

Seattle Colleges boosts Postsecondary Enrollment, Retention, and Completion Figures Among City's Most Vulnerable Youths



Perhaps the greatest, most thrilling achievement of all is what is emerging: not just a model for free community college, but a new model for education.

– Rosie Rimando-Chareunsap
Seattle Colleges Chancellor

SUMMARY

Since its inception in 2018, the Seattle Promise program has assisted more than 9,000 Seattle public high school graduates to apply to and/or enroll in college.

As of Fall 2023, nearly two-thirds of eligible Seattle high school students applied to the program. Of these applicants, more than 3,000 have chosen Seattle Colleges to help them in reaching their higher-education goals through participation in the Seattle Promise program. Promise has empowered them to achieve their goals by providing up to 90 credits of tuition-free college courses to all eligible students and by offering comprehensive wraparound services to support their educational needs before, during, and after their time at Seattle Colleges.

Seattle Promise continues to have a tangible impact on student enrollment, success, and degree program completion, particularly in lower-income and historically underserved communities. Clearly, pandemic-related impacts have not hindered the program or its positive outcomes.

Seattle Promise serves lower-income and historically underserved students.



2/3 students of color



1/3 first generation



50% from families making less than \$75K/year⁷

APPROACH

Seattle Promise uses a two-pronged approach to improve student access, success, and degree completion, combining tuition support with comprehensive wraparound services for students from their junior year of high school until the completion of their first degree.

College Funding

The last-dollar model of the tuition funding means that after a student's federal and state grants and scholarships are accounted for, Seattle Promise pays the remaining cost of the student's college tuition. The program pays tuition for up to 90 credits, which is sufficient to fully cover the cost of a variety of two-year degree or transfer programs at Seattle Colleges.

In addition to tuition support, equity scholarships for college costs beyond tuition, including books, transportation, and housing, are awarded to students with financial need.

Wraparound Support

Beyond financial support, the program's wraparound services ensure that students receive consistently high-touch and high-quality onboarding and advising throughout their time with Seattle Colleges. Promise staff assist students beginning in their junior year of high school, continuing through the completion of their first degree, certificate, 90 credits, transfer to a four-year university, or direct entry into the workforce.

With a ratio of one specialist to 300 student applicants, Seattle Promise outreach specialists are placed in each high school, where they work with students and families one-on-one to complete applications, including Seattle Promise, Seattle Colleges admissions, Free Application for Federal Student Aid/Washington Application for State Financial Aid (FAFSA/WASFA) financial aid completion, and transition to college.

Academic bridge and orientation programs, including Readiness Academy and Summer Bridge, assist students during the summer between their senior year of high school and their freshman year of college as they determine their desired area of study and register for their first college classes.

The program also pairs students with a Seattle Promise retention specialist during their time in college, with a ratio of one specialist to 100 students. These advisors work with students one-on-one to register for their first classes, set academic goals, create an education plan, and then connect them with needed resources to help ensure that they stay in school and complete their academic programs.



We make getting to college easy, helping with everything from applying for aid to building your class schedule.



– Aurelio Valdez-Barajas
Seattle Promise Outreach Specialist

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Community Commitment to Youth

With the support of the citizens of Seattle through the [Families, Education, Preschool, and Promise levy](#), and through strategic partnerships with the City of Seattle, Seattle Public and Charter Schools, and the University of Washington and other university transfer partners, Seattle Promise provides a guaranteed pathway to higher education and living-wage jobs for Seattle public high school graduates regardless of GPA, income, ability, or country of birth.

A New Model for Higher Education

This new model for higher education is bridging gaps and creating a seamless transition to postsecondary access and support for all students, especially low-income, first-generation (i.e., students who are the first in their family to attend college), and/or African American/Black, Hispanic/Latinx, Native American, Pacific Islander, underserved Asian populations, other students of color, refugee and immigrant, homeless, English-language learners, and LGBTQ+ students.

Creating a Workforce Ready for Our Region's Careers

In turn, students are succeeding in transitioning to their next destination, whether it is transferring to a four-year college or university, completing a certificate or professional training program to enter the workforce, or entering a skilled trade apprenticeship. The program is also earning more community interest, investment, and support, fostering even more opportunity.

RESULTS AND OUTCOMES

Application and Enrollment

Since its launch in 2018, Seattle Promise has experienced explosive growth in the number of students enrolling in the program. In its first year, about 220 students enrolled, which rose substantially to about 390 in 2019¹.

In 2020, when the Promise program opened to all 17 high schools in the Seattle Public Schools District, more than 50% of all graduating seniors applied to it.² Enrollment more than doubled from 2019, with approximately 840 students enrolled. Enrollment surged again in 2021 despite remaining pandemic conditions, with more than 1,110 students enrolling.³ In 2022, growth continued expanding overall and in charter schools, with approximately 1,250 students having enrolled. In 2023, the program grew again, enrolling about 1,460 students and vastly surpassing the levy projection of 870 students at full roll-out.

Completion

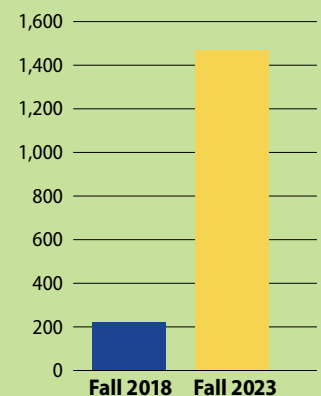
Among students who started college in the Fall of 2018, 38% successfully graduated within three years, representing a national benchmark for completion at community colleges. However, reflecting the challenges posed by the COVID-19, the three-year graduation rate for the 2019 cohort was 31% and further decreased to 32% for cohort 2020.⁴

Low completion rates in college can be attributed to a range of interconnected factors. Financial barriers, including contributing to family earnings and independently supporting oneself upon high school graduation, forces students to juggle work alongside their studies. Balancing work and family obligations can contribute to increased stress and a higher likelihood of dropping out. Academic unpreparedness further compounds the challenges, as students may struggle with coursework. During quarantine periods of the pandemic, the availability of in-person resources, health issues and economic downturns also played roles in hindering completion for cohorts 2019 and 2020.

To tackle suboptimal completion rates, a comprehensive approach is essential, targeting assistance for individual students based on their unique circumstances. Equity enhancements play a crucial role in supporting students to complete at higher rates. For the Cohort 2020, the three-year completion rate stands at 32%, on par with the national completion rate of 31%. However, by increasing the amount of the Equity Scholarship, there has been a notable improvement, with 40% of students who received the scholarship successfully completing their studies within the same timeframe.⁵

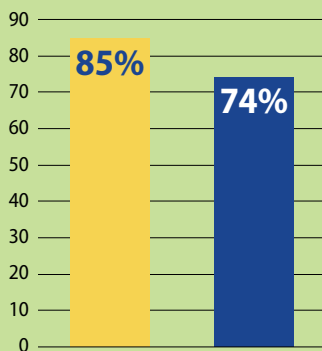


Since its inception, the Seattle Promise program has grown by 609 percent.

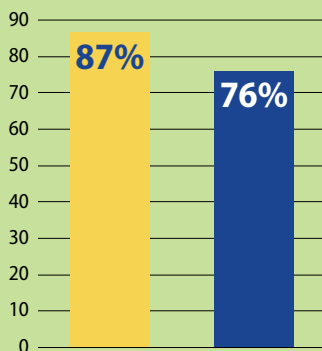


220 students enrolled in Fall 2018, and more than 1,460 enrolled in Fall 2023

Seattle Promise students are staying with the program: retention levels have surpassed those of pre-pandemic levels and have exceeded retention levels for all Seattle Colleges students.



85% of Promise students continued from Fall 2018 to Winter 2019 compared with 74% of all Seattle Colleges students in the same period.



Between Fall 2022 to Winter 2023 Seattle Promise retention rates increased to 87% vs 76% for all Seattle Colleges students.

Additionally, recognizing the impact of the completion commitment and flexibility in enrolling part-time on completion rates, it is notable that the overall completion rate for part-time students is 33%.

Demographics

The Seattle Promise program serves a racially and ethnically diverse group of scholars. As a body, scholars reflect the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity of our city.

Over two-thirds of our scholars are students of color, one-third are first-generation college students, and 60% come from families making less than \$75,000 a year.⁶

Seattle Promise is designed with students’ unique needs in mind and will be refined as the program needs change. Several program elements have been added to address specific demands, including the Equity Scholarship to assist with college costs beyond tuition for those with financial need. Additionally, peer mentors are available to relate to and help students; and interpreted application and financial aid workshops for families are regularly held remotely or in-person.

CONCLUSION

Seattle Promise continues to exceed expectations and has become a national model for free community college.

Seattle Promise application and enrollment numbers have constantly surpassed projections. This evidence confirms the effectiveness of the Promise program’s combination of tuition support and comprehensive wraparound services.

With our K-12 and college/university partners, we are bridging gaps and creating a seamless transition to postsecondary access and success. We are also establishing a clear pathway to living-wage careers for students, especially historically underserved populations, including students of color, low-income families, and first-generation college students.

More students are seeing that a college education is attainable and achievable. This is leading to both self-confidence and success for students; building a local workforce ready for our region’s careers; and, in turn, strengthening families, communities, and industry. As other districts and states look for role models, these successes provide a road map for similar programs to improve enrollment, retention, and graduation rates among historically underserved populations across the country.

- 1. [Seattle Promise Facts, Impacts and Successes](#)
- 2. Seattle Promise 2020-21 Fall to Summer Report
- 3. Seattle Promise Fall 2021-2022 Report
- 4. Seattle Promise Fall 2021-2022 Report
- 5. Seattle Promise Fall 2023 Memo Report
- 6. [Seattle Promise Facts, Impacts and Successes](#)
- 7. [Seattle Promise Facts, Impacts and Successes](#)
- 8. Seattle Promise Fall 2023 Memo Report

seattlecolleges.edu/promise

