

Building a Legacy of Leadership Serving Communities

Steelcase Foundation President Daniel Williams selected as a 2021 Aspen Institute Ascend Fellow

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The Aspen Institute selected Steelcase Foundation President Daniel Williams as one of 19 individuals around the country to serve as a 2021 Ascend Fellow. Williams joins more than 80 past [Ascend Fellows](#) selected for their visionary leadership and readiness to make a quantum leap forward toward breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty for families in America.

Ascend at the Aspen Institute is the national hub for breakthrough ideas and collaborations that move children and adults in their lives to educational success, economic security, health and wellbeing. Fellows will boldly lead change, working shoulder-to-shoulder with communities to co-design programs that give all children the opportunity to thrive, feel safe, known and loved.

Williams' selected proposal, which will be supported and driven by the Steelcase Foundation, is a long-term, systems-based and focused look at helping families in West Michigan as they are beginning to emerge from below the poverty line, through ALICE (asset limited, income constrained, employed) and beyond. The proposal is a multi-sector approach designed to increase families' access to opportunity and end the cycle that involves sending people off to various agencies or organizations for various resources, depending on their most pressing needs at the current moment.

"I am proposing a network of partners from different sectors work together to 'stack' their services in a well-coordinated effort to support entire families holistically and beyond moments of 'crisis,'" says Williams. His approach targets growth in essential areas such as early childhood and K-12 education, employment pathways, asset building and ensuring access to mental, physical and behavioral health services.

"It is imperative that we center families in our work at the Steelcase Foundation," says Williams, "which is exactly what this project aims to do." His approach directly aligns with the mission of the Steelcase Foundation, which works to increase access to quality public education and support the cultivation of communities that create conditions for children to thrive from birth through young adulthood.

"Our future as a country is inextricably tied to how well we do by our families. This new class of fellows is dedicated to creating a nation where every child is set up to prosper and where every family has access to the education and opportunity to do better than the previous generation. At the Aspen Institute, we cultivate and celebrate leaders who help society live up to its ideals. The new class of Ascend Fellows joins an extensive global network of such individuals who are doing just that," says Dan Porterfield, President and CEO of the Aspen Institute.

Over the next 18 months, fellows will inspire, challenge and support each other as they work across sectors that all impact the prosperity and wellness of families: from reinventing systems of care and learning and unlocking capital that opens doors for economic inclusion and justice, to breaking ground with research that changes the course for policies and practices directly affecting communities.

Williams’ initiative leverages the Steelcase Foundation’s power to influence and inform philanthropy, policy and future partnership investments that put families — not programs or organizations — at the center. Williams explains, “This is just one small step for one foundation in one region, but for us it signals a shift towards a more comprehensive and targeted approach to uncovering a path to more equitable outcomes; a path to substantive change; a path to a more just and liberated community.”

To learn more about the Steelcase Foundation visit steelcasefoundation.org. To read about the Aspen Institute Ascend Fellows visit ascend.aspeninstitute.org.

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