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Partnerships from California, Florida, Indiana, New Mexico, and Texas Chosen for National Effort to Improve Rural Higher Education and Workforce Systems

COLUMBUS, Indiana, March 1, 2022 – Five rural partnerships have been selected by CivicLab to participate in a two-year initiative to improve higher education and workforce systems in their communities. Supported by Ascendium Education Group, the \$750,000 grant initiative provides training, technical assistance, and direct financial support for system-level strategies that create pathways to prosperity for low-income learners, including adults entering or re-entering workforce training programs.

The five rural partnerships were selected through a national call for proposals. Each partnership includes higher education institutions, nonprofit organizations, public agencies, private-sector partners, and other local stakeholders that work together to improve education and workforce outcomes. To be selected, partnerships were required to submit plans that both improve outcomes for their residents and make lasting changes on higher education and workforce systems during the two-year grant period.

“Though many partnerships are deserving of this recognition and support, these five demonstrated they had the relationships, capacity, and capability to make real change,” said Dakota Pawlicki, director of Talent Hubs at CivicLab.

The rural partnerships selected for this initiative include:

FutureMakers Coalition – Southwest Florida, Fla.
Focus: Hendry County

Lawrence County Workforce Coalition – Lawrence County, Ind.
Focus: Lawrence County

ProjectAttain! – Sacramento, Calif.
Focus: 22-county region in northern California

Taos Education Collaborative – Taos, N.M.
Focus: Taos County

Upskill Coastal Bend Partnership – Coastal Bend, Texas
Focus: Brooks, Duval, and Jim Wells Counties

“Rural communities have largely been left out of national initiatives designed to improve postsecondary education and workforce outcomes,” said Kirstin Yeado, program officer at Ascendium. “Ascendium is pleased to support this diverse cohort of partners committed to strengthening their collaborative efforts and building the systems necessary to ensure more learners from low-income backgrounds earn degrees and credentials. We anticipate this work

generating many lessons learned on how to build the capacity of postsecondary education and workforce training systems within a rural context.”

The initiative launched in February 2022 with teams from each partnership attending a two-day Stakeholder Engagement Process Learning Lab at CivicLab’s headquarters in Columbus, Ind. The group will return in April 2022 for CivicLab’s System Building Lab to improve their plans for making lasting change in their communities. The cohort will continue to meet virtually each month to share ideas, resources, and receive technical assistance.

“We are honored to have the chance to share the Columbus story with other rural practitioners,” said John Burnett, co-founder of CivicLab and president and CEO of the Community Education Coalition. “Our community has long served as a living laboratory for other communities to learn from, and we are grateful to have the opportunity to serve these five rural partnerships as we collectively seek to improve the human condition in the places we call home.”

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About Ascendium Education Group: Ascendium Education Group is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization committed to helping people reach the education and career goals that matter to them. Ascendium invests in initiatives designed to increase the number of students from low-income backgrounds who complete postsecondary degrees, certificates and workforce training programs, with an emphasis on first-generation students, incarcerated adults, rural community members, students of color and veterans. Ascendium's work identifies, validates and expands best practices to promote large-scale change at the institutional, system and state levels, with the intention of elevating opportunity for all. For more information, visit <https://www.ascendiumphilanthropy.org>.

About CivicLab: CivicLab, (a program of the Community Education Coalition) is a nonprofit institute dedicated to advancing the practice of civic collaboration and leading complex social systems. CivicLab’s approach is to: 1) learn what makes community collaboration work at its best, 2) document the discoveries, and 3) teach and share the practices broadly. The purpose of the work is to help communities increase their *collective capacity*—which is their ability to get things done, together. Since its inception, CivicLab has partnered with over 300 communities and organizations across the U.S. and trained more than 14,000 leaders of foundations, educational institutions, government, corporations, and community development organizations.

CivicLab is the home of Talent Hubs and the National Talent Network. The Talent Hub designation signifies that a local or regional cross-sector partnership has met rigorous standards for creating environments that attract, retain, and cultivate talent, particularly among [today’s students](#), many of whom are people of color, the first in their families to go to college, and from low-income households. The designation serves both as an aspirational target for other cities to aim for and a platform from which cities designated as Talent Hubs can build. The National Talent Network is a group of nearly 100 cross-sector partnerships working collaboratively to connect learning to economic opportunity in the places they call home.

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