

Why Scholarships and Other Financial Assistance Are Important in Recruiting Qualified HVACR Techs

WOULD-BE STUDENTS CAN CHOOSE FROM NUMEROUS FINANCIAL AID PACKAGES TO PURSUE HVACR TRAINING.

Getting trained as an HVACR technician is expensive. According to July 2016 estimates from The Simple Dollar web site, the average two-year trade school degree costs \$33,000 to complete. That's a lot of cash for tuition, books, equipment, uniforms, and lab and graduation fees. And don't forget fees for dropping or adding a class.

Chris Mercado appreciates the value of that training. Mercado enrolled at All State Career School near Philadelphia in July 2015. He was a star student and received high praise

from his instructors for his leadership, strong work ethic and skill in the classroom. He received a sponsorship, one-on-one mentoring and additional proprietary training from One Hour Heating & Air Conditioning in Hatboro, Pennsylvania. When he completed his training program, Mercado was hired by One Hour Heating & Air Conditioning. This all happened less than a year after he started school.

Mercado is glad he took advantage of the training, and he appreciates the help from his employer. "If you want it [the training], it's well worth the investment. Even though I am not even a whole year working, I am loving the field so far. The financial help from One Hour Heating & Air Conditioning helped." Mercado advises his peers to take school seriously: "It's all about what you can do and what you put into it. Stay with it, and keep your mind on what your goals are."

Mercado believes financial aid is crucial. "Absolutely, there should be more scholarships or employer sponsorship programs. I have had friends who were interested in other trades, but they didn't have the money to pay for school so they just ended up doing something else. We need more scholarship opportunities, but you also have to have the opportunities (jobs) to go along with it."

Mercado appreciates his employer's sponsorship program and is thankful for the opportunity. "Anyone who is trying to get to the next step in their life should pursue this; I have had a lot of help so far, and I am definitely enjoying it."

Mercado believes some of his contemporaries are missing an opportunity. "I don't think a lot of young people realize the benefits of going into the trades; everyone thinks you have to go to college. If you go into the trades and are willing to work, the payoff is well worth it."

THE SCHOLARSHIP PATH

Steward Cade, a maintenance and heating technician at an apartment complex in Gainesville Georgia, was the recipient of an AHRI Ted Rees scholarship (see *A Scholarship Sampler*) that helped him complete his training at Athens Technical College in Athens, Georgia, in 2015.

Carter Stanfield, who until recently was the Air Conditioning Technology program chair and instructor at Athens Technical College, describes the challenges that Cade faced in getting his technician training: "Steward worked all night and then drove 40 miles to attend school. When he graduated, he got a job in his home town working on industrial refrigeration systems, doubled his take-home pay, and generally upgraded his life. All we did for him was offer an opportunity. He never complained about what had to be a grueling two years.





Ty Killen is one of the students who went through the pilot Ride and Decide program in Tennessee in 2015.

The Ted Rees scholarship allowed him to remain in school — he was also strained financially.”

Cade believes the industry needs more scholarships to help ease the coming shortage of HVACR technicians. “I think more scholarships would definitely help, especially with those who can’t afford to buy all the books, tuition, fees, and every other expense that goes with trying to learn the trade.”

He believes other forms of financial aid, such as employer-sponsored training and certification funding, are needed to get more recruits into the trade. “I think more sponsored training and additional funding would be great tools to help train more technicians for the industry.”

According to Cade, trade school books are a big money factor for today’s HVAC tech students. “Yes, books are very expensive. You can pay upwards of a couple hundred dollars for just one text — and you may need three or four for just one class.”

WORK SPONSORSHIPS

Students preparing for ANY career are investing big money, says Gordy Noe, president of Pioneer Heating and Air Conditioning in Knoxville, Tennessee. In a recent issue of *Plumbing & Mechanical Magazine*, Noe said that college debt in the United States exceeds \$1.7 trillion, and that doesn’t include what families have scrimped

and saved to send their kids to college.

Yes, student debt is significant, but James Hughes says the problem goes beyond dollars and debt. He is director of Technical Training at Plano, Texas-based Service Experts Heating & Air Conditioning

The NATE Magazine asked Hughes whether scholarships and worker sponsorships can help ease the coming shortage of HVACR technicians. “Probably not,” says Hughes. “The shortage of technicians is an ongoing issue that the industry has faced for decades, and it is becoming progressively worse.”

Scholarships and work sponsorships as a solution, says Hughes, imply that there is a large group of potential workers who would like to enter the trades but are unable due to the cost of training. “I don’t believe trade schools routinely turn away students due to their inability to pay for training. Additionally, scholarships and work sponsorships already exist in one form or another through apprenticeship programs, tuition reimbursement, and companies that will hire employees and send them to various training programs,” Hughes notes.

He explains that Service Experts Heating & Air Conditioning has programs designed to take individuals with no industry experience and, at no cost to them, provide the training they need to have a successful career.

“Ultimately,” says Hughes, “our challenge is not individuals who cannot afford the training to make our industry their career. Our challenge, in a society where young people are conditioned to believe they must go to college to get ahead, is to promote our industry so people see it as a good career choice.”

Hughes remarks that the Comfort Masters Service Experts air conditioning contractor group in the Chicago area is an example of his firm’s efforts to recruit and train new blood for the industry. For several years, staffers at the contracting firm have participated in the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) program at a local high school. Through their school partnership, they offer summer internships to students, so they can be exposed to the HVACR industry while they are considering their career options.

Panasonic also is playing a role in training the next generation of HVACR technicians. That’s the word from Malcolm Persaud, senior product planning and development manager, Heating & Solutions Group, Panasonic Eco Solutions North America. “We teach courses on the latest HVACR technology,” he says.

His firm offers prearranged courses monthly at its three training centers (Harrison, New Jersey; Kennesaw, Georgia; and Chicago). The classes are free, and all are welcome with preregistration. Some of the subjects covered in the courses include: Installation of Panasonic Mini Splits and VRF Products; Commissioning of Mini Splits and VRF Products; Service, Troubleshooting and Maintenance of Mini Splits and VRF Products; and Applications of the VRF Product Range.



Gordy Noe, president of Pioneer Heating & Air Conditioning Inc. in Knoxville, Tenn., is pictured on the left with three high school students who successfully completed the Ride and Decide program.

Persaud says his firm uses the courses as a recruiting tool. Panasonic executives also serve on advisory committees at technical schools to give suggestions on equipment students should be learning about now and in the future. “When possible, we have also made donations of equipment to schools so the schools can

bring their curricula up to date and students can work on technology that they’ll encounter on the job,” adds Persaud.

Yes, recruiting new technicians can be a challenge, says Steve Stauffer, owner of One Hour Heating & Air Conditioning in Hatboro, Pennsylvania. He has been in the

HVACR business for 22 years and has owned his firm since September 11, 2001.

“Finding technicians is very difficult,” Stauffer says. “I believe it is because the high schools today are pushing further education in colleges and universities. It’s as if you can only work smart but not hard, or work

A SCHOLARSHIP SAMPLER

William R. Moore College of Technology – Moore Tech Memphis, Tennessee, offers an extensive Air Conditioning/Refrigeration and Heating program. Founded in 1909, it has provided vocational training to tens of thousands of students throughout the mid-south.

The school offers two in-house scholarships for students in all programs, including HVACR. There are numerous outside scholarships available to the school’s HVACR students. The most popular outside scholarship is through the Rees Scholarship Foundation.

Rees Scholarship Foundation – The foundation awards scholarships to promising HVACR students throughout the nation, without regard to race, creed, gender or background. The foundation assesses each student’s application based on recommendations, motivation for starting or progressing a career within the industry, and performance in the classroom.

“The Rees Scholarship Foundation supports both traditional students and veterans reentering the workforce by offering two categories of scholarships,” says Misha Adams, AHRI’s education program specialist. “The foundation places emphasis on students dedicated to careers in the industry and on financial need. Rees has provided \$440,000 in scholarships to over 250 students since 2003.”

There’s a new partnership between the Rees Scholarship Foundation and North American Technical Excellence (NATE) to support new students studying to enter the HVACR and water heating industry.

Through the alliance, NATE will provide Rees Scholarship recipients with a free Industry Competency Exam (ICE), which measures industry-agreed standards of basic competency for entry-level (one year or less) technicians. It is an important certification for technicians to gain in their ongoing career development. It is a graduation requirement at more than 300 schools nationwide for students to complete at least one of these exams. The collaboration between Rees and NATE will help students pay their tuition while encouraging them to take the critical next step toward becoming a certified technician.

Shurtape Mission: HVAC program – Shurtape Technologies, LLC, a producer of pressure-sensitive tapes, offers financial help to future HVACR industry workers through its Mission: HVAC and Mission: Packaging programs. Through these programs, the company is challenging six students (three HVAC, three packaging) to complete a series of themed missions related to their areas of study. Upon completion of each challenge, the students report their findings via blog posts on a dedicated site to earn up to \$5,000 each. Winners can use the funds to help them prepare for future endeavors.

Donald Frenberg Scholarship – In September 2015, NATE Chief Operating Officer John Lanier announced the creation of the Donald Frenberg Scholarship to support qualified students in an HVACR program at an accredited institution in Florida, Frenberg’s adopted home state. Frenberg is the former executive vice president of Heating, Air-conditioning & Refrigeration Distributors International (HARDI). He is now a principal at Phase 3 Insights, LLC. The company offers heating, air conditioning and refrigeration industry consulting. Three scholarships will be awarded annually in honor of Frenberg.

Women in HVACR – Scholarships can help talented individuals overcome financial hardship and join the HVACR industry, says Danielle Putnam, who is an executive board member of the Women in HVACR group. She is also president of The New Flat Rate. Women in HVACR enables its members to connect with other women who are growing their careers in the HVACR industry. The New Flat Rate has developed a menu pricing system for electrical, HVACR and plumbing contractors.

“Scholarships encourage those with the most passion for the industry to stick with it,” Putnam says. “Scholarships aren’t free. To win or receive the scholarship, you must first be interested in the industry, and then you have to put forth the work to apply and get accepted.”

Putnam says the two \$2,000 scholarships awarded to women in the industry via Women in HVACR in 2016 have helped people who are committed to the industry. “The scholarships are great propellers to helping with any cost or barriers that could inhibit already interested individuals.” She says companies should consider providing potential new hires with the following recruitment goodies: starter kits, tool bags with tools, free uniforms with your company logo and school supply expense reimbursements.

“Just apply for scholarships — you never know until you try.” That’s the advice that Cade, the maintenance and heating technician we visited earlier, has for his peers who are considering a career in the HVACR industry. Cade adds: “Cast a wide net to any scholarship source available — scholarships will be out there.”

In addition, certification costs shouldn’t be a drain on technicians’ wallets. Employers understand this, so many of them do pay for their technicians to take the exams and maintain their certifications. Technicians should see if their employer will pay the testing fees for NATE HVAC Support Technician, Industry Competency Exams (ICE) or professional-level certifications. Technicians should also query their employers about paying the NATE recertification application fee and tuition and other costs associated with earning Continuing Education Hours to gain recertification.

hard but not smart. What happened to working smart and hard?”

According to Stauffer, company sponsorship programs can help recruit people to the HVACR field. “Sponsorships are going to help bring new people into the industry because one of the main concerns today is how to pay for further education. This sponsorship not only helps to pay for further education but also helps to guarantee students a great start to their new career.” Stauffer says that new employees that start their careers on the right foot are more likely to enjoy their work life and maybe even recruit others to join.

RECRUITING INITIATIVES

Sponsorships and scholarships are just one part of the solution to adding new techs to the workforce, says Mark Baker, president of Franchise for One Hour Heating & Air Conditioning. He says his firm has taken a comprehensive approach in its recruitment efforts.

“In addition to offering financial help, we want to develop well-trained professionals and give them the tools and training to actually do the job,” Baker says. “We offer up to \$2,000 in financial assistance that can go toward tuition reimbursement; up to \$1,500 in tools (critical for being able to



HVAC students get instruction in the afternoon class at William R. Moore College of Technology (Moore Tech) in Memphis, Tenn.



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— Danielle Putnam, executive board member of the Women in HVACR group.

actually work in the HVACR industry); and proprietary training in the ‘One Hour Way’ before students even graduate.” Baker says the resources that his firm provides give new trade school grads the tools and training they need to work in the HVACR industry.

Baker says the financial component is just one of many things the industry must address in its HVACR technician recruitment efforts. “If people really have a desire to work in the skilled trades but can’t get the necessary technical training because of a financial hardship, I think companies that have the resources, and are willing to invest in the next generation, should step up. These jobs are too critical to go unfilled.”

There are a variety of initiatives that introduce would-be HVACR techs to the industry. The Ride and Decide program helps high schoolers understand if a job in the trades is right for them. Pioneer Heating & Air Conditioning’s Noe created the program in 2014 while he was the local Plumbing-Heating-Cooling Contractors (PHCC) president.

Noe started the initiative because his firm was having difficulty recruiting experienced, skilled workers. The program aims to give youngsters a brief exposure to the skilled trades before they make the decision to go to college,

trade school or the military. Recruiting new blood for trades that are facing a wave of retirees is another goal of the program.

The Ride and Decide program runs two years. It places students in a compensated summer job after their sophomore year and with a local skilled trade business after their junior year. The program starts in June after school adjourns for the summer and runs for four to eight weeks, depending on the student’s needs and schedule.

In its first year, in the summer of 2015, Ride and Decide gave a total of 42 students job opportunities in 20 businesses. A similar Ride and Decide program, under the auspices of PHCC, is on the drawing board to start in Nashville, Tennessee, in the coming year. A similar initiative got started in California this past summer.

Ride and Decide success continues. “This past summer,” explains Noe, “we had about 50 students work for 23 businesses. Many of those students have already secured permanent jobs after graduation.” Other areas of the United States are on board, he adds. “Ride and Decide is spreading across Tennessee, and many other states are putting their programs together.” ●

Michael Keating is a contributor to *The NATE Magazine*.

WEB RESOURCES

- AHRI Rees Scholarship: <http://www.ahrinet.org/Resources/HVACR-Education-and-Training/Rees-Scholarship.aspx>
- NATE Certification Basics 101: <http://www.natex.org/site/353/Technicians/Certification-Basics/101>
- Pioneer Heating and Air Conditioning Ride & Decide Program: <http://pioneercomfort.com/ride-and-decide/>
- Rees Scholarship Foundation: <http://www.reesscholarship.org/site/1/Home>
- Shurtape Mission: HVAC: <https://www.shurtape.com/blog/mission-hvac>
- William R. Moore College of Technology (Moore Tech) in Memphis, Tenn.: <http://www.williamrmoore.org/programs/test>
- Women in HVACR-WHVACR Scholarship Program: <http://www.womeninhvacr.org/webapp/p/244/whvacr-scholarships>