

MEETING THE MOMENT





 **I continue to be impressed by our grant partners and the critical work they perform in a rapidly changing world to ensure all learners can find a path to upward mobility.** 

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

The Moments Shaping Our Grantmaking

At Ascendum, we hold firm to the belief that the power of education and training beyond high school is transformative. Postsecondary education and workforce training continue to be the most effective way for learners to achieve upward mobility. The benefits of that extend far beyond the individual as well.

Our belief is clearly reflected in our grantmaking efforts each year, and in 2022, we awarded \$122 million in new grants. Through our grantmaking, we are driven by exploring innovative ideas, building an evidence base and scaling effective practices so that more learners from low-income backgrounds can achieve their education and career goals.

By itself, this is important and challenging work. When you layer in the constantly changing world around us, all involved have an even greater task and responsibility to meet the moments in front of us.

The aftermath of the COVID-19 health crisis is certainly one such

moment, which has continued to surface inequities for learners, especially those from low-income backgrounds. For example, data from the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) Research Center shows that fewer students successfully transferred from community colleges to four-year institutions during the health crisis. We will continue to support future systems change to help these transferring learners complete their degrees.

Additionally, we are in a moment as a nation where significant investments and policy changes at the federal level are creating both opportunity and urgency for our grant partners. One example is the reinstatement of Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated learners coming in July 2023. Our grantmaking supports partners like Jobs for the Future and the Vera Institute of Justice in their work to build the field's readiness to serve these learners when they gain renewed access to critical financial aid resources to support their journey through postsecondary education in prison.

Ascendum is grateful for our partnerships to advance equitable education and workforce training outcomes for learners from low-income backgrounds. I continue to be impressed by our grant partners and the critical work they perform in a rapidly changing world to ensure all learners can find a path to upward mobility. We look to the future with excitement and optimism, knowing their work has the potential to make a lasting, positive impact on the learners of today and tomorrow.



Richard D. George

Chairman, President &
Chief Executive Officer
Ascendum Education Group

Meeting the Moment

As we see continued rapid change — social, economic, political, demographic and technological — the investments we make must meet the demands and opportunities of the pivotal moments that result. Our grantmaking in response to the moments from the past year will yield benefits for learners from low-income backgrounds for years to come.

Let's take a closer look at some of the ways that Ascendum is meeting the moments of 2022.

1

Shifting research to better meet the knowledge needs of decision-makers.

Ascendum's Learning and Impact team helps us make better research grants that support improved decision-making by practitioners, policymakers and philanthropists. Through building and sharing actionable evidence, we provide stakeholders with the information they need to ultimately change practices, policies and programs that inhibit the success of learners from low-income backgrounds.

2

Refining our grantmaking strategy to fund work that pushes progress in solving problems in key areas.

We understand we have a lot to discover about the most significant challenges that learners from low-income backgrounds face and how to optimize impact in addressing those challenges. We continue to use our findings to refine and narrow our investment priorities in each focus area.

3

Evolving and growing our team to support the expansion of our grantmaking.

By evolving and growing our team, we can better support the increase in the volume of our grantmaking, best serve our grant partners and design and implement large-scale initiatives targeting the most persistent barriers to success for low-income learners.

CONTENTS

President's Message	1
Meeting the Moment	2
Highlighting Our Grantmaking in 2022.....	4
New Grants Furthering Systems Change	6
Elevating Partner and Learner Information through Strategic Media Partnerships.....	10
Progress from our Grant Partners in Support of Advancing Our Mission	12
A Refined Focus on Learning and Impact	16
Looking Ahead.....	18
A Culture of Giving	20



Scan this code to read our report online and view exclusive videos.

Grantmaking in 2022

**60 Grants
\$122 Million**



Highlighting Our Grantmaking in 2022

Take a look at some of this year's grants. These grants represent our support for the evolving needs of learners from low-income backgrounds. Visit ascendiumphilanthropy.org for a comprehensive list of all our grants.



No Holding Back: Using Data to Review and Revise Administrative Policies Among Postsecondary Institutions

\$405,000

Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education

Develops tools to evaluate the impact of administrative hold policies on equitable student success.

[Remove Structural Barriers to Success](#)



Enhancing and Expanding the Transfer Explorer Tool

\$1,716,350

Ithaka Harbors, Inc.

Helps transfer students apply prior credits to reduce cost and time-to-degree as they move from two-year to four-year institutions.

[Streamline Key Learner Transitions](#)



Supporting Career Pathways for Low-Income Rural Immigrants, Migrants and Refugees

\$1,250,000

Jobs for the Future

Supports subgrants and a community of practice among 10 rural-serving organizations to enhance workforce training offerings for immigrants and refugees.

[Support Rural Postsecondary Education and Workforce Training](#)

Helping the Field Prepare for Pell Reinstatement

\$1,400,000

Vera Institute of Justice

Provides training and advising to Second Chance Pell institutions before the full restoration of Pell Grants for incarcerated learners in July 2023.

[Expand Postsecondary Education in Prison](#)



Advancing Community College Students' Post-Graduation Success

\$2,000,000

The Aspen Institute

Implements reforms at 10 community colleges to increase the post-graduation success of learners from low-income backgrounds.

[Streamline Key Learner Transitions](#)

AA-to-BA Transfer Apprenticeship Pathway for Rural Talent

\$600,000

Reach Institute for School Leadership

Supports opportunities for rural learners to access bachelor's degree pathways that prepare them for in-demand teaching jobs in their communities.

[Support Rural Postsecondary Education and Workforce Training](#)

Scaling Academic Recovery Interventions

\$2,500,000

University Innovation Alliance

Scales a package of intensive supports to help learners who must retake critical courses due to life barriers, including the lingering impacts of the COVID-19 health crisis.

[Remove Structural Barriers to Success](#)

“Merit America has demonstrated a deep commitment to expanding opportunity for low-wage, working adults. We’re proud to support Merit America in impacting tens of thousands of learners through in-demand technology training that leads to meaningful careers.”

Maryann Rainey

Senior Program Officer—Streamline Key Learner Transitions
Ascendium Education Group



Merit America Product Manager Kirstin Li works with Merit America student Hamid Hamidi.

Lifting Working Adults Through Flexible Training for In-Demand Careers

Increasingly, diverse postsecondary education and training options exist outside traditional degree programs. One example is Merit America’s short-term, fully virtual IT training for low-wage adults without a bachelor’s degree. It provides 14-21 weeks of skills and workplace training that learners can complete while working. This is followed by a job placement phase lasting up to three months. The model meets learners where they are while creating a clear path to meaningful, family-sustaining career opportunities.

With \$10 million of our support, Merit America aims to bring its skills training and career placement

programs in IT Support, Data Analytics and Java Web Development to at least 20,000 learners over the next three years. Ascendium’s investment will supplement up to \$45 million provided by the Google Career Certificates Fund, which was co-designed by Merit America to bring unique financing to the workforce development sector. Programs like Merit America’s can help meet two related goals. First, they have the potential to address the needs of nearly two-thirds of American workers without a degree who work full-time and need a route to better jobs. Second, they can address the unmet workplace demand for good jobs requiring only short-term, but specialized training. Of note,

The Chronicle for Higher Education reports that 900,000 tech positions in the U.S. went unfilled in 2021.

Grantmaking in our Streamline Key Learner Transitions focus area supports the development, evaluation and scaling of high-quality, diverse credential options like Merit America provides. These options help learners from low-income backgrounds meet their postsecondary education goals and succeed in the workforce. Merit America’s model has resulted in a greater than 80% graduation rate, with nearly all graduates getting jobs and seeing an average wage gain of \$19,000 per year.

Seizing a Historic Moment for Incarcerated Learners

With the restoration of Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated learners slated for summer 2023, questions remain. Are program providers ready for an influx of new students? Does the infrastructure exist to maximize this new funding and share best practices?

To address these questions, we recently awarded a grant to the New England Board of Higher Education in convening the Commission on the Future of Higher Ed Behind Bars in New England. While research demonstrates that postsecondary prison education programs are one

of the best ways to support the re-entry and long-term success of incarcerated learners who can take advantage of them, demand for postsecondary education in prison far exceeds existing programs’ capacity.

This innovative regional commission brings together postsecondary education leaders, corrections decision-makers and elected officials in New England. They are working to address the challenges and opportunities of postsecondary education delivered within the region’s prisons. Resources produced from this grant should yield more robust and

aligned state- and region-level policies and practices to improve offerings and outcomes for incarcerated learners.

As part of our efforts to expand postsecondary education in prisons, we seek to create bridges between postsecondary education, corrections systems, employers and community-based organizations. Projects like this go a long way toward fulfilling that promise. They should create the conditions for more incarcerated learners to meet their education and workforce training goals in 2023 and beyond.



Courtesy of LaunchCode.

The expansion of Pell Grant eligibility to incarcerated learners can potentially transform postsecondary education in prison, but only if we’re prepared to meet the challenges — and opportunities — that accompany this historic moment.

Helping Students Stay on Track

While the proportion of U.S. high school graduates attending college has risen in recent years, the completion rates for institutions with high populations of learners from low-income backgrounds have not kept pace. Part of the challenge lies in the availability of and access to resources to help students stay on track, such as advising staff, services or planning tools. Emerging technology solutions have the potential to fill some of these gaps, but institutions can benefit from support in accessing and deploying them effectively.

As part of our efforts to remove structural barriers to success, we recently awarded Partnership for Education Advancement a \$1.4 million grant to address this issue. The grant supports piloting a cloud-based, constantly updated academic planning tool at two Historically Black College and University campuses. This initiative aims to help these institutions operationalize the tool to ensure it is used to maximum benefit. The tool will help students more easily see the courses and requirements they need to graduate. It will also provide valuable course planning information for campus administrators.

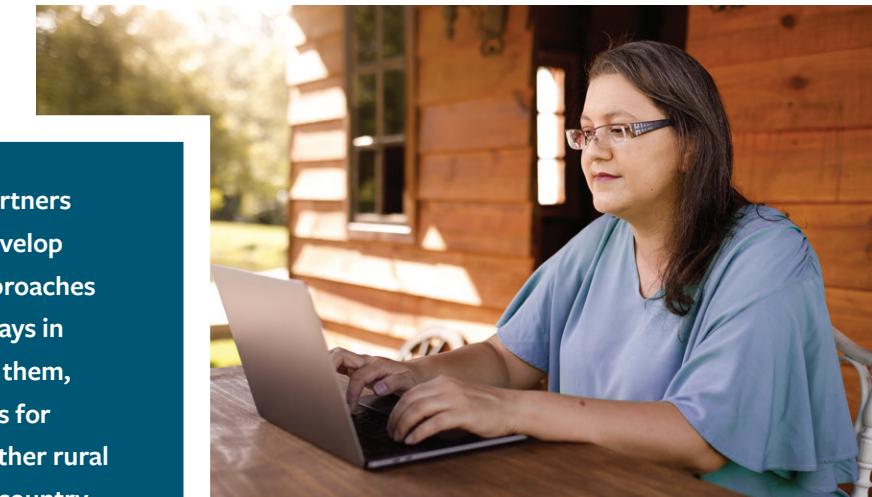
Ascendum is committed to supporting the development and evaluation of promising approaches and interventions to increase completion rates and decrease time to a degree. This project not only fulfills that commitment, but also helps institutions learn how to leverage such technologies to inform their transformation.



In addition to decreasing excess credit accumulation and time to a degree for students, these projects will help institutions calculate the return on their investment in such technologies.

Dr. Rodney L. McCrowe, assistant chair and assistant professor at Fayetteville State University, works with participants of the Academic Navigation Pilot.

We believe these new partners are well positioned to develop and share innovative approaches to building career pathways in rural communities. With them, we will identify strategies for potential replication in other rural communities across the country.



Strengthening Career Pathways by Connecting Rural Learners and Leaders

While many rural communities faced severe economic downturns during the Great Recession and, more recently, the COVID-19 health crisis, there are still many good jobs available in rural areas. However, many of those jobs require postsecondary education credentials or workforce training that aren't easily accessible for rural learners — especially those from low-income backgrounds.

Ascendum proactively identifies and works with mission-aligned partners who serve rural communities to develop career pathways through postsecondary education. Connecting rural learners and workers with pathways to family-sustaining

jobs can be transformational for those individuals, as well as for rural communities trying to regain economic stability and growth in the wake of the COVID-19 health crisis.

We awarded grants, totaling \$2 million, to two new partners to support connecting rural learners to viable careers in 2022. The Council of State Governments will work with state and local governments and public sector employers in two states to implement apprenticeship programs that have the potential to create clear paths to good jobs for learners from low-income backgrounds. Another organization, the Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives Foundation,

will explore the role of chambers in facilitating the development of new training pathways for learners from low-income backgrounds that are responsive to the needs of the local economy.

As part of our grantmaking focus to support rural postsecondary education and workforce training, we believe these new partners are well positioned to develop and share innovative approaches to building career pathways in rural communities. With them, we will identify strategies for potential replication in other rural communities across the country.

Elevating Partner and Learner Information Through Strategic Media Partnerships

Addressing tough challenges for learners from low-income backgrounds can't happen without teamwork. Ascendum's media partnerships recognize the power of storytelling in fostering engagement, innovation and collaboration in the field to support student success. To this end, our partners use multiple media formats to showcase how system-level changes can impact learners in meaningful ways.

This year, we formed new partnerships with news outlets, podcasters, film producers and more. Each brings the power of media to the work being done in our focus areas. Read more about a few of our new partners.

These partnerships build on strong, continuing relationships with award-winning journalists and podcasters whose work last year reached tens of thousands of people. Here are just a few of our enduring relationships.

Academic Intelligence (AI) produces the "Future U." podcast, hosted and produced by two award-winning experts in postsecondary education. Ascendum is supporting the production of twenty "Future U." podcasts this season that highlight postsecondary education initiatives and resources supporting student success.

Open Campus is a nonprofit news organization that gathers national and local experts to produce multi-perspective reporting on issues in postsecondary education. With our support, two dedicated national reporters are partnering with local networks to bring needed focus to the challenges of and effective strategies for serving rural and incarcerated learners.

Restless Productions is focused on using film to tell stories with social impact. Ascendum will support its production of a documentary, "UnlockED," that follows inmates who taught themselves to code and built an open-source learning management system to increase access to prison education.

Rural Matters has produced two seasons of successful podcasts with Ascendum's support. In the new season, they will produce a four-part series showcasing the assets and challenges of rural communities and spotlighting partnerships between postsecondary education institutions, employers and community leaders.

The Chronicle of Higher Education developed The Different Voices in Student Success, a multimedia online resource center. It showcases insights and ideas to make student success a priority through special virtual events, focused reports and more. They continue to elevate the successful and innovative approaches needed to enroll, retain and graduate students.



CONNECT WITH US!



#AscendumEP @AscendumEP

Higher education professionals have reported that the resources shared via the Different Voices of Student Success partnership are helping their student success efforts with students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and those who are the first in their family to attend college.

The Chronicle of Higher Education

Equipping incarcerated individuals with tech skills not only allows for better outcomes upon release; it also provides a new talent pool for employers looking for motivated, committed candidates. On both these fronts, LaunchCode's programs have been a success.

LaunchCode JusTech professor Ben Clark shakes hands with graduate Jeffrey Cooper.



Moving from Incarceration to Careers in Tech

According to the Missouri Department of Corrections, nearly half of all individuals released from prison return within five years. Many incarcerated adults lack access to postsecondary education in prison. And what little programming exists is often costly to the institutions and disconnected from career opportunities. Equipping incarcerated individuals with tech skills not only allows for better outcomes upon release; it also provides a new talent pool for employers looking for motivated, committed candidates.

In 2020, as part of our efforts to expand postsecondary education in prison, we supported The LaunchCode

Foundation in expanding its JusTech foundational coding and web development training and employment program for incarcerated students nearing release in several Missouri prisons. Through this program, students develop the tech skills and industry knowledge that will serve them upon release, when those that finish the course are eligible for apprenticeships. The goal: to increase workforce training opportunities and improve employment outcomes for incarcerated adults while providing a pathway to further education.

In 2022, the program produced its first three graduating classes. These graduates leave prison equipped with a level of digital literacy and coding skills that will allow them to overcome one of the most challenging elements of culture shock facing long-term incarcerated individuals. Additionally, LaunchCode has been building a network of hiring partners and has had more than 20 technology employers visit its programs across two facilities.

Using Real-time Data to Inform Effective Transfer Policy and Practice

When the COVID-19 health crisis emerged, the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) Research Center stood ready to react. They recognized the difficulty of aligning transfer policy and practice even before the crisis and focused their efforts on transfer trends. Transfer plays an essential role in helping learners from low-income backgrounds meet their postsecondary education goals. As NSC Research Center Executive Director Doug Shapiro describes in an interview with Ascendum, accessible transfer pathways are an important component of student success. They allow learners to change institutions as learner needs

and circumstances dictate and the world around them continues to transform.

Through a \$545,500 grant, the NSC Research Center carried out a two-year project to understand how this disruption impacted transfer trends over time. Regularly released reports provided real-time information to inform stakeholders and provided data that could serve as a baseline for state and institutional policy development. Over time, the NSC Research Center data revealed concerning trends. One, enrollment and persistence rates in community colleges fell. Two, overall transfer rates dropped, with transfers from two- to

four-year institutions showing a steep drop in the second year. These trends significantly impact learners from low-income backgrounds, who often begin their postsecondary education in less-expensive two-year institutions and then transfer to four-year institutions to earn a bachelor's degree.

Supporting strategies that ease the transition from community colleges to four-year institutions is integral to our Streamline Key Learner Transitions grantmaking. Overall, the reports helped stakeholders understand the early impacts of the COVID-19 health crisis and pinpoint some of the chronic barriers to transfer.



National Student Clearing House Research Center Executive Director Doug Shapiro discusses transfer trend implications.

"Today's students are more likely than ever to accumulate learning from multiple sources, and many postsecondary institutions have rightly begun to approach credit mobility as the new normal rather than an exception to the rule."

Carolynn Lee
Senior Program Officer – Streamline Key Learner Transitions
Ascendum Education Group



A series of six briefs, known as the Rural Community College Leader Series, were created from conversations that emerged from NCII's learning community. The briefs are short and action-oriented, covering topics like maintaining financial stability, redesigning advising and support services and cultivating partnerships.

Building the Capacity of Rural Postsecondary Providers Through Community

Building off momentum from an earlier Ascendium grant, the National Center for Inquiry and Improvement (NCII) made strides this year in developing and delivering a regionalized approach to guided pathways focused specifically on rural institutions. Large-scale educational reform efforts have historically included more urban and suburban institutions than rural ones, resulting in few opportunities to adapt and evaluate those reforms in rural contexts.

NCII's approach is unique with its focus on rural. It's also distinctive in that the implementation of this education reform not only centers community colleges, but also

employers, K-12 and university partners as core members of the implementation team.

Additionally, Ascendium grant funding supported NCII in convening a group of college leaders who created helpful resources and tools for rural community colleges as they navigated challenges from the COVID-19 health crisis. Leaders continue to engage on the topics highlighted in these briefs, especially the final brief in the series.

Reiterated in this final brief is the need for partners in rural communities to develop strong relationships with stakeholders. The brief also underscores the use of data, especially local labor market

information, to support and guide conversations about the needs of employers and the pathways to good jobs that are available through postsecondary education and workforce training.

We understand that rural institutions face unique challenges compared to their urban and suburban peers, but we also know they possess unique assets that help them create opportunity for learners. Our investments in efforts like the learning communities convened by NCII leverage those assets and help build the capacity of rural institutions to support learners through postsecondary education and entry into the workforce.

Improving Student Outcomes Through Placement Reform

Many colleges still test entering students to determine if they're academically prepared for college-level math and English courses. These single, high-stakes tests have proven to be ineffective predictors of students' abilities to succeed in college-level courses. They are also barriers to early college success for learners from low-income backgrounds and adult learners.

To help solve this problem, in 2020, we gave MDRC, in partnership with the Community College Research Center (CCRC) at Teachers College, Columbia University, a \$2.3 million grant to expand the adoption of multiple measures assessment (MMA) systems for student

placement in math and English. There is no single, correct way to design and implement MMA to improve course placements. MMA programs generally use high school GPA and other measures, in addition to placement test scores, to assign incoming students to either developmental or college-level courses in math and English.

Results from this initiative have been encouraging, as seen in a 2022 study of two recently completed experimental reviews of MMA. They found that students who were "bumped up" into college-level English courses by multiple measures were 16 percentage points more likely to have completed the course by the

end of their third college semester compared to those who started in a developmental course. For math, students were 11 percentage points more likely to complete the course.

Though more research is needed to determine the impact this has on equity gaps in math and English college course completion, these findings are nevertheless promising. Particularly so as the COVID-19 health crisis has left colleges open to alternative placement systems that are easy to use in a remote or virtual setting. This approach is the kind of intervention we aim to continue to support in our Remove Structural Barriers to Success focus area.

Early findings on the effectiveness of MMA systems are promising, particularly as the COVID-19 health crisis has left colleges open to alternative placement systems that are easy to use in a remote or virtual setting.



Jessica Wise, Kate Evans, Mindy Hodges, Deena Martin, Caleb Hughes and Wayne Floyd from University of Arkansas – Pulaski Technical College discuss multiple measures work.

A Refined Focus on Learning and Impact

The Learning and Impact team continues to help Ascendium understand the impacts of postsecondary education reforms, prioritizing the building of high-quality evidence that is useful to the field in 2022. Recognizing postsecondary education systems need to do better for learners from low-income backgrounds, the team also ensured our research and evaluation grants advanced equity by examining who conducts the research, how it is conducted and why.

There was also an increased focus on the relevance and rigor of the evidence we're helping generate and a desire to ask more than just "does it work?" about the strategies and practices we're evaluating. When researchers ask more robust questions within their work, they don't just create evidence — they create evidence with a purpose as it supports action and advances social change.

A grant to Community College Research Center (CCRC) is a great example. CCRC is conducting several studies to deepen our understanding of which student success reforms are working for which learners and

under what conditions. These studies provide useful evidence to community college leaders engaged in large-scale education reform.

By centering equity and generating relevant and rigorous evidence, we have responded to the current moment, equipping stakeholders with the timely knowledge needed to ensure that learners from low-income backgrounds can succeed.



When researchers ask more robust questions, they create evidence that supports action and advances social change. Further questions include why, how does it work, for whom does it work, under which conditions does it work and is now the right time to ask if it works?

Ascendum is committed to finding, testing and scaling the most promising strategies for removing the persistent barriers that impact learners from low-income backgrounds.



Photo top, left: The Education Philanthropy team gathers to discuss our grantmaking strategy at the Ascendum office. Photo bottom, left: Sarah Mayer, interim executive director of LaunchCode, and others listen while graduate Ron Crenshaw speaks at the JusTech graduation. Photo bottom, right: Le'Mont Calhoun and Jamal Alsoff exchange ideas at the Merit America office.



Our Commitment to Exploring, Validating and Scaling Continues

Our report provides an overview of our grantmaking, shining a spotlight on the important efforts being carried out by our grant partners to serve learners from low-income backgrounds. While we are inspired by the many stories of progress and success in 2022, we remain aware of the challenges many learners, institutions and organizations faced as well. Ascendum will continue to listen to our grant partners in the field and invest in efforts to ensure that all learners see value in — and are able to succeed in — a high-quality postsecondary education or workforce training program.

We're excited to learn from others with fresh ideas and ensure they

have the support they need to test those ideas. We're also looking forward to generating research that validates whether these new ideas have the intended impact on our target populations. And for impactful new ideas, we're thinking more strategically about how to deploy them so that they can benefit the greatest number of learners from low-income backgrounds.

We are entering 2023 with optimism and a renewed sense of purpose as we prepare for a strategy refresh. As part of that process, we will focus on listening and learning from our peers, grant partners and the field about the role philanthropy should play at this moment in time.

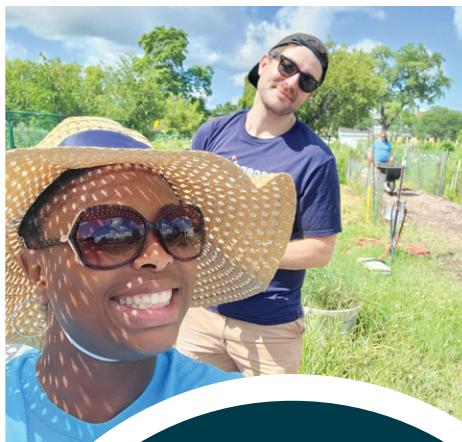


Scan this code to read our report online and view exclusive videos.

Ascendum is committed to finding, testing and scaling the most promising strategies for removing the persistent barriers that impact learners from low-income backgrounds. We strive to contribute to systemic change that will lead to more equitable postsecondary education and career success for these learners.

A Culture of Giving

Ascendum's mission to champion opportunity permeates everything we do. Our employees embody this mission in their daily work and are passionate about making a difference in their communities as well. Throughout the year, Ascendum employees participate in initiatives that allow them to meet the needs of students and their families in the communities where employees live and work. They also contribute to organizations that share our goal of elevating opportunity.



\$438,000

donated to 114 nonprofits through **Triple Your Impact** (includes 3:1 corporate match for every \$1 donated by employees).



\$5 million+

in corporate gifts to local nonprofits, including capital campaign donations to **Centro Hispano of Dane County** and **The Center for Black Excellence and Culture**.



\$157,000

donated to local **United Ways** and **Community Shares of Wisconsin** through **Unite for Our Communities** (includes 4:1 corporate match for every \$1 pledged by employees).



1,100+ hours

volunteered by employees through paid **volunteer time off**.

\$1 million

given to education and workforce training nonprofits through **Good Neighbor Grants**.

\$23,000

donated to nonprofits through **Dollars for Doers**, in which Ascendum matches volunteer hours with donations to organizations where employees volunteered.





38 Buttonwood Court | Madison, Wisconsin 53718
ascendumphilanthropy.org

© Ascendium Education Group, Inc. All Rights Reserved. 4249 (03/23)

