

Lending a Hand

Ascend helps students who are new to academia develop their potential | BY JULIA SERAZIO

Joe LaPlume and Thomas Harwell were both working toward the same goal. They just didn't know it.

As the head of corporate development at Charles River Laboratories, which partners with biopharmaceutical companies on new medicines, LaPlume (LAW'99, Questrom'09) was thinking about how to help people who feel "othered"—excluded, even ostracized, for being different—at work. He wondered how that experience limited potential: both theirs and that of companies like his. Meanwhile, as the Questrom School of Business' inaugural director of diversity and inclusion, Harwell was encouraging students, faculty, and staff to understand and expand their community's diversity—and to consider how to carry these values into their careers.

In 2016, LaPlume reconnected with Questrom as a guest lecturer. Around the same time, he and his wife, Chiara LaPlume (LAW'01), started thinking about making a gift. They were introduced to Harwell and talked with him over several months.

"Joe and I talked about our needs overlapping," Harwell says. "Our conversations were really open and frank. You can identify a need for something without having had that experience yourself. Joe and Chiara wanted to invest in today's BU, and make their mark in a unique way."

Harwell brought up Ascend, a new fellowship program for



The Questrom School of Business students who participated in the Ascend fellowship program spent their first week on campus touring Boston, visiting local businesses, and getting to know one another.

African American/Black, Hispanic, Latino, Native American, Pacific Islander, and first-generation college students. Launched in fall 2017, Ascend brings fellows to campus a week before other freshmen arrive, to learn business concepts and leadership skills, visit local businesses, do team-building exercises, and meet Questrom leaders. During the academic year, they take classes together, live together in the Towers on Bay State Road, and continue to gather for training and mentorship.

The LaPlumes liked Ascend because, they realized, it could help students both as they transitioned to college and later, as they entered the workforce. They invested in the program's future with a six-figure gift that supports more robust programming this year and will increase

the number of Ascend fellows next year. And the gift is having a ripple effect: Harwell says Ascend is proving a worthy model for Questrom's other identity-based engagement programs.

For LaPlume, the advantages are both personal and practical. "I hope that Ascend will allow students of color and first-generation college students to find a supportive community and build a comfortable base for excelling at academics," he says.

"I am a firm believer in getting access to all of the best human capital in the business world, and without programs such as Ascend, we are limiting that," LaPlume adds. "I expect Boston University, and Questrom especially, to lead the United States as a top-tier school, and also in diversity and inclusion—and I want to be part of that journey."