



Ascendium's Funding Strategy Gets an Update

Ascendium's philanthropic mission is to elevate opportunities and outcomes for learners from low-income backgrounds so they can better achieve postsecondary educational and career success. Our grantmaking focuses on increasing equity for low-income populations, especially those in historically underrepresented groups: first-generation students, incarcerated adults, rural community members, students of color and veterans.

Today we unveiled our new funding strategy, which will guide our grantmaking in pursuit of that mission for the next three to five years. The new framework builds on our existing funding approach, expands our focus in new areas and broadens our geographic scope.

Why did we see fit to refresh our strategy? Not too long ago, as relative newcomers to the postsecondary philanthropy space, we chose to apply a flexible approach that allowed us to explore new issue areas and pivot quickly as we developed new relationships and identified areas of need.

Growth Leads to New Funding Priorities

But our philanthropy program has grown dramatically over the past decade, and it's fair to say we are now recognized as a leader in postsecondary education philanthropy. That has motivated us to intensify our efforts on critical issues where we believe we can direct our resources for the greatest impact.

After significant research and internal discussion, as well as conversations with many of our partners, peers and allies, we developed a new strategic framework that includes four focus areas:



Removing barriers to student success at the institution and system levels



Streamlining key learner transitions, such as matriculation, transfer and workforce entry



Expanding high-quality higher education in prison programs



Developing rural education and workforce training programs

What Else is Changing?

In the past, our grantmaking mainly supported projects in our legacy focus states of Wisconsin, Minnesota, Ohio, Iowa, Arkansas, North Dakota and South Dakota. With this new strategic framework, we have expanded our geographic range, and our philanthropy is now national in scope.

What is Staying the Same

As before, we will continue to fund efforts at every stage of development: "exploration grants" for promising but unproven initiatives; "validation grants" that support testing and evaluation to build the evidence base for interventions shown to be effective; and "scaling grants" aimed at expanding adoption of proven practices. We plan to issue requests for proposals for several projects with specific parameters in the coming months, so watch this newsletter for those announcements. We are not accepting unsolicited grant requests at this time.

New Frontiers

We have long been involved in projects aimed at removing systemic obstacles and streamlining key transitions (though transition into the workforce has not been an area of emphasis until now). But two of the focus areas included in the new strategy are relatively new to us. Last year we funded several projects related to higher education in prison (HEP). By explicitly making HEP one of our focus areas, we are signaling our commitment to elevating opportunity for underrepresented populations, including people who are incarcerated.

Rural education and training is another relatively new focus area for us. Rural areas have generally not benefitted from the nationwide transformation taking place in postsecondary education, and those communities face unique challenges in building strong connections between postsecondary programs and employer needs. We see a great opportunity to help foster meaningful change in partnership with the institutions, agencies and employers that serve those communities. We're excited to address this important issue.

To learn more about our new funding strategy, we invite you to:



[Register for our webinar on June 5, 1 p.m. to 2 p.m. CDT](#)



[Visit the strategy page of our website](#)