondary education and workforce training, support testing those promising models to build evidence, and foster conditions for scaling successful models within and between various systems through which they reach learners.

As the landscape of postsecondary education evolves, so does our philanthropy. We eagerly anticipate sharing the details of our new strategy through Ascendium communications in 2024.

## 2023 BOARD OF DIRECTORS



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