1,400 miles, 52 days and 6 pairs of shoes later, Oregon college president raises thousands for students

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By Maddie Khaw | The Oregonian/OregonLive

Clackamas Community College President Tim Cook on Thursday crossed the finish line of a 1,400-mile running route that took him from the Oregon-Idaho line to the Columbia River Gorge, stopping at all 17 of the state's community colleges along the way.

The 57-year-old essentially ran a marathon nearly every day for over seven weeks to raise money for community college students.

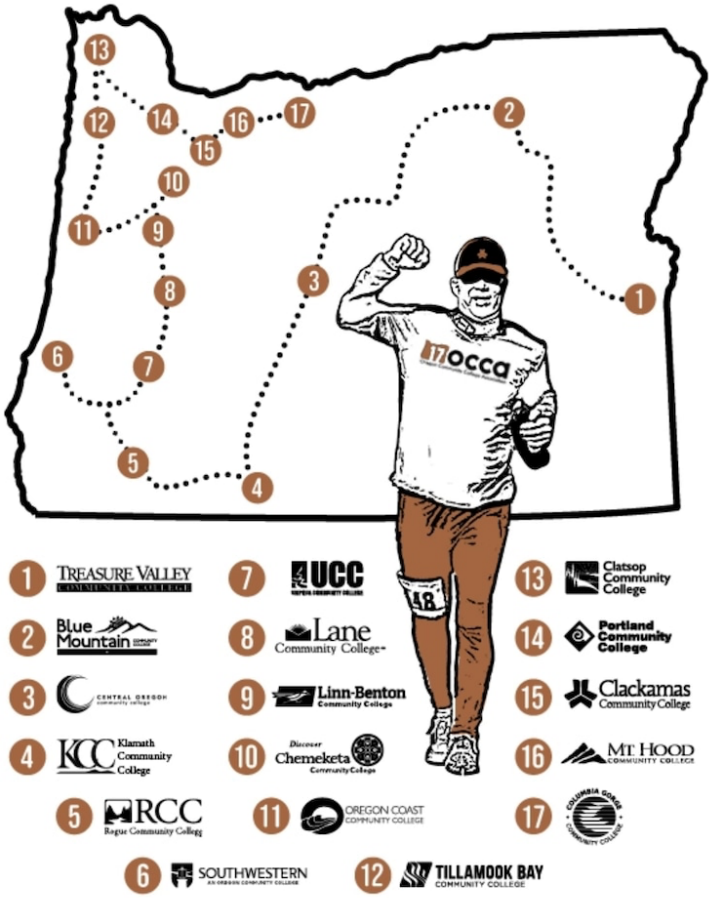
Cook cited the challenges that many students face, including food insecurity, homelessness and limited access to child care and transportation.

"Several years ago, I got really concerned about the number of students that I was seeing on my campus … living out of their cars," Cook said last week during a walking break along the shoulder of a busy road in Tigard.

"I saw that the food pantry was getting wiped out every week," he said. "When I would talk to people about it, I don't think they really understood how severe it was. They would say things like, 'Well, I had to eat Top Ramen in school. I don't see what the big deal is.' And I was seeing a much more serious matter."

Cook set out on June 16 from Treasure Valley Community College in Ontario and ran until — 52 days and six pairs of shoes later — he reached the final campus, Columbia Gorge Community College in Hood River.

Most days along the way, he ran 26 to 30 miles, according to his running blog, wearing what's become his signature look: a white bucket hat, sunglasses and a neon-yellow running vest.



Clackamas Community College president Tim Cook ran 1,400 miles across Oregon to raise awareness for student basic needs. While his original plan was to run 1,500 miles, some shortcuts and road blocks shortened the route to around 1,410 miles, he said. Courtesy of Clackamas Community College

Clackamas Community College students are 29 to 30 years old on average, Cook said, with septuagenarians in each year's graduating class. Many live at home, not on campus, and balance work with school.

A 2019 survey found that over half of Oregon community college students had faced housing insecurity, 41% had struggled to afford food and one in five had been homeless. The study was done by Temple University's Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice.

“It’s hard to learn if you are living out of your car or if you haven’t eaten,” Cook said. “So for me, basic needs is becoming just as important as money to buy textbooks or money to pay tuition.”

BAND-AID FUNDS

Nearly 600 people have donated more than $127,000 so far toward Cook’s goal to raise $150,000. Donations are open online until Aug. 30.

People can choose which community college their money goes toward, and each college will choose how to spend the money, Cook said.

The money could make a difference for some of Oregon’s approximately 200,000 community college students, said Randy Weber, the president of Rogue Community College in Grants Pass.

“We tragically have too many students who drop out of college — and are doing academically well — because they don’t have the resources to make college a priority,” Weber said.

At Rogue, the more than $11,000 raised — the largest amount of any Oregon community college besides Cook’s own Clackamas, at $75,000 — will help restore the food pantry and fund emergency grants for students. The grants help students who, for example, can’t afford car repairs or tank refills to drive to class, Weber said.

“Students will skip class because they don’t have money for gas,” Weber said. “It impacts their ability to learn.”

At Clackamas Community College, the money will be deposited into the college’s basic needs fund, Cook said, which includes a campus care team helping students with everything from electric bills to car insurance.

The college estimates cost of attendance for one full-time term at the Oregon City campus is $7,418 for a student living with a parent and $10,499 for a

student not with a parent. Factored into that cost is $2,175 per term for tuition and fees.

Students were on Cook's mind often as he ran. Otherwise, he kept busy listening to music, audiobooks and podcasts (his favorite being the podcast "Stuck in the '80s"), he said.

He mostly ran alone, but was sometimes joined by others. A Clackamas Community College math professor, a student and a board member each ran stints. In La Grande on June 20, Cook met up with U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden. And at each community college pitstop, people cheered for him at campus events with donation bins and cardboard signs reading "Run, Tim, Run."



Supporters in yellow shirts clapped, cheered and rang cowbells as Cook ran his final stretch to the finish line at Hood River Event Site.Maddie Khaw

"It's a vast undertaking, and there he is, putting one foot in front of the other for about eight weeks without stop," said Ben Cannon, the executive director of

Oregon's Higher Education Coordinating Commission. "From a running standpoint, frankly, I think it borders on insane."

Cannon ran 62 miles with Cook over two days between Astoria and Vernonia. He was "blown away" by Cook's steady pace through intense summer heat and elevation. (Cook said the highest point he reached throughout the trip was 9,000 feet.)

The money raised, Cannon said, is a "Band-Aid" for the deep-seated challenges faced by community college students. While it helps, he said, the biggest benefit of the run is the attention it brings to students' needs.

"I hope it gets people thinking about long-term solutions," Cook said. "This is what I'm doing one time to help support, but I'm hoping that longer term, state legislators find money so that we don't have to do things like this."

The Legislature approved $854.4 million for Oregon community colleges for 2025-2027, a nearly 7% increase from the previous cycle. A state program also provides free community college tuition for GED or high school graduates.

BLOOD, SWEAT AND TEARS

On Thursday morning, Cook jogged a final 2.5 miles from Columbia Gorge Community College to the banks of the Columbia River in Hood River.

Flanked by his son, Holden, and Columbia Gorge's President Kenny Lawson, around 50 people clad in yellow-shirts clapped, cheered and rang cowbells as Cook crossed the finish line under an inflatable blue arch.

Cook's wife, Paddy, was among the first to embrace him. She had traveled all 1,400-plus miles with him, trailing along in a Sprinter van while other crew members drove ahead in another car, scouting out the route ahead. Cook stopped at the van for food, water, rest and sprays from a water-mister along the way.

“It has been, really, an indescribable journey,” Paddy Cook said. “I’m hoping that all of the blood, sweat and tears will help others understand how important our students are.”



Cook's wife, Paddy, accompanied him throughout the 1,400 mile trek, driving ahead in a Sprinter van. Maddie Khaw

Much of Cook’s route took him on narrow highway shoulders and rural roads with cars whizzing past. At one point on U.S. 101 between Lincoln City and Tillamook, he said, he leapt into a muddy ditch to avoid being hit by a car that “came flying around the corner.”

Cook has run marathons for 20 years, so he’s no stranger to a long run. To prepare, he added more mileage and strength work to his weekly training load starting back in January. He was up to around 50 miles per week leading up to the trek, but that still wasn’t enough, he said: He ran 210 miles within the first week.

Those first two weeks were the roughest, he said. His toes and heels were covered in blisters. Kinesiology tape stretched across his leg muscles for pain relief. His Achilles ached. But after two weeks, things gradually improved, he said. By the time he passed through Portland on his 47th and 48th days of running, he felt physically better than when he started.

He went all the way from Ontario to Klamath Community College in Klamath Falls and through the Siskiyou Mountains in southern Oregon before running his way through Eugene, along the coast and eventually through the gorge. Now, Cook feels bittersweet about reaching the finish line.

He will return to work on Monday, back from running the state to running a college. And it won't be long before he's off to the races again; he plans to run the Atlantic City marathon in New Jersey in October, part of his goal to run a marathon in each state (he's at 38 out of 50).

In the meantime, he said he's excited to return to his house, his dogs and a couch.