Regional Community College Career Technical Education Program

The Roundhouse Foundation, a private family foundation based in Sisters, Oregon, is deeply committed to strengthening and celebrating rural Oregon and Indigenous communities. The Foundation partners with community organizations to develop, implement and sustain creative, place-based approaches and programs. Its work spans four areas fundamental to thriving rural communities: arts and culture, environmental stewardship, education and social services.

Through the Roundhouse Foundation's strategic work across Oregon, career technical education (CTE) has emerged as a consistent ingredient of vibrant rural economies. The Foundation has elevated CTE as a strategic priority, recognizing its power in rural spaces. At the forefront is its **Regional Community College Career Technical Education Program**. This program is an innovative, impactful way for philanthropy to invest in CTE and reduce barriers that can keep students from accessing credentials and skills for jobs in high-demand sectors. It addresses hidden costs of CTE – essential non-tuition expenses for equipment tools, protective gear and other requirements for many CTE courses – that too often present obstacles for students and their families.

"The Roundhouse Foundation program makes a profound difference in the lives of our CTE students. It opens doors that might otherwise remain closed, providing critical support to those who need it most and empowering them to pursue their dreams with confidence and security."

– Cathy Yasuda, Treasure Valley Community College's Chief Development Officer and Foundation Executive Director

The Regional Community College CTE Program launched in 2020 and has steadily grown. By the end of the 2024-25 school year, the Foundation will have awarded $1.25 million, reducing financial barriers for an estimated 4,700 students at 13 rural Oregon community colleges as they pursue credentials in more than 30 high-demand career fields. Funds equip students for their training and entry into the rural workforce.

With its flexibility, scalability and efficiency, the program model is an accessible and innovative way for funders to support education, workforce development, rural economies and specific fields such as health, environment and early childhood that rely on CTE-trained professionals. Funders can easily customize the program to available funds, community needs and programmatic interests and have confidence in the program's impact.

Why Career Technical Education? Skilled tradespeople are critical to all communities regardless of size, but especially critical to small rural and remote communities, who may face significant geographic distances and limited capacity. They are trained specialists who provide the essential services that keep rural homes, businesses and community services running smoothly. They help rural communities prevent, respond to and recover from community disasters. And they are key players in bringing rural place-specific economic development innovations to life. Skilled trade careers also provide a pathway for people to stay in rural communities and make a stable living. Examples of this workforce includes fire fighters on cargo ships that trade goods across the country; aluminum welders who work for the aluminum boat companies; building contractors, machinists, and vet techs who go right to work after graduation, in their local communities.

CTE programs develop these trades specialists by combining academic and technical skills in real-world workplace contexts. People earning CTE certificates and degrees emerge with the knowledge and training needed to contribute to their local workforce immediately. In rural spaces, regional community colleges often provide the most accessible educational opportunities, including CTE programs. These place-based colleges also address their region's most current and vital workforce needs.

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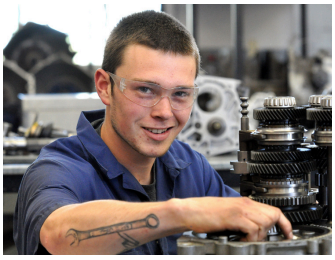
Essential non-tuition expenses are barriers to CTE. CTE programs often require students to purchase their own job-specific tools, equipment and supplies for classes. These costs typically range from $20-$500. Welding students, for example, must come with their own helmets, aprons, gloves and boots. Allied health and nursing students are often required to purchase their own scrubs, stethoscopes, blood pressure cuffs, and personal protective equipment, among other equipment. Natural and forest resources students need binoculars, rain gear, hatchets and rainproof field notebooks. Students in automotive, heavy diesel, agricultural, and industrial manufacturing courses may need steel-toed boots and toolsets. Requirements can extend beyond equipment to background checks, fingerprinting, certifications and exams, and other expenses.

These "hidden" program costs are in addition to standard student tuition, books and supplies and can result in hundreds of dollars of out-of-pocket expenses for students. Financial aid typically does not cover these costs, leaving many students with limited options to pay for them. This gap is where philanthropic support plays a unique and critical role. By addressing these hidden costs, the Foundation is ensuring that financial barriers do not hinder students' education and career prospects.



"The Roundhouse support was a huge help throughout the year. All the equipment for this work is so expensive, and finding gear that fits properly is important. What I got is really nice, fits me perfectly, and has made it easy for me to do my class work."

– Anthony, Columbia Gorge Community College Student

The Roundhouse Foundation Regional Community College CTE Program Model

In 2020, the Foundation partnered with the local community college to design and pilot a program to offset financial barriers for students pursuing CTE degrees and credentials. Grant funds were awarded to the college foundation, which then worked with the college business office to apply the funds directly to student accounts. The approach was well-received and incrementally expanded to include additional community colleges, new methods of student support, and a broader pool of CTE programs.

With ongoing feedback from community college partners, the Foundation has continued to refine its program. Core elements include:

Efficient, streamlined processes. Community colleges are pre-selected and invited to apply through a brief and straightforward process. This approach has ensured regional representation as the program grows. Process insights, such as avoiding time-consuming and cumbersome competitive grant application processes, reflect sensitivity to rural partners' capacity, as well as the Foundation's own internal capacity. Reporting processes are similarly streamlined. Importantly, the Foundation has worked with colleges to adjust timelines for application and renewal processes to best align with colleges' academic year.

Authentic collaboration. Colleges and the Foundation mutually agree upon the CTE programs and types of expenses the grant will support. The Foundation understands that each college has different programs, capacities and processes, and it trusts that colleges know the needs of their students and communities best. It also continuously asks college partners for feedback and is open to learning and changing. For example, while the program initially focused on traditional trades such as carpentry and plumbing, the program scope has evolved through conversations with college partners. The Foundation now supports a broad array of CTE programs, including those of regional importance, such as marine-related programs at coastal colleges and agriculture programs in Eastern Oregon. This partnership approach ensures that funds support student, college and community needs in ways that align with the Foundation's mission and overarching vision for the program.

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Internal college collaboration is also crucial. Upfront engagement among college foundation staff, deans, faculty and business offices is essential to build a shared understanding of the program and connections to other supports such as TRIO programs, STEP funds, student navigators and scholarships.

Grants are awarded on a sliding scale according to enrollment. The scale changes over time based on funds available and the number of participating colleges. Schools are encouraged to spread funds over the school year (i.e., not limited to first-year or fall-term students).

Community college foundations deploy the funds for direct student benefit. The use of funds is specifically for essential non-tuition costs. The funds are not scholarships and are intended to complement, not replace, financial aid. No funds are used for administrative expenses. College foundations also work with college partners to leverage support and braid funding with national, state, local and philanthropic resources.

Students receive equal support. The Foundation explicitly intends for funds to promote equity in CTE classrooms. With minimal exceptions, support is equally provided to entire cohorts of students, ensuring that all students in a course have the same high-quality equipment. There is no competition for resources, no callout for special consideration and no stigma based on income or financial need.

Students own the equipment. Ideally, funds support durable equipment that will be useful in the class setting and allow students to enter the rural workforce with the skills, knowledge and tools to succeed. This is crucial because many trade careers require workers to bring their own tools to the job. Moreover, supporting the purchase of durable equipment increases the return on philanthropic investment to the local community.

"Our hope is that by removing these cost barriers, we will see higher retention and completion rates."

– Zak Boone, Central Oregon Community College's Chief Advancement Officer and Executive Director of the COCC Foundation

Colleges have flexibility in how they deploy the funds and get students what they need. Often, faculty provide equipment lists to the college foundation, which then makes a bulk purchase, or faculty make bulk purchases and get reimbursed. One community has leveraged the funds to build a relationship with a local company: students go to the business to shop from a pre-approved list of items charged to a college foundation account. The business then provides one invoice for all students in the class and applies a discount. Another college purchases gift cards from a local business, and students make their own purchases. Occasionally, a college disburses funds directly to students to make purchases independently, such as for size-specific items that students cannot purchase locally or fees for required certifications or background checks. Regardless of how colleges deploy funds, the Foundation wants to be sure that the disbursement process is easy for students and support does not impact student financial aid.

Students benefit from knowing someone believes in them. Students who receive support know that the funding comes from the Roundhouse Foundation and why it cares about them and CTE. College partners emphasize how important this is because "it helps CTE students see that people believe in them, want them to succeed, and recognize and appreciate the value they and their skills will bring to their community."

There is mission value in being a curious partner. This program has deepened relationships and opened doors to other opportunities for the Foundation to support its rural community college partners and advance regional CTE through additional grants for facilities, equipment and programming.

Any funder can take this approach. The program is customizable, scalable and efficient. Funders of any size and in any place can directly and meaningfully impact students and communities.

For more information, please visit our website or contact us: