



Seattle Department of
Education & Early Learning

Seattle Promise Scholar Persistence & Advising Support

2020-2021 Process Evaluation Report Executive Summary

Conducted by:

The Seattle Department of Education and Early Learning

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Introduction

This report is intended to serve as a brief overview of the 2020-2021 Process Evaluation Report of Seattle Promise Scholar Persistence and Advising Support.

[Seattle Promise](#) provides graduates of Seattle Public Schools (SPS) with up to two years (or 90 free credits) of financial assistance and support services at any of the three Seattle Colleges (North Seattle College, Seattle Central College, and South Seattle College). Funded by the City of Seattle since 2018 through the [Families, Education, Preschool, and Promise \(FEPP\) Levy](#), Seattle Promise is a last-dollar scholarship program that covers remaining tuition costs after all other public funding or grants a student may be eligible for are applied. Scholars within the program from low-income households are also eligible to receive an Equity Scholarship, which provides funds for education-related expenses such as books, child care, food, transportation, and housing.

In addition to providing college access, Seattle Promise helps scholars navigate their college experience through its Retention Advising program. Beginning in the summer before they enroll in college, scholars receive ongoing support from teams of Retention Specialists, who are based at each of the three Seattle College campuses and work with a caseload of scholars at a maximum student-to-staff ratio of 100:1. Scholars are required to meet with their Retention Specialist a minimum of once per quarter but may seek out more frequent and in-depth support as needed. Scholars must meet quarterly eligibility requirements to remain in the program and receive scholarship support.

Seattle Promise enrollment has grown steadily over the past three years, and the number of scholars enrolled in fall 2020 was 835 (690 first-year scholars and 145 second-year scholars). However, nearly half (46%) of Seattle Promise scholars who began the program in 2018 or 2019 exited after one year, and only 22% graduated by the time they completed the two-year program.¹ The three-year graduation rate of scholars who began college in Seattle Promise is above the national average for full-time community-college students (37%, compared to 28%²), but there remains room to improve persistence within the program.

Key Terms

In this report, the term **persistence** refers to scholars continuing their college process through to degree completion (in this case, an associate degree or certificate earned at one of the Seattle Colleges). The term **retention** refers to scholars remaining in the Seattle Promise program.

¹ Source: Seattle Promise Administrative Data (Milestone Data), 2020

² Source: National Center for Education Statistics, 2020

About the Process Evaluation

Over the course of the 2020-2021 school year, the Seattle Department of Education and Early Learning (DEEL) conducted a process evaluation to understand how DEEL and Seattle Colleges can continue raising Seattle Promise graduation rates and support scholars furthest from educational justice.³ A process evaluation is a tool that can be used to highlight early successes and determine how to improve practice, planning, and design of a program.

This process evaluation is the first in a planned cycle of Seattle Promise evaluations outlined in the FEPP Levy Implementation and Evaluation Plan. It uses both qualitative and quantitative data to gain insights into program implementation, student experiences, and short-term outcomes, to address the following questions:

- 1. How are scholars progressing in Seattle Promise during their first and second years, and what persistence challenges do they face?**
- 2. How are Seattle Promise Retention Specialists supporting scholar success?**

To answer these two evaluation questions, DEEL analyzed Seattle Promise administrative data (known as Milestone Data) and collected feedback from 215 Seattle Promise scholars and four senior Retention Specialists through interviews, focus groups, and surveys. Eighty percent of scholars who provided feedback for the evaluation identified as Black, Indigenous or People of Color and 50% identified as first-generation college students. Twenty-six percent of enrolled first-year scholars (N=145) and 30% of second-year scholars (N= 33) participated, representing all three Seattle Colleges.

Key Findings

Trends in Seattle Promise Enrollment and Persistence

Before beginning data collection, DEEL conducted a review and analysis of Seattle Promise Milestone Data for context on the full Seattle Promise student body, including demographics, academic performance, and trends in enrollment, persistence, and completion. The following highlights emerged:

- Seattle Promise eligibility expanded in the 2019-2020 school year from six pilot high schools to all 17 SPS high schools, resulting in tripled enrollment between 2018 and 2020.
- A majority of Seattle Promise scholars during the first three years of the program identified as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.
- Asian and White scholars showed the highest completion rates between 2018 and 2020.
- An upward trend in Promise retention between 2018 and 2019 cohorts reversed after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Seattle Promise scholars were more likely than non-Promise SPS graduates to enter college with educational support needs (includes English Language Learners and students who did not meet grade level SBA math and English standards) and nearly half enrolled in developmental courses in college.

³ A third-party external evaluator will be engaged for evaluation of graduation and other long-term outcomes in Year 5 or 6 of the FEPP Levy.

How are Seattle Promise scholars progressing during their first and second years?

Overall, more than 8 in 10 scholars surveyed were satisfied with their Seattle Promise experience and felt they had the financial support they needed. Fewer felt welcomed at their college (71%) or that they had the necessary support to succeed academically (69%). In addition to financial support, academic progress and social integration are important contributors to college student persistence.

85% of scholars were satisfied with their overall experience in Seattle Promise.		
 82% had enough financial support to attend college	 69% had enough support to succeed academically	 71% felt welcomed at their college

The majority of Seattle Promise scholars reported an intent to transfer, and many sought out Seattle Promise as a supportive bridge between high school and a four-year institution. However, scholars experienced a variety of persistence barriers that affected their progress toward a postsecondary degree (see Figure E1):

- Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) and full-time enrollment⁴ were the most challenging program requirements for scholars to maintain, impacting their ability to remain eligible for Promise scholarships. Full-time enrollment was more challenging for scholars who were struggling academically, experiencing personal hardship, or enrolled in high-credit STEM courses.
- Seattle Promise provides scholars with two years (up to 90 credits) of support to attend college. For many scholars, 90 credits were insufficient to obtain a degree and transfer, especially for those struggling academically or undecided about their career goals.
- Scholars entering college with developmental course placements found it more difficult than their peers to meet the SAP eligibility requirement and complete a degree within the 90-credit funding limit.
- The top personal persistence challenges participants reported were remote learning, indecision about career goals, and pressures related to family and employment.
- Lacking flexible leave options or a pathway back to Promise after losing eligibility created a persistence barrier for those who struggled with full-time enrollment or needed to leave college temporarily for personal reasons.

Figure E1: Top Seattle Promise Persistence Barriers Identified in Scholar Surveys and Focus Groups

Structural Persistence Barriers	Personal Persistence Barriers
1. Full-Time Enrollment Requirement <i>Challenging for 49% of scholars</i>	4. Remote Learning <i>Cited as a progress barrier by 43% of scholars</i>
2. Satisfactory Academic Progress Requirement <i>Challenging for 37% of scholars</i>	
3. 90-Credit Funding Limit <i>27% of scholars needed more than 90 credits to complete degree and transfer requirements</i>	
	5. Competing Priorities <i>42% struggled to juggle work & family needs</i>
	6. Indecision about Career Interests and Goals <i>30% felt indecision affected college progress</i>

⁴ SAP requires scholars to maintain a 2.0 GPA and not drop or fail classes. Full-time enrollment requires a minimum of 12 credits each quarter.

How are Seattle Promise Retention Specialists supporting scholar success?

In focus groups and surveys, scholars provided detailed feedback about their experiences with Seattle Promise advising. Key findings from their feedback are as follows:

- Ninety-three percent of scholars surveyed were satisfied with Seattle Promise advising, and two thirds agreed that the support they received had increased their understanding of their academic strengths and improved their readiness for the rest of their college and career journey.
- Scholars surveyed found Seattle Promise advising most helpful with course registration, academic planning, and meeting eligibility requirements (see Figure E2), but 73% demonstrated a need for increased support in other areas. The top needs scholars identified were assistance with transferring, academic performance, career development, extra financial assistance and mental health counseling.
- Eighty-four percent of surveyed scholars were able to access Retention Specialists when needed, but feedback from scholar focus group participants suggests that Retention Specialists sometimes lacked the capacity to provide the responsive and in-depth support they needed.

Figure E2: Scholar Feedback about Seattle Promise Retention Advising



Eligibility and Enrollment Support

Registering for classes, academic planning, filling out financial aid paperwork, general support meeting Seattle Promise eligibility requirements

95% of scholars found Retention Specialist support in this area to be helpful.



Transfer and Career Support

Transfer planning, support with transfer applications, career planning, connecting to job and internship opportunities

86% of scholars found Retention Specialist support in this area to be helpful.



General Student Success

Advice about how to adjust to college, time management and study skills, finding support needed to succeed in classes, dealing with stress at school or at home.

81% of scholars found Retention Specialist support in this area to be helpful.

Source: Seattle Promise Current Scholar Survey, 178 respondents, administered February 2021

Opportunities to Improve Scholar Persistence

The suggested strategies listed below have been identified by Seattle Promise scholars and staff to mitigate scholar persistence barriers and promote equitable postsecondary outcomes for scholars furthest from educational justice.

- 1. Adjust Seattle Promise Structure and eligibility requirements to limit program retention barriers.**
Suggested strategies include expanding part-time enrollment and temporary leave options and extending financial support beyond 90 credits.
- 2. Add scholar supports to promote degree completion and long-term post-secondary success.** Strategies may include strengthening academic supports to reduce the need for developmental courses, providing Promise-specific career development and transfer advising, and improving access to emergency financial assistance and mental health counseling.
- 3. Strengthen Seattle Promise Advising Capacity to support scholars furthest from educational justice.**
Approaches to consider include lowering scholar-to-staff ratios, adding administrative support for Retention Specialists, and introducing an advising and persistence data tracking system.