

2024 Education
Philanthropy Report



SHAPING OUR FUTURE



Executive Chairman's Message

Creating Pathways to Opportunity

“By expanding access to and tapping into a broader pool of talent, we create **opportunities for everyone to succeed**, regardless of their starting point.”

Effective education pathways for learners from low-income backgrounds have long fallen short. A contentious presidential election has heightened tensions within already challenged postsecondary education and workforce training systems, adding to the strain. Although we now know the election outcome, public policy questions remain unresolved, leaving room for changes in the years ahead.

In such uncertain times, staying focused on our mission is critical. This year, we renewed our commitment to expanding opportunities for learners from low-income backgrounds. We conducted a comprehensive evaluation of our grantmaking strategies, refining our approach to better align with our goals. By early 2025, we will fully transition to a refreshed grantmaking strategy, laying the groundwork for even greater impact.

At the same time, the national need for skilled workers has never been more urgent. A recent report from the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce predicts that by 2031, 72% of jobs will require at least some postsecondary education and training after high school.

Yet, millions of Americans, particularly those from underserved communities, lack access to these critical pathways. We envision a world where learners from low-income backgrounds can succeed in these fields. Unlocking this talent pool is essential to meeting workforce needs and investing in our economy's vitality.

By expanding access to and tapping into a broader pool of talent, we create opportunities for everyone to succeed, regardless of their starting point. This commitment reflects both the foundation of our mission and the vision of our board.

While the coming year will undoubtedly bring new challenges and opportunities, we are confident that our strategy will continue to drive meaningful outcomes for the people we serve.

RICHARD D. GEORGE

Executive Chairman
Ascendum Education Group

2024 TOTAL GIVING

\$176.5 MILLION
Total Funds Awarded

Our giving is comprehensive and includes our strategic grantmaking, corporate gifts, sponsorships, and memberships.

Funding to Achieve Impactful Outcomes

Here is a look at our funding this year to improve postsecondary education and workforce training systems.

SIGNIFICANT AREAS OF GRANTMAKING

There were several areas where we saw opportunity in 2024 for concerted effort across focus areas to address timely opportunities. The following are examples of these.

-  **\$14M** to expand and evaluate apprenticeships as an effective path to good jobs.
-  **\$35.7M** to expand, evaluate, and build the capacity of nonprofit sectoral workforce training providers with a mission to create direct paths to good jobs.
-  **\$18M** to strengthen postsecondary education in prison programs through technical assistance and capacity building.



FIELD ENGAGEMENT AND KNOWLEDGE SHARING

In 2024, we funded the sharing of compelling and actionable ideas, research, and findings, which are key to our mission.



\$21.6M

in independent evaluation of innovation and reforms in postsecondary education and workforce training.

\$1.2M

to support mission-aligned convenings and conferences. This includes travel grants and sponsorships.

\$3.7M

to support the work of media partners in highlighting issues and promising solutions.

◀◀ We hosted our first convening of grantees engaged in providing postsecondary education in prison.

STRATEGIC GRANTMAKING HIGHLIGHTS

Strategic grantmaking helps our partners explore, validate, and scale postsecondary education and workforce training models that work for today's learners.

Since 2019, Ascendium has awarded a total of **\$428.5M** in strategic grantmaking.

\$69.2M

Streamline Key Learner Transitions

\$35.5M

Remove Structural Barriers to Success

\$160.4 MILLION

\$1.3M

Other Mission-Aligned Grants

\$12.8M

Support Rural Postsecondary Education and Workforce Training

\$11.9M

Field Support and Development

\$29.8M

Expand Postsecondary Education in Prison



President’s Message

Refining Our Philanthropy for Lasting Change

The theme of our 2024 report, Shaping Our Future, reflects our commitment to contributing to a better future for the individual learners who are at the center of all we do, as well as for their families, their communities, and our national economy and society. When we remove barriers to postsecondary education and workforce training for learners from low-income backgrounds and ensure there are viable paths to upward mobility, everybody wins.

In 2024, we made over \$160 million in grants to partners who share that commitment. We are immensely proud of and inspired by the work our partners accomplished throughout the year. We are also grateful for what we have learned from them.

But there is much more to do and learn. Too many people remain stuck in low-wage jobs with no clear alternative in sight. Some look at the costs and rigid structures of postsecondary education and workforce training and conclude that they are not worth doing. For those learners who do invest time and money to build a better future, the current systems create barrier after barrier to their success.

We, as a country, can do better. The promise that education beyond high school will lead to a better life has — for too many learners — not been kept. Those committed to the promise of education and training, including us, must continue to learn how to reshape and align the systems meant to deliver on it.

That is why, throughout 2024, we reviewed and refined our strategy. Seeking greater clarity about what we hope to achieve and how, we asked: How can we maximize our grantmaking’s impact to meet the scale of our aspirations? With our access to evidence and insight, how can we better position ourselves to aggregate and share that information? How can we best support our partners as they remain steadfast in their commitment to our shared goals?

As we move ahead with this renewed focus, we remain committed to stewarding Ascendium’s resources with a sense of urgency for renewing the promise of postsecondary education and workforce training for those who need it most.

Thank you for joining us in shaping a better future.

KEITH WITHAM
President and Chief Executive Officer
Ascendium Education Group

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“When we remove barriers to postsecondary education and workforce training for learners from low-income backgrounds and ensure there are **viable paths to upward mobility**, everybody wins.”

— KEITH WITHAM



Building Evidence and Enabling Conditions for Change in 2024

Behind every grant lies a story of vision, collaboration, hard work, and lessons learned. Through our partners, we learn about what works, for whom, and under what conditions. With these insights, we explore, validate, and scale postsecondary education and workforce training models that work for today’s learners.

With evidence, we aim to create more effective learning and training options that lead to living-wage employment. We also support strategies to help learners succeed and to connect and align

learning and training systems to ensure all learning counts towards credentials with labor market value.

Our capacity to support our philanthropic mission grows each year, furthering our opportunity to make an impact. Whether funding a new idea or supporting the scaling of an effective practice, these stories highlight our investments in the pursuit of building better futures for learners from low-income backgrounds.



Amplifying Information to Spark Systems Change

Through strategic media partnerships, we support organizations working to help increase the public understanding of issues impacting learners from low-income backgrounds, draw attention to promising solutions, and build urgency for change.

◀◀◀ Paul Fain, co-founder of Work Shift and editor of The Job, speaks about the importance of reporting on the connections between education and work. Work Shift was one of our **19 media partners** in 2024.

Creating More Effective Learning and Training Opportunities

For learners from low-income backgrounds looking to postsecondary education or workforce training to secure a better economic future, the path to and through these opportunities should be clear; however, many programs with strong outcomes are inaccessible, unaffordable, or incompatible with the lives and responsibilities of learners. These programs should also align with careers.

Ascendium supports the development and evaluation of learning and training opportunities that support these learners. We are committed to exploring new opportunities that respond to

emerging labor market needs and helping to expand proven-effective programs so more learners can access and obtain credentials that offer a strong return on their investment.

Apprenticeships and sectoral workforce training programs are two models that show promise; however, we need to learn more about how and for whom these models can be most effective. Our partners are working to expand the reach of these opportunities while also contributing to that learning.

Serving More Learners Through New Sectoral Training Programs Change

Sectoral training programs train individuals for existing jobs in high-demand sectors that do not require a four-year college degree, providing an alternate pathway for learners to achieve upward mobility. Evidence continues to build about the components of effective programs. There is also a strong demand for well-trained workers in good jobs that require non-degree credentials and training.

Merit America, a national workforce development nonprofit, is building new sectoral training pathways to good jobs for learners from low-income backgrounds. In response to unique opportunities in industries receiving historic federal investments, Merit America is expanding its programming to serve more learners and offer new tracks in fields such as human resources, semiconductor and advanced manufacturing, and supply chain and logistics.

The organization will offer financing for learners to complete these training pathways through the Opportunity Coalition, raising up-front capital to support direct learner financing via zero percent, outcomes-based loans. Additionally, Merit America will continue to evaluate its sectoral training programs, using the evidence to improve its programming so that more learners can achieve upward mobility.

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS CRITICAL TO UPWARD MOBILITY

Institutions with dedicated missions and those that serve disproportionately large populations of learners from low-income backgrounds, such as community colleges, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and rural-serving institutions, among others, play a critical role in creating pathways to upward mobility. We support these institutions in building their capacity to carry out their vital roles and to share their expertise by developing evidence and insights to inform the broader field.

Best-in-class nonprofit workforce training providers also play a vital role in creating new paths to good jobs in high-demand fields. Organizations such as NPower and Per Scholas, for example, provide specialized training paired with robust supports. They also partner directly with employers to make rewarding careers in tech more accessible to all.



Expanding Apprenticeship Pathways
to Develop Wisconsin's Future Workforce

In Wisconsin, significant federal investments and industry growth are resulting in projections for thousands of new jobs in the skilled trades over the next few years. This has led to an urgent need for industries who need tradespeople to enhance workforce development initiatives and take bold steps to grow the pipeline of future workers.

A grant to the **Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership (WRTP) | Building Industry Group Skilled Trades Program (BIG STEP)** supports an expansion of the organization's reach as a statewide workforce intermediary responsible for increasing access to apprenticeship opportunities. The grant also supports Wisconsin's Pathways to Apprenticeship Program, which addresses the need for enhanced awareness and engagement around apprenticeship pathways, particularly for rural learners from low-income backgrounds.

Through this program, WRTP | BIG STEP will provide quality credentialed training and placement of underserved and underrepresented learner populations into good jobs supported by pre-apprenticeship and Registered Apprenticeship programs. This initiative will also bring together stakeholders to build a workforce framework to meet Wisconsin's infrastructure needs.

Growing the Availability of High-Quality
Guidance for Postsecondary Education
in Prison Programs

The reinstatement of Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated learners has led to growth in postsecondary education in prison programs. This presents an opportunity for the field to identify and implement practices and models that best serve these learners. However, few resources are widely available to ensure these programs result in good learner outcomes.

American Institutes for Research (AIR) is launching an initiative to significantly increase the availability of high-quality best practice guidance for postsecondary education in prison programs. Through this initiative, AIR is helping to identify, strengthen, and disseminate resources drawing on the expertise of existing programs. These resources will help other providers as they develop new programs or expand existing ones, ensuring that programs can effectively serve learners and create supportive pathways to continued education or employment after release.



We are committed to exploring new opportunities that respond to emerging labor market needs and helping to **expand proven-effective programs** so more learners can access and obtain credentials that offer a strong return on their investment.



➡ View the online report to read additional stories.



BUILDING EVIDENCE AND ENABLING CONDITIONS FOR CHANGE

Developing Strategies So Learners Can Succeed

Postsecondary education and workforce training offer transformative opportunities, but many learners from low-income backgrounds encounter barriers in pursuing them. The traditional college experience caters to a type of student who now represents a minority among learners pursuing postsecondary education or workforce training.

Indeed, today's learners are parents, caregivers, and working adults, juggling those responsibilities with the desire to continue their education. They need programs that align with their goals, help them succeed, and lead to wages that justify their investment.

We focus on building systems that meet these learners where they are. Through our grantmaking, our partners develop and scale strategies that empower learners to succeed — whether by overcoming early challenges in critical courses or finding clear pathways to in-demand careers. By supporting strategies that help learners balance learning, work, and life, we clear the paths for them to achieve their goals.

Preparing the STEM Workforce of Tomorrow

Entry-level science courses often prevent learners — especially those from low-income backgrounds — from pursuing STEM degrees and careers. Failing these courses limits access to high demand fields and fuels a troubling trend. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 69% of community college students who start in STEM switch to non-STEM majors or leave college altogether.

To address this, the Ohio Strong Start in Science (OhioSSS) initiative, a partnership among the **Ohio Department of Higher Education**, the Community College Research Center, and 17 colleges and universities, aims to improve STEM outcomes by reforming placement practices, curricula, and instruction in critical biology and chemistry courses. It will also implement promising approaches such as corequisite support models.

This work is vital as Ohio faces surging demand for STEM graduates, driven by projects like Intel's \$20 billion semiconductor complex, expected to create 20,000 jobs.

Scaling Success for Strong Starts

Louisiana faces significant challenges in postsecondary education. Only 51% of working-age adults hold a degree or credential (*Source: Louisiana Board of Regents*). Improving first-year success is critical, as earning nine credit hours in a program of study during the first year increases graduation likelihood by 40% (*Source: Community College Resource Center*). However, low success rates in key gateway courses and limited career guidance hinder students in reaching these milestones.

Through the **Louisiana Board of Regents**, Louisiana's public colleges and universities are scaling strategies grounded in the Louisiana Meauxmentum Framework, an evidence-based approach tailored to the state's needs. The initiative provides implementation grants, technical assistance, and statewide networking to enhance outcomes in foundational courses and improve curricular engagement. These efforts will help students select academic focus areas and connect their studies to future careers.

[View the online report to read additional stories.](#)



Advancing Opportunities for English-Language Learners

English-language learners face additional barriers to postsecondary education and workforce training beyond those experienced by other learners. English-language learners must try to navigate unclear pathways while also gaining the English language skills necessary to succeed. To address these challenges, the **Texas Community College Education Initiative** aims to reform placement and curricular systems that hinder these learners from transitioning into workforce training or degree programs. It also focuses on expanding academic support and financial aid access to better serve these learners.

In collaboration with WestEd and Student-Ready Strategies, the initiative equips Texas community colleges with technical assistance and resources to create smoother transitions for English-language learners. By aligning these reforms with workforce demands and leveraging incentives like Texas House Bill 8, which ties funding to credential completion, the initiative aims to meet Texas's growing needs for skilled workers, as 70% of the state's jobs will soon require a postsecondary credential.



Today's learners need programs that **align with their goals**, help them succeed, and lead to wages that justify their investment.

STRENGTHENING RURAL PROGRAMS AND PARTNERSHIPS TO IMPROVE STUDENT SUCCESS

Ascendium is committed to learning about promising innovations, reforms, and solutions that connect rural learners from low-income backgrounds to postsecondary education and workforce training pathways that lead to good jobs.

Rural community colleges face unique challenges, including constrained resources, high staff turnover, and limited data capacity. These constraints have left them mostly excluded from national reform efforts, like the guided pathways movement, which requires long-term planning and effort to help students earn useful credentials.

The National Center for Inquiry and Improvement is expanding guided pathways reforms at rural community colleges and adding new colleges to an existing cohort. The initiative aims to help rural colleges strengthen their programs and partnerships to improve student success and align credentials with local labor market needs.

Aligning Learning and Training Systems for Today’s Mobile Learners

Learners today are more mobile than ever. It is common to accumulate job-relevant skills across a range of formal and informal educational experiences. However, as learners move between institutions or complete training through multiple sources, they may find that their previous experiences do not amount to a completed credential.

Postsecondary education institutions’ policies and practices have yet to fully catch up with the mobility of learners and the diversity of their prior learning experiences.

Exacerbating the challenges learners face in getting credit for all their relevant learning and skills, systems of postsecondary education, workforce, and corrections operate in silos. Learners whose lives intersect with multiple systems can face additional barriers to a high-quality credential when those systems fail to connect.

By linking infrastructure and coordinating across systems, we can improve learners’ ability to move between institutions while successfully completing credentials of value.

Sharing Best Practices to Support Learner and Credit Mobility

Learners can acquire skills and college credits by moving between jobs, sectors, places, institutions, and even types of institutions. Learners from low-income backgrounds are more likely to face barriers when getting their prior learning counted toward a degree, which contributes to lower rates of degree completion.

Ithaka S+R is collecting best practices from postsecondary education institutions that are taking proactive and comprehensive approaches to recognizing and applying credits for learners’ previous educational experiences. Their pilot project, focused on aligning policies, practices, and technological tools within postsecondary

education systems, aims to help institutions learn how to support learner and credit mobility, thereby saving learners time and money while increasing their chance of success.

Building Rural Education-to-Employment Partnerships


When education and training programs closely match local employers’ needs, then learners have a direct path to a good job in their communities. This is especially important in rural communities, where a lack of partnership across sectors, outdated training programs, and high turnover in postsecondary education leadership can prevent this alignment.



CivicLab, a project of the Columbus Learning Center Management Corporation, is developing education-to-employment partnerships in 10 rural communities. They are bringing together workforce leaders and postsecondary education and training providers to build sustainable, integrated talent development ecosystems for rural learners.

Expanding New England’s Capacity for Postsecondary Education in Prison

Throughout New England, only 1,000 out of the 128,000 incarcerated individuals have access to postsecondary education in prison. The **New England Board of Higher Education** is collaborating across and within six New England prison systems to increase the quantity and quality of their postsecondary education offerings. This approach will build capacity within the region to maximize the availability of Pell Grants for incarcerated learners.

 View the online report to read additional stories.

CREATING MEANINGFUL PATHWAYS FOR INCARCERATED LEARNERS

In partnership with our grantees, we are committed to improving pathways for learners with a history of incarceration. The **Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy (VICPP)** is exploring cross-sector partnerships as a strategy for expanding postsecondary education in prison. The Virginia Department of Corrections system serves only three percent of college-eligible learners each semester. VICPP’s goal is to scale education programs eligible for Pell Grant funding across the state’s prisons.

To do this, VICPP will undertake a wide-ranging public awareness campaign. They will educate key stakeholders on the benefits of educational opportunities in prison, which includes providing accurate, accessible information to incarcerated learners.

VICPP will also establish a statewide coalition of leaders in postsecondary education, corrections, economic development and business, politics, and faith-based organizations as well as justice-impacted individuals themselves. The coalition will help develop and advocate for high-quality educational offerings in Virginia’s prisons.



With good evidence, we aim to **shift postsecondary education and workforce training systems to produce better outcomes** for learners from low-income backgrounds.

Creating Evidence that **Catalyzes Change** to Learning and Training Systems

As a learning organization, we believe that credible evidence is critical to the continuous improvement of postsecondary education and workforce training systems. This can happen at two key levels. First, individual organizations can generate and use evidence to refine and improve their work. Second, evidence produced by high-quality independent evaluations helps all of us — practitioners, policymakers, funders — better understand the policies, practices, and programs that are most impactful and warrant scaling. Good evidence, therefore, helps shift the postsecondary education and workforce training systems overall and the organizations within those systems to produce better outcomes for learners from low-income backgrounds.

Supporting Our Partners in Assessing and Learning from Progress, Success, and Failure

When entering a new grant partnership, we support all partners in setting and reporting on key milestones. This ensures we have a shared understanding of progress, success, and what we could learn and share with others. Critical first steps include helping partners prioritize the right activities and outputs that can lead to meaningful change for learners, organizations, and systems.

We then support partners over the duration of the grant to reflect on those milestones, understand their progress, and if necessary, adapt in real-time based on the lessons learned.

Investing in Independent Evaluations

Independent evaluations can build evidence about what works and for whom. Evaluations can also deepen our understanding of the conditions that enable or prohibit the expansion of proven solutions. Our main goal in funding evaluations, or validation grants, is to increase the number of reforms and innovations that improve outcomes for learners from low-income backgrounds.

Our continued partnership with Dr. Ben Castleman at the **University of Virginia** provides an example. Castleman's research team is conducting an evaluation of Merit America, a sectoral training provider. The evaluation supports Merit America in continuously improving its suite of programs while contributing to a shifting narrative about the effectiveness of workforce training programs. It will also hopefully catalyze new policy action to support training programs, like those offered by Merit America, that deliver upward mobility for learners.

Continuing Our Commitment to the Future

In 2024, we...

-  Awarded over \$160 Million in grants to support impactful initiatives.
-  Refined our grantmaking approach to better support innovative solutions that drive systems change for more learners.
-  Focused on building systems that eliminate barriers and help learners balance earning and learning, paving the way for upward mobility.
-  Aligned practices across systems help learners transition smoothly and complete credentials of value.

In 2025, we are...

-  Rolling out a refined strategy to help us maximize our impact in the future.
-  Continuing to leverage media partnerships to elevate learner experiences and share solutions.
-  Exploring new ways to share insights and foster collaboration among education leaders.



Great ideas thrive through connection.

In 2024, we gathered postsecondary education in prison grantees in Montgomery, Alabama, to share insights, spark collaboration, and inspire innovation. We look forward to expanding this practice with more grantees in 2025 and beyond.

2024 Board of Directors



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