

UW System: Ascendium awards UW System's Prison Education Initiative \$150,000 grant

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MADISON, Wis.—University of Wisconsin System President Tommy Thompson announced today that Ascendium Education Group has awarded the Prison Education Initiative \$150,000 in support of curriculum development based on employer needs, learning infrastructure, and needed pre- and post-release support structures utilizing data gathered from potential students and stakeholders.

“Educating people in prison and reducing recidivism is a goal important to me that we are making progress on,” Thompson said. “When we train people who are incarcerated to enter the workforce, our communities, families, and businesses are stronger. Just as importantly, this training provides opportunity for individual success in work and life after incarceration.”

Thompson sought state investment in the initiative, but it was not funded in the current budget. Nonetheless, UW System is continuing to work with partners to build the program's foundation so that the initiative is ready when sufficient funding is available.

“Ascendium supports the UW System's efforts to help people in prison overcome barriers by providing an educational pathway as a means for workforce opportunity,” said Amy Kerwin, Ascendium Vice President for Education Philanthropy. “We are encouraged by the UW System's collaborative approach and applaud the strong working relationships as well as the growing team of statewide and local partners needed to address the support and employment opportunities necessary to maximize success.”

Ascendium's education philanthropy invests in initiatives designed to increase the education and labor market success of students from low-income backgrounds, with an emphasis on first-generation students. Its "Expand Postsecondary Education in Prisons" portfolio addresses barriers facing currently incarcerated adults.

UW System and Department of Corrections staff have developed work groups for four focus areas: curriculum development; student success (ensuring students succeed before, during, and after program participation); infrastructure (providing a learning environment that meets security and capital requirements); and sites for success (engagement and cooperation among correctional facilities and UW campuses).

Both UW Extended Campus, the UW System's online and adult education-delivery effort, and UW-Madison's well-regarded Odyssey Project, which focuses on a whole family approach to breaking the cycle of poverty through access to education, have played key early and ongoing developmental roles. The UW Odyssey Project, through its prison-based program Odyssey Beyond Bars, offers award-winning college jumpstart programs to students incarcerated in Wisconsin's state prison system.

Under the Prison Education Initiative, the UW System will create a pilot program to offer baccalaureate degrees and competency-based degrees to adults in Wisconsin prisons. Early pilot-program efforts include collaboration with the following UW universities: UW-Green Bay, UW-Madison, UW-Milwaukee, UW Oshkosh, and UW-Parkside.

All initial and future programs will focus on academic and skills fields that meet both employer needs and student interests. The program will scale to eventually offer college access to every student in prison who desires it. The initiative will also complement existing UW initiatives related to expanding online learning opportunities; diversity, equity, and inclusion; educational innovation; and existing prison education programs.