

GIVING BACK to Your Chapter

An inside look at The Bluebonnet Scholarship Fund

BY VIVIAN NGUYEN

In January, Chapter 74 made a commitment to dedicate \$20,000 towards their members' training and credentialing needs. We invited Richard Scholtz, R/W-AC, David Baylor, SR/WA, and Randy Williams, SR/WA, who were key to the development of The Bluebonnet Scholarship Fund, to share some insight about the process and how the scholarship will support the educational needs of their Chapter members.



Richard Scholtz
R/W-AC



David Baylor
SR/WA



Randy Williams
SR/WA

Congratulations on establishing the Bluebonnet Scholarship Fund! Can you give us a brief overview of the scholarship as well as your roles in its development?

RS: David, Randy and myself were involved in the development of the program with final input and approvals made by the Chapter 74 Board of Directors. The scholarship consists of \$20,000 that the Chapter has set aside for partial reimbursement for one- and two-day IRWA courses. The reimbursement is \$200 for a one-day course and \$350 for a two-day course for any primary Chapter member of Chapter 74 as of January 1, 2022.

RW: I'd like to add that Chapter 74 primary members who join after January 1, 2022, will qualify, but they must live within central Texas boundaries as described in the description on our website.

DB: The idea of giving back to the Chapter members has certainly been a recurring theme, especially focusing on supporting members' education in some way. The Chapter found itself in a good position financially after hosting an annual eminent domain seminar on a virtual platform for the past two years per social distancing guidelines; the Chapter was able to save on costs by not being able to travel. Randy and Richard first proposed the idea of a scholarship with the extra funds in keeping with being a nonprofit association and the desire to support Chapter members.

IRWA Chapter 74
The Bluebonnet Education Scholarship Fund
Chapter 74 has committed \$20,000.00 to your training and credentialing needs!

Chapter 74 will reimburse members
\$200 for 1-day course and \$350 for a 2-day course.
3-day and 4-day courses do not qualify for reimbursement.

Who qualifies?

1. Be a current Primary member of Chapter 74 prior to January 1, 2022.
2. New members after January 1, 2022, must reside within the Austin Metropolitan Statistical Area, or reside within Bell, Burnet, or Fayette Counties.

What Courses Qualify?

1. Any 1-day or 2-day IRWA course qualifies.
2. Courses taken on-demand, virtually, or in person.
3. 3 course limit per member. Members may only be reimbursed for up to 3 courses.
4. Courses on sale or offered at a discount. Please note, reimbursement will not exceed the cost of the course.

How to Qualify?

1. Take a 1-day or 2-day IRWA course.
2. No pre-approval from the Chapter is required.
3. Submit a reimbursement form and course completion certificate to the Chapter Treasurer and Education Chair within 30 days of completing the course.
4. Chapter will reimburse attendee within 30 days of the reimbursement form being submitted.

What inspired the initial idea behind the scholarship?

DB: The initial idea was Richard and Randy's. They approached me about it, as I am Chapter treasurer. The goal was to support professional development for Chapter members through education as a way of giving back.

RS: As a Chapter, we had talked about doing some kind of reimbursement/scholarship in the past, but it had never gotten off the ground. We had also had a raffle for a free registration to attend the International Education Conference, but we wanted to do something bigger. Given the amount of money we had allocated, we wanted to do something to benefit all members of Chapter 74.

RW: Our Chapter found itself in the enviable position of a healthy treasury. By promoting IRWA's mission through education, our goal has always been to advance our members' careers.

How long did the process take?

RS: The process began in August 2021 when it was announced at the 2021 Region 2 Fall Forum in College Station, Texas, that the Chapter was planning to do something with these funds. Executive Director Tim Drennan, CAE, reached out to me and offered any assistance that headquarters could provide, and David put together a proclamation for the Chapter. The program was brought before the Chapter 74 Board of Directors at the October board meeting and voted to approve the reimbursement program at the November board meeting. After several conference calls and email exchanges, along with input from Headquarters, the program was rolled out on January 1, 2022.

What were some of the challenges that you faced?

RS: The biggest challenge was determining what policies were going to be in place for the reimbursement and who all was going to be able to apply for the reimbursement. In the end, it was decided that our Chapter members are our biggest supporters, so we felt they should get the most benefit from the program. Tim was able to provide valuable insight into the eligibility requirements for the program. My wife, who is a teacher and an avid fan of Google Forms, showed me how to build the reimbursement form and the course completion upload. If a Chapter would like to do something similar, we have these forms available to share.

DB: Thankfully, the Chapter membership attending the board meetings was highly supportive of the idea, and there was no trouble from a conceptual issue. Crafting the framework of the scholarship, how to implement the rules and qualifying courses was a little more challenging but really came together quite quickly with no opposition.

RW: I echo Richard and David, as one of the most rewarding parts was Chapter 74's large and active board, which was 100 percent in favor of this motion.

What do you hope Chapter 74 members will gain by taking advantage of these funds?

RW: We plan to advance the careers of our members. Many times, our members are paying for these courses out of their own pockets. This scholarship is for members working towards certifications/designations or members who are recertifying.

RS: Many of our members are already very proactive in taking courses to fulfill their education needs, and the hope is that Chapter members will continue to do so. Plus, our program is set up to not only reimburse the person taking the course, but also the employer if they reimburse their employees for taking courses. We hope that the employers will also want to take advantage of this program to assist with education budgets.

DB: I hope the scholarship provides a jumpstart to many of the members' professional development goals and assists them in attaining professional credentials. We are always seeking well-trained professionals in right of way. A highly educated right of way workforce can only help all of us in the industry.

What do you envision for the future of the scholarship?

RS: As for future plans, we are still in the very early stages of this program, so we are in a "wait-and-see" mode at this time. We have already had people sign up for the program and will continue to send out email blasts to the Chapter members to ensure they are aware this program is available to them. If our budget allows us to do so, we may consider allocating additional funds to the program at a later date.

RW: We have put no time frame on the program so the entire \$20,000 will be spent. I expect we will revisit this scholarship if finances allow. While we respect the need for healthy Chapter finances, we are not in this just to build up a bank book.

DB: I'd like to think the benefits to members could lead to increased participation in the Chapter and the IRWA at large. The benefits provided by this scholarship I hope lead to a desire to keep it going in the future with new scholarship opportunities sponsored by the Chapter.

What advice do you have for other Chapters that might want to follow suit and create scholarships for their members?

RW: Look at your membership and its educational needs. Bringing value to our members is a great way to retain or recruit members. A strong, vibrant Chapter is usually a financially healthy Chapter.

RS: The first piece of advice I would give is to look at your budget and determine how much money you can set aside for a program like this without compromising your budget. You may decide that doing a one-time scholarship offer may be the appropriate way to support your members. Whatever you decide to do, keep in mind that your Chapter members are generally the biggest supporters of your Chapter, so they should be the ones receiving the most benefits.

DB: I believe nonprofit associations are there to support their members. Education is a top IRWA goal, and I encourage other Chapters to find a way to give back in this way as well. Chapter sizes vary as do their financial balance sheets but a scholarship can make a world of difference to an up-and-coming right of way professional who is striving to complete a certification or to someone who is struggling to just get started in advancing their education. Some employers are unable to support their employees' education as much as others, and this is a way to provide an opportunity and make a big difference in someone's professional development.

