

Clearing the Path

2018 Education Philanthropy Report



“We envision a world where everyone has the opportunity to ascend to their peak potential, and we believe postsecondary education and workforce training are the vehicles best equipped to take them there.”



PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

One of the great educators in American history, Booker T. Washington, famously said success is best measured not by the position one attains in life but by the obstacles one overcomes to get there.

It's an inspiring sentiment, but the reality is that obstacles come in different shapes and sizes. They arise at different points along a student's educational journey, and many of them cannot be overcome by personal grit alone. Our philanthropy aims to clear the path for students whose route to postsecondary success contains a disproportionate number of obstacles.

That long-standing focus continued to guide our philanthropy in 2018. As always, we looked for opportunities to support promising innovations at the institutional and system level; research to confirm the validity of effective interventions; and efforts to scale proven practices to benefit more students. However, it was a year of major change in other ways. 2018 started with the acquisition of Great Lakes' student loan servicing business by Nelnet, Inc. and ended with the launch of our new corporate identity: Ascendium Education Group.

Why Ascendium? We chose that name because it captures what our organization is about. We envision a world in which everyone has the opportunity to ascend to their peak potential, and we believe postsecondary education and workforce training are the vehicles best equipped to take them there. As Ascendium, we champion opportunity for everyone by helping bold, evidence-based ideas take flight, just as we did under the Great Lakes banner. In this report, you can read more about the ideas we supported in 2018.



Richard D. George

Chairman, President & CEO
Ascendium Education Group

Our Funding Philosophy and Strategy

Our guiding belief is that postsecondary degrees, credentials, apprenticeships, internships and certificates are the surest path to economic success. We work to ensure that more students are able to access and complete the type of education most relevant to their goals, whether they are recent high school graduates or returning students with valuable workforce or military service experience.

We believe we can have the greatest impact by targeting our resources toward learners who have historically faced the greatest barriers to success. In particular, we focus on those from low-income households, a disproportionate number of whom are students of color and first-generation students. To that end, we award grants that support educational institutions and researchers committed to evidence-based strategies for building better, more equitable postsecondary and workforce training systems that supports and serves the needs of all students.

Our funding strategy is designed to help advance ideas and interventions at every stage of development, from promising but untested measures to proven practices ready to be brought to scale. We generally organize our grants into these three categories:

Exploration Grants These are limited-term grants designed to help us and our partners learn more about innovations that look promising based on experience or anecdotal evidence. Exploration grants encourage innovation and outside-the-box approaches to persistent systemic challenges.

Validation Grants These grants fund independent evaluations to demonstrate whether a program is as effective as preliminary data suggests, and if so, under what conditions. Validation grants help build the body of evidence to support ideas that deserve to be more widely implemented.

Scaling Grants Scaling grants enable the growth of successful, evidence-supported programs to significantly increase the number of students they help. We invest in more widespread adoption of approaches and interventions that have been shown to make a measurable difference.



The Student Journey

Students face obstacles at every stage in their postsecondary journey, from access through enrollment, academic success, transfer for some, and ultimately completion. We fund projects aimed at eliminating stumbling blocks that appear all along the path.

Text Steps

\$544,000 awarded to 13 Wisconsin school districts

A handful of short texts from counselors over the summer about final steps students need to take before starting college in the fall—like finalizing financial aid, signing up for orientation and arranging campus housing—can increase the chances a student will successfully enroll as planned.

FAFSA Completion Challenge

\$1 million awarded to NCAN

The National College Access Network is supporting efforts in 25 cities to improve the percentage of college-intending students who complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), a key step in accessing many forms of financial assistance and a leading indicator of whether a student will enroll in college. *In partnership with The Kresge Foundation.*

Tackling Transfer

\$1.2 million awarded to The Aspen Institute

The Aspen Institute is working to improve transfer outcomes in MN, TX and VA by working with those states and their institutions to strengthen policies and practices that will enable more students from community colleges to successfully transfer to four-year colleges and attain bachelor's degrees. *In partnership with Joyce Foundation, The Kresge Foundation and ECMC Foundation.*

Completion Grants

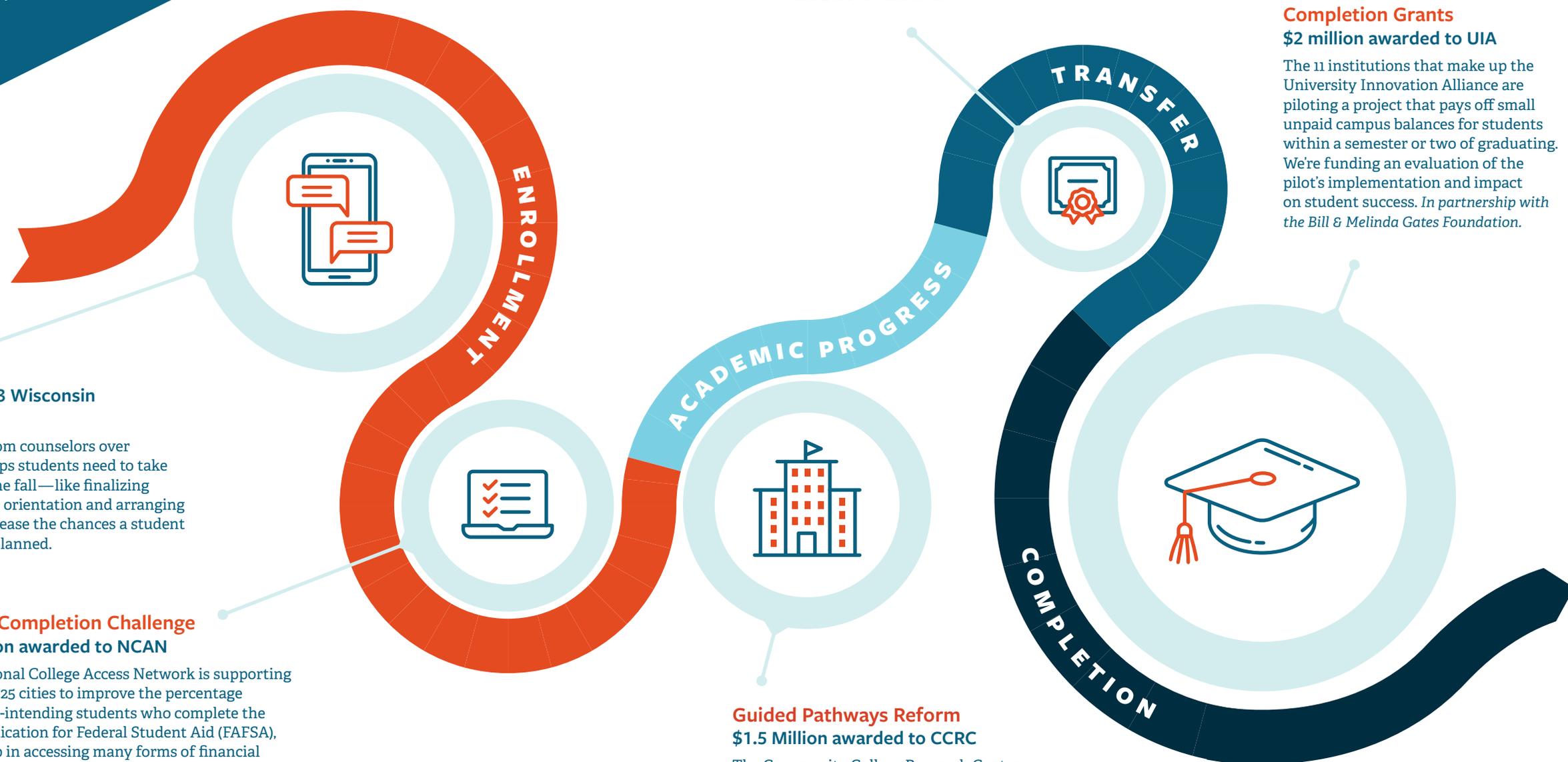
\$2 million awarded to UIA

The 11 institutions that make up the University Innovation Alliance are piloting a project that pays off small unpaid campus balances for students within a semester or two of graduating. We're funding an evaluation of the pilot's implementation and impact on student success. *In partnership with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.*

Guided Pathways Reform

\$1.5 Million awarded to CCRC

The Community College Research Center at Teachers College, Columbia University is helping implement and evaluate guided pathways reforms at 23 Ohio community colleges to provide students with a clearer roadmap to program completion.

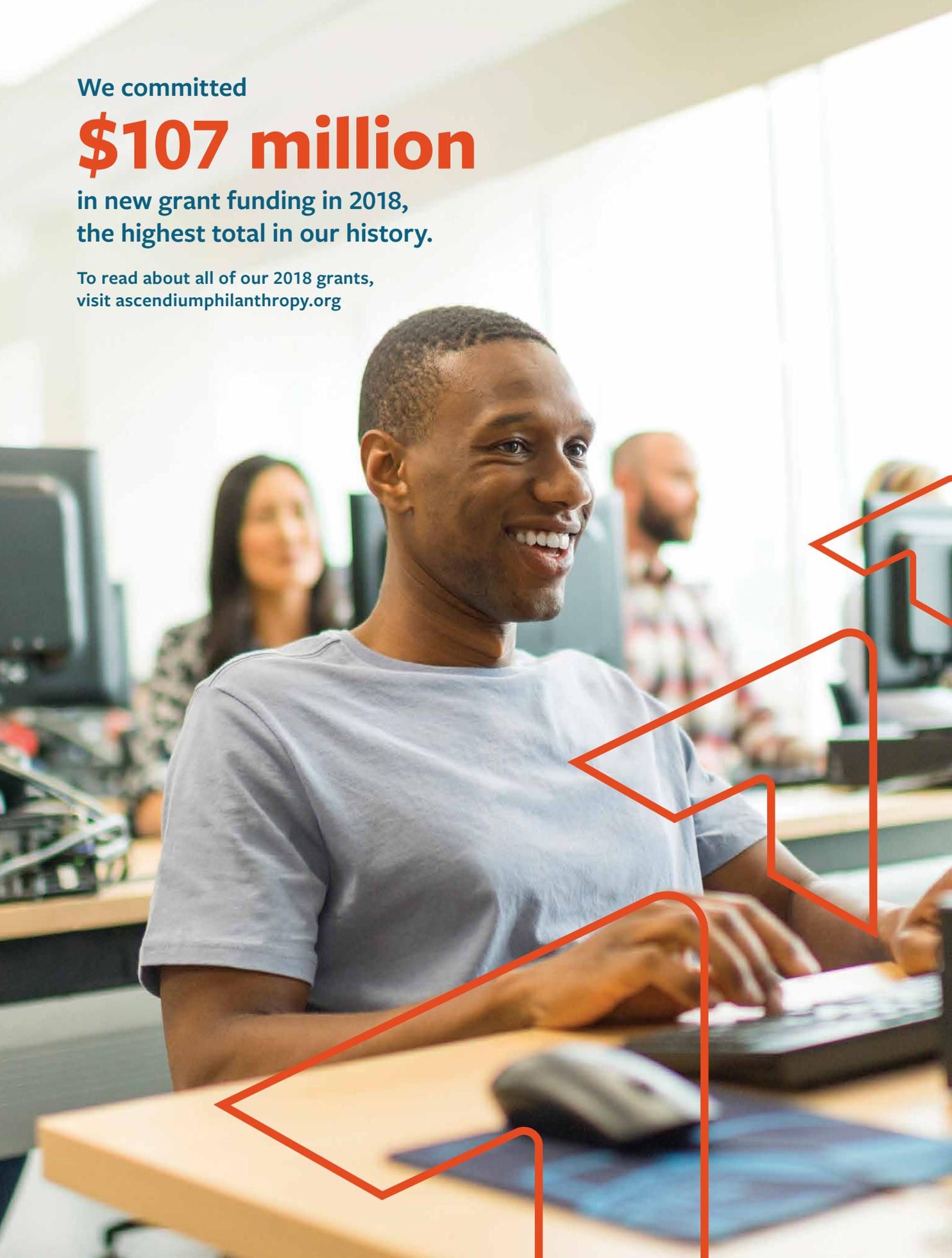


We committed

\$107 million

in new grant funding in 2018,
the highest total in our history.

To read about all of our 2018 grants,
visit ascendiumphilanthropy.org



2018 HIGHLIGHTS

Nurturing the New, Propagating the Proven

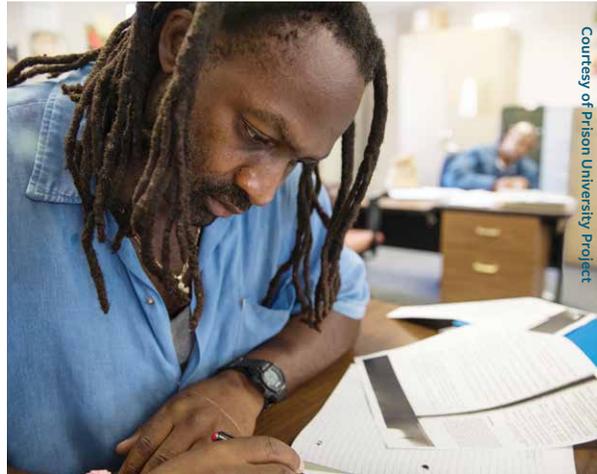
The issues impacting access and success in postsecondary education and workforce training are complex, partly because they are shared by both students and institutions. That's why we believe in funding a pipeline of solutions, some of them novel and untested, others fully baked and ready to be scaled up.

Following are examples of the issues we worked on in 2018 and the initiatives we are funding to address them.

Focus on Higher Education in Prison

In 2016, we commissioned the RAND Corporation to conduct a landscape scan of higher education in prison (HEP), and we learned about some promising opportunities to help advance the field. Our interest in this area stems in part from the understanding that the groups our philanthropy focuses on, particularly individuals from low-income households, are tremendously over-represented in the incarcerated population, and this is especially true for low-income people of color.

Public policy discussion of HEP tends to fixate on its impact on recidivism. That's not surprising, since reducing public spending on corrections is an appealing prospect for many elected officials. A postsecondary credential, or credits earned toward one, can certainly improve post-release job prospects for a student in prison, and in turn reduce their probability of being reincarcerated. But our interest in promoting high-quality postsecondary education in prison is more about personal assets than fiscal ones. We believe that people in prison need and deserve postsecondary education for the same reasons as their peers in the community: Education has the power to transform lives and minds, and everybody should have the opportunity to tap into that power.



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Our interest in this area intensified in 2018, leading us to fund five projects focusing on Higher Education in Prison:

PROJECT
Career and Technical Education in Prison

GRANTEE
Minnesota Correctional Education Center

The RAND landscape scan identified the Minnesota Correctional Education Center (MCEC) within the Minnesota Department of Corrections as a promising program ripe for expansion. MCEC's offerings included 17 career and technical programs, as well as instruction in workplace relationship skills. While mapping out career pathways, MCEC identified clear needs for more advising staff and additional training to better align with labor market demand.

In 2018 we made a grant of nearly \$2 million to support MCEC as they measure the impacts of expanded course offerings and advising. Funding covers the costs of instructors and equipment that will allow up to 2,100 students access to courses that lead to credentials in heavy equipment and forklift operations and OSHA 10 safety certifications. These credentials were identified as being in high demand for infrastructure projects in Minnesota.

One of our long-term interests in this project is to learn more about the benefits of advising for incarcerated students. To that end, this grant also supported the addition of career navigators, whose role is to help students make the most of their course options and prepare them for post-release employment. To determine whether the coaching provided by career navigators makes a difference in employment outcomes, we committed an additional \$500,000 to RAND to evaluate its impact.

PROJECT
Promoting Student Success in Prison Higher Education

GRANTEE
Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP)

Since policymakers tend to gauge the value of prison higher education programs in terms of return on investment, their success is usually measured by reductions in recidivism. Academic achievement and career readiness are lower priorities in many cases. One obstacle to changing the dialogue is that the field currently lacks a set of well-conceived metrics on performance, efficiency and equity that would allow practitioners to refine their programs.

We awarded a \$1.7 million grant to IHEP to develop a set of key performance indicators (KPIs) tailored for prison higher education programs. These KPIs will help institutions benchmark their progress and identify areas for improvement. IHEP is conducting a landscape scan of current higher education programs in prison and their methods for measuring access, success, affordability and post-release outcomes. They are also engaging in conversations with practitioners and outside experts to determine what performance metrics would be most useful. Once they have designed a set of KPIs specifically for HEP programs, IHEP will field test them and ultimately disseminate them widely to HEP providers.



Courtesy of Prison University Project

PROJECT
Trauma-Informed Instruction in Prison

GRANTEE
Prison University Project (PUP)

PUP, which has been serving students at California’s San Quentin State Prison since 2003, is the nation’s largest prison-based higher education program. A survey of incarcerated students enrolled in PUP found that nearly 90% were victims of violence or abuse while growing up and nearly half had experienced homelessness. Educators have long understood that a history of trauma can have long-term emotional and cognitive effects that impact learning.

With a three-year grant of nearly \$1 million from Ascendium, PUP’s Teaching and Learning Initiative is focusing on developing and sharing trauma-informed teaching methods for students in prison, drawing from trauma-informed instruction techniques in use in the broader education field. The funding support is allowing PUP to employ a learning difference specialist to design and manage expanded services with learning disabilities and other challenges related to a history of trauma; build capacity to improve student supports; develop assessment tools and monitor interventions; train instructors in trauma-informed instruction; and create a toolkit that will be widely used by other practitioners.

PROJECT
“Second Chance Pell” Planning Grant

GRANTEE
Vera Institute of Justice

When the Higher Education Act was first passed in 1965, incarcerated students were eligible for federal financial aid. Congress revoked their access to Pell Grants in 1994, however, and because so many incarcerated individuals are from low-income backgrounds, access to higher education in prison shrank dramatically. In 2015 the U.S. Department of Education reinstated financial aid for students in prison through the Second Chance Pell Pilot Program, making need-based federal financial aid available to a subset of that population for the first time in over two decades.

The Department selected 65 academic programs in over 100 prisons to participate in the pilot. But because the financial aid process is so complex, Second Chance Pell sites needed extensive support to develop systems for helping students take advantage of Pell Grants. The Department allocated funding for one year of technical assistance provided by the Vera Institute of Justice, but there was little time during that period for coaching on student success strategies to ensure the programs are high-quality.

We provided a \$180,000 planning grant to Vera to provide technical assistance beyond financial aid access to eight Second Chance Pell sites across the country and the systems they are associated with. Vera is working with practitioners to find ways to strengthen program offerings, develop strategies to serve more students, improve outcome tracking and accelerate students’ degree attainment. Each site will collaborate with Vera to create a roadmap to institutional change and determine their own benchmarks for success.

GRANTEE
Alliance for Higher Education in Prison (AHEP)

To advance the field as a whole, we also provided a \$300,000 grant to the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison to boost their capacity as a resource center and the hub of a learning community for practitioners in prison higher education programs across the country.

Most of the programs currently operating in American prisons are lean, grassroots efforts spearheaded by a small number of individuals—often an instructor at an area college or even a relative of an incarcerated person. So they frequently lack the resources and support to implement effective programming and strategies.

To address this gap, a group of practitioners and experts launched AHEP in 2017 to foster collaboration and promote best practices across the field. Our grant is enabling AHEP to add staff, build infrastructure and grow their capacity to share information, provide technical assistance, and collect and analyze data.

Grantee and Applicant Perception Report

In 2018 we enlisted the help of the Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP) to conduct anonymous surveys of our grantees and applicants. The resulting Grantee and Applicant Perception Report allows us to measure ourselves against CEP's dataset of survey results for more than 250 funders built up over more than a decade, as well as a custom cohort of 13 funders that more closely resemble us in scale and scope. This was our second Grantee Perception Report. Our first was in 2014, and we made some changes in response to the feedback we received. It's gratifying to see how much progress we've made over the past four years as a result of those adjustments.

Thanks to the efforts of our program officers and grants management staff, we showed significant improvement since 2014

in relationship-building, where we are now in the top 20% among all funders in CEP's database; responsiveness and approachability, where we are now in the top 10%; and transparency, where the new survey put us in the top 30%.

We were pleased to learn that our grantees view us as partners working alongside them to achieve a common goal.

Our scores were not as high in some other areas, such as our perceived understanding of grantees' day-to-day realities. But as a learning organization, we welcome the challenge to improve continually, and we're grateful to those who provided candid feedback through the survey.

VALIDATION GRANTS

Focus on Boosting Community College Graduation Through Enhanced Student Support

While big gains have been made nationwide in improving college access among low-income students, completion rates have remained stubbornly low, particularly at community colleges. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, only about one in every five full-time, first-time, degree-seeking students at public two-year colleges earns a degree within three years of enrollment.

PROJECT
Ohio ASAP Replication Demonstration

GRANTEE
MDRC

In 2007 the City University of New York (CUNY) launched Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP), a comprehensive program that provides students with up to three years of financial, academic and student support services. The nonprofit research organization MDRC evaluated ASAP using a randomized controlled trial and found that ASAP nearly doubled graduation rates and halved the time it took students to graduate.

Having witnessed those remarkable results, we were interested in learning whether the ASAP concept would be as effective in other, very different environments and locations.

So in 2014 we provided \$5 million in anchor funding, supplemented by support from several other funders, for a five-year project to replicate the ASAP approach at three community colleges in Ohio. Lorain County Community College, Cuyahoga Community College District and Cincinnati State Technical and Community College each launched a program based on the ASAP model, providing full-time students with enhanced advising, tutoring, career services, a tuition gap waiver and financial incentives that could be used at local gas station and grocery chains.

“Wrapping” students with a robust set of supports can be a key to boosting community college graduation rates across the county.

In December of 2018, MDRC published a brief highlighting results from the first two years of the Ohio replication project. They found that the program more than doubled graduation rates after two years. It also increased the number of credits earned by 37% and boosted both full-time enrollment and semester-to-semester persistence. These results suggest that “wrapping” students with a robust set of supports can be a key to boosting community college graduation rates in very different settings across the country.



SCALING GRANTS

Focus on Increasing Latino Student Success

In 2016-17, there were 492 Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs), defined by the federal government as having a Latino student enrollment of at least 25%. HSIs—which include two- and four-year schools and public and private institutions—educate 65% of the nation's Latino undergraduates, according to the Latino student advocacy group *Excelencia* in Education.

PROJECT
Improving Services for Adult Learners at HSIs

GRANTEE
Council for Adult & Experiential Learning

But HSIs—like other colleges that serve large populations of low-income students and students of color—struggle to get their students all the way through to graduation. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, fewer than one in four Latino adults has a college degree, compared to 43% of their white peers. With the help of a \$1.3 million grant from Ascendium, the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) and *Excelencia* joined forces in 2018 on an initiative aimed at increasing degree completion among adult Latino students at 15 HSIs. Ascendium is supporting the project in collaboration with The Kresge Foundation and the Greater Texas Foundation, with each funder providing grant dollars in regions they serve, including California, Florida, Texas and Wisconsin.

The three-year initiative makes use of CAEL's Adult Learner 360 diagnostic tool. Adult Learner 360 uses feedback from students, faculty and staff to identify areas where institutions can improve their services for adult students. The participating HSIs will also receive professional development for staff, access to other CAEL tools and research, and technical support from CAEL and *Excelencia* as they implement their plans for enhancing services to adult learners.

Adults need access to the same higher education outcomes as younger students, but institutions must recognize that adult students have unique needs.



Ascendium Employees “Walk the Talk”

At Ascendium, we strive to help every employee feel engaged and connected to our educational mission. One way we nurture that connection is through our Ascendium Cares employee giving program, which provides opportunities for team members to give back in ways that promote educational success and expand opportunity for youth in the communities where we live and work.

Each of our four offices engages in drives and other activities that benefit a nearby employee-selected nonprofit with an education focus. One of the cornerstones of the program is our annual Unite for

Our Communities week, anchored by our United Way campaign. Ascendium matches the money raised at each center dollar-for-dollar with a contribution to their adopted organization.

The other key component of Ascendium Cares is our Volunteer Time Off program (VTO), which enables employees to spend up to eight hours per year volunteering for the nonprofit of their choice on company time. Employees have responded enthusiastically to the availability of VTO, as demonstrated by increasing participation each year.

LOOKING FORWARD

The Ascendium Era

As we enter our first full year as Ascendium, much remains the same in terms of our philanthropic approach. As before, we are committed to access and success for learners historically underrepresented in postsecondary education and workforce training. In particular, we focus on those from low-income households, a disproportionate number of whom are students of color and first-generation students.

We also expect to continue a shift that has been taking place in recent years toward a more national focus in the initiatives and research we support, while maintaining our historical focus on seven states: Wisconsin, Minnesota, Ohio, Iowa, Arkansas, North Dakota and South Dakota.

While we will continue to deploy a strategy aimed at supporting initiatives at various stages of development through exploration grants, validation grants and scaling grants, we will be unveiling a new strategic plan in 2019 that will guide our grantmaking for the next three to five years. We plan to add a new emphasis on students from rural communities and adult learners—including incarcerated adults—as well as a greater focus on aligning academic and career goals.

We're excited about Ascendium's future as a philanthropy and look forward to more years of learning, collaboration and difference-making.

Financial Analyst **Laura Sorensen**
is also an Ascendium Cares Ambassador.

ABOUT ASCENDIUM

Elevating opportunity through the power of higher education since 1967

Ascendium Education Group (formerly Great Lakes Higher Education Corporation & Affiliates) is the nation's largest student loan guarantor as well as a leading postsecondary education and workforce training philanthropy and provider of student success services for colleges and universities. Founded in 1967, Ascendium provides information, tools and counseling to millions of borrowers nationwide, helping them avoid the consequences of default and keeping the door to re-enrollment open. Ascendium's philanthropy program provides funding to educational providers and researchers aimed at promoting evidence-based strategies for eliminating systemic obstacles to success in postsecondary education and workforce training. Our grantmaking focuses on learners from historically underrepresented groups, particularly those from low-income households, a disproportionate number of whom are students of color and first-generation students. All of Ascendium's operations are grounded in the belief that every individual has potential to contribute meaningfully to their community and society. We work to unleash that potential through the power of higher education and workforce training.



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