

# Seattle's tuition-free community college program comes to the rescue during the pandemic

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1 of 2 | Karla Franco Fierro is a first-year nursing student at Seattle Central College and a scholarship recipient through the... (Bettina Hansen / The Seattle Times)



By Joy Resmovits  
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Two years ago, Seattle voters overwhelmingly approved an education levy giving the city's public high-school graduates two years of free community college.

But just as the program was gearing up to start its first year at full capacity, the pandemic hit.

Schools shut down. And the recruitment and enrollment specialists stationed at each Seattle high school to raise awareness and help students apply could only work from home.

A summer session meant to help prepare students for college life? That had to be entirely redesigned.

And the students already enrolled in the program? They suddenly needed Wi-Fi, devices and a space to learn on their own.

And yet, in some ways, Seattle Promise couldn't have come at a better time. Despite the hurdles, the program has exceeded its pandemic-era enrollment projections. That's even as nationally, community colleges saw a 22% dip; statewide, community college enrollment is down 13.5% this year.

This fall, Seattle Promise counted 846 students, including 699 in their first year, and 147 in their second. That represents about one-third of Seattle Public Schools' class of 2020. And 62% are students of color.

"There's a pervasive narrative out there that some students don't want to go to college. Our students and data suggest that students overwhelmingly want to go to college," said Nicole Yohalem, opportunity youth initiatives director at The Community Center for Education Results, a nonprofit that provides data, research and other supports for schools in South King County. "They understand how critical some education post-high school is."

The initiative is one piece of the puzzle to get more Washington students into college. By any metric, a college degree makes it much easier to find stable work. And it's an idea that's been gaining traction nationwide: President-elect Joe Biden, whose wife, Jill, teaches English at Northern Virginia Community College, has promised to make two years of community college tuition-free for people of all ages. Though, of course, it's unclear how America will foot the bill.

## FAQ

### The Seattle Promise

Where can I learn more? Visit [seattlecolleges.edu/promise](https://seattlecolleges.edu/promise)

Who is eligible to apply now? Students who will graduate from Seattle Public Schools in spring 2021.

What does the Promise get me? Two years of community college tuition-free, or up to 90 credits, and student support.

How does the application process work? Check out [this video](#), where a student will walk you through it.

How many students are participating now? 846.

Beyond financial help, the Seattle Promise aims to help students persist through college, assisting them in preparing for classes and organizing their schedules. Thanks to the levy that funds the Seattle Promise, there's a caseworker for each 100 students — significantly higher than the Seattle Colleges' ratio of 500 to 700 students for every adviser.

"It feels positive that it doesn't seem like we've lost a bunch of students due to the pandemic," said Melody McMillan, Seattle Promise's senior executive director.

But some — inside and outside the program — say Promise has a way to go before it is truly equitable.

The program is limited to students in Seattle, while many lower-income students have moved south, said Yohalem; a [King County Promise](#) is in the works. At a time when vulnerable students face disruption, admissions are limited to just-graduated seniors.

And in pre-pandemic times, specialists were stationed evenly at each high school. Some critics suggest that it would have been smarter to put more recruiters in the lowest-income schools, rather than distributing them evenly across the city's high schools.

Program leaders say the city is assessing its fairness through its Racial Equity Toolkit process.

Access isn't enough. "If we can eliminate that financial side of it, we still know that students experience racism," said Brian Jeffries, policy director at the Washington Roundtable/Partnership for Learning. "They experience other barriers. We need to start turning our attention to that."

Still, schools can learn from the Promise's early glimmers of success. They show how community colleges, armed with extra resources, can recruit and support students who need all the credentials they can get as they prepare to enter a COVID-shaped workforce.

Just ask Karla Franco Fierro, an aspiring nurse who is always second guessing her grip on English.

### Remote college "is going great"

Speaking through the grogginess of a near all-nighter spent studying for a math quiz, Franco Fierro recently explained that although she was born in Seattle, her first language is Spanish. Fierro's parents moved here from Mexico, and the family spoke Spanish at home.

"The only time I talked in English was at school. My English wasn't perfect until 7th or 8th grade," said the first-year student at Seattle Central College. "I started to get better. Sometimes I do have trouble speaking English, but I try my best."

Franco Fierro's parents didn't go to college. Early on in her time at Nathan Hale High School, she knew she wanted to continue her education, but was scared off by the price tag. The Seattle Promise specialist at her school suggested she apply — all she had to do was graduate.

She got into other schools, but ultimately chose to start at Seattle Central — for financial reasons, and so she could spend more time with her mom.

She experienced the victory of a successful go at college admissions, followed by the letdown of learning that the experience would move from the campus to the cloud.

But to her surprise, she said, "It's going great." The best part, she said, is her "wonderful" teachers. She worried that they wouldn't understand her. But after her first day, she took up one instructor on their offer to talk one on one. "I told her a little bit about me, and how my English was sometimes not perfect," she said. She was told not to worry. We're here to help you out.

Other students feel that support, too. Patrick Mungai, a second-year student at Seattle Central College, plans to transfer to pursue his commercial pilot license. He credits his career path to the Seattle Promise specialist assigned to assist him, who asked questions like "When you were younger, were you curious about airplanes?"

Still, Mungai, who is from Kenya, said he struggles with online learning. "The teachers don't always explain too much online," he said. "That's a big problem for me."

And the temptation for procrastination, he said, is stronger at home.

### Adapting to all-online college

When the pandemic suddenly forced schools online, community college administrators delayed the start of spring classes to buy an extra week of planning.

First, they had to assess and upgrade their students' tech.

But the challenges were greater than that. "The environment they're in is a bigger issue," said Kurt Buttleman, the Seattle Community College system's vice-chancellor for academic and student success. "You're in a smaller apartment with 3 siblings and a mom who's trying to work from home; you can't do your classes because you're babysitting your brother."

Then, there were the incoming students, who had already connected with Seattle Promise staffers in person at their high schools. In May, the program set up a pop-up function on its website that invites students to connect with high school support staff.

In any other year, new students would attend an in-person Summer Bridge program to orient them to college life. The colleges changed the format this year, rejecting two packed days of online meetings. Promise staffers talked about what McMillan calls "academic tenacity," the idea that while school is hard, students have already overcome tough life challenges.

Staffers focused on surveying students, talked about learning outcomes and sent them packages with swag to keep them excited.

Instead of setting students up with a course catalog and an adviser, Promise administrators sent students a proposed course schedules based on their interests. They also added bonus workshops for students and their families.

They allowed students to drop in, virtually, at any time over a few weeks, to confirm or tweak their schedules.

Administrators upgraded their own technology. They now get alerts to let them know if students haven't regularly been signing into their learning portals. That tells them who needs help.

The Seattle Promise grew from a smaller initiative based at six Seattle high schools, called the 13th Year Scholarship, which used private donations to cover a year of tuition. In 2018, voters overwhelmingly approved the over-\$600 million [Families, Education, Preschool and Promise Levy](#), which grew the College Promise — and bought the class of 2019 a second-year tuition-free.



*Patrick Mungai, a second-year student from Kenya with Seattle Promise, is planning to transfer and become a commercial pilot. He also wants to learn the business side of aviation. He credits his career path to the Seattle Promise specialist assigned to assist him.*

Seattle Promise costs about \$5.7 million. Most of that comes from levy money. The initiative has raised an additional \$1 million in private money through a new foundation, said Kerry Howell, the Seattle Colleges' vice president for advancement.

The fundraising initially intended to make the Promise sustainable beyond its voter-determined shelf life of seven years. "What we're learning is that in the current fundraising environment ... people want to give money that is going to make a difference right now," said Howell.

The foundation will soon launch a new campaign to help update the colleges' infrastructure and facilities.

### Boosting college-going takes time

Changing patterns and perceptions about college-going requires a long-term behavioral shift.

The Promise, said Michael Meotti, executive director of the Washington Student Achievement Council, might be bucking enrollment trends because it has the benefit of a longer runway. "The message about Seattle Promise has been resonating around the community now for a few years," he said. "Last year, you had seniors and families hearing about it since eighth grade."

Boosting college-going is a long-term project. "People in privileged communities and families start hearing about college-going and assume they're going to college when they're in elementary school. That's not the case with the entire population," Meotti said. "You can't turn around the future ... by just telling them in 12th grade that it's free."

To change behaviors, assumptions and systems need to change, too.

"We need to ask families what their experiences are and not make assumptions," said Jeffries. "We've done a poor job ... in truly engaging with students, especially first-generation students."

Yohalem said that for the program to be more equitable, it should concentrate counselors at high schools with the greatest need, and expand eligibility beyond those who just graduated from high school or can enroll full time.

"We have to ask, 'Who gets boxed out of that kind of approach?' People who are working to contribute to the family income, raising children of their own," she said.

In other words, in its current form, Yohalem said, "While the Promise represents a huge step forward, it might fail a rigorous equity screen."

The city and Promise staff are weighing these concerns. It recently created an equity scholarship and a peer mentorship program. "We are working with students to be as flexible as possible and support them during the pandemic," Barb Childs, executive director of communications and recruitment, said in an email. "It has always been an option for students to request to take a quarter off due to life circumstances, including COVID related issues."

It is seeking ways to help current students take time off without losing their scholarships.

Said McMillan: "The pandemic invited us to be good listeners to our students, for us to be surveying them to see, what did they need?"

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