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Runner on epic trek visits campuses in Medford, Grants Pass to benefit students

By Vickie Aldous of the Daily Courier

GRANTS PASS — At nearly the halfway point on a 1,500-mile run through Oregon, Tim Cook jogged onto the Rogue Community College campus in Grants Pass on Thursday morning amid cheers from a waiting crowd.

The president of Clackamas Community College south of Portland, Cook is running more than a marathon every day as he visits all 17 community colleges in Oregon to raise money for students who are struggling financially.

He started his epic journey on June 16 in far Eastern Oregon, ran through Central Oregon and reached RCC in Southern Oregon on day 25 of his planned 50-day adventure. He must average 32 miles daily to complete his goal — more than the 26.2 mile length of a standard marathon.

"I will say, beyond the blisters I have on my feet, my body has actually gotten a lot stronger," said Cook, who has covered about 700 miles so far. "It's adapted. It's sort of said, 'This is kind of what we do now. This is our life.'"



JULIE ANDERSON / Daily Courier, Clackamas Community College President Tim Cook jogs onto the Rogue Community College Redwood Campus in Grants Pass on Thursday during his 1,500-mile run to raise money for struggling community college students across Oregon.

Cook said he's had some monotonous days pounding the pavement, but he's also seen beautiful parts of Oregon up-close.

"When you're driving by something, it's different than when you're running by. I see everything and that's been really, really amazing," he said.

On Tuesday and Wednesday, Cook saw much of Medford, the Bear Creek Greenway and Rogue River Greenway in Jackson County, and local sights like a public art bear sculpture in Grants Pass. After soaking his feet in ice water and getting a night of rest, he jogged onto the RCC campus in Grants Pass on Thursday to visit the crowd before a 30-mile run.

Cook, age 56, has been running marathons for about 20 years. But he said running long distances back-to-back every day has been a big change. He's also battling Southern Oregon summer weather.

"What has been difficult down here is the heat. The last couple of days, I'm running in 95 degree weather, ice on my head, trying to stay cool. It's been a challenge that way," Cook said.

Like many community college presidents and faculty around the state, Cook said he has become increasingly concerned about the financial struggles faced by community college students in Oregon.

Research shows 41% have difficulty getting enough food, 51% have housing challenges like trouble paying the rent or utilities, and almost 20% experienced homelessness in the past year. Some are living in vehicles, for example, or couch-surfing.

Cook said RCC and other schools offer assistance programs that can help students cover bills and expenses that might otherwise force them to drop out.

"A flat tire could be the difference between a student finishing and not finishing," he said.

RCC President Randy Weber said Cook was at a meeting of community college presidents back in August 2024 when Cook proposed running to all the colleges to raise awareness and funds.

"The room just got silent. "It wasn't, 'Yeah, you can do it! Go get it!' We were all just like scared for him," Weber said. "Is this smart? Is this a good idea? But he quickly convinced us how much thought he had put into it. The magic of it was how important it was to him."

Cook said the other college presidents like to frame their initial hesitation as concern for his well-being.

"I think it was they were really worried I was going to make them run with me," Cook said. "As soon as they realized, no, I'm not expecting that at all, I'm just going to go out and do it, then the support came. 'Oh, yeah. We can help you.'"

Cook said the RCC community has been very supportive of his fundraising efforts.

Pat Fahey, a local retired businessman and member of the RCC board of directors, offered $5,000 in matching funds for donations to the RCC Foundation.

Local donors have already met Fahey's challenge, and the total raised as of Thursday for local students was $11,315, according to RCC.

For the whole state, people have donated about $81,000 so far toward Cook's $150,000 goal.

At Thursday's celebration of Cook's arrival at RCC, student Lynne Hamblin said she dropped out of high school and later had twins at age 37.

She enrolled them at Head Start preschool at the RCC Redwood Campus, and later heard another mom talking about how RCC helps people earn their GEDs. She decided to give it a try.

"My GED instructors truly saw in me what I didn't see for myself. Getting my GED changed everything," she said.

Hamblin has now attained career certificates, works at RCC helping students with financial struggles, parents her children and is working toward a two-year transfer degree with plans to eventually earn a four-year degree at Oregon State University in public policy.

Hamblin's mother also enrolled in RCC and earned career certificates. This spring, the two celebrated the completion of coursework with 4.0 grade point averages.

"Education is multi-generational," Hamblin said of the three generations of her family that have benefited from programs at RCC's campus, from preschool to college.

To help other students, Hamblin works for the SNAP Training & Employment Program, known as STEP, that aids qualifying students enrolled in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, sometimes called food stamps.

"I really want to give back and let people know that college is attainable," she said.

STEP has helped cover expenses like protective masks and gloves for welding students, massage tables for aspiring massage therapists, textbooks, child care, transportation and tuition, Hamblin said.

Weber said that assistance can be critical for community college students, who are often balancing school, work and family obligations. Making sure students graduate improves their lives, the lives of their families and the economy, he said.

In April, RCC was honored with a national Opportunity College distinction, meaning its graduates earn at least 25% more than the local median income and its student demographics match the community — rather than representing only an elite that can afford to go to college.

As Cook jogs through Oregon with a support crew that includes his wife, he said many curious people are asking him why he's running. That's his chance to tell them about his mission to raise funds to help students succeed.

"Every single day, somebody stops us and says, 'What are you doing?' Once they hear about it, they say, 'Wow! That's amazing. How can I support it? How can I learn more about that?'" he said.

Joggers, including community college students, sometimes join him along the way.

From Southern Oregon, Cook plans to run toward the Willamette Valley, then west to the Oregon Coast, then east to wrap up his journey in the Columbia Gorge. He'll likely finish around Aug. 6.

Asked what he's looking forward to after he completes his 1,500-mile run, Cook had a simple answer: "Sitting on my couch."

To donate to help RCC students facing financial hardship, visit roguecc.edu/foundation or call Lindsay Griffiths at the RCC Foundation at 541-956-7327.

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