

# The Seattle Times

FRIDAY, APRIL 2, 2021

## NORTHWEST

# Seattle Promise sees record applications despite pandemic



ALAN BERNER / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Manny Dubinsky, a senior at Middle College High School, is planning to attend the Seattle Maritime Academy later this year through the Seattle Promise program. He is one of 2,100 seniors who applied to the Promise program this year.

### EDUCATION LAB

By ELISE TAKAHAMA  
*Seattle Times staff reporter*  
Growing up, Manny Dubinsky wasn't sure he wanted to go to college. He had faced some social anxieties early in high school, which he thought might follow him to college, and he didn't want to end up buried in student debt.

"It kind of freaked me out at a young age," said 19-year-old Dubinsky, a senior at Seattle's Middle College High School. "I thought, 'I don't need to go to college to have a job.'"

Then he signed up for a summer course at the Seattle Maritime Academy, a program run by Seattle Central College that offers certificate programs for students who want to pursue a career in the maritime industry — including in passenger transportation, fishing and seafood processing, international trade and military operations.

### HIGHER EDUCATION | Leaders of the tuition-free community college program think that many students were drawn to the idea of postsecondary stability.

"After that summer, I was really curious," he said. "I was like, 'Maybe I could learn more. Maybe I could turn this into something.'"

When he heard about the Seattle Promise, the city's tuition-free community college program funded by taxpayers through Seattle's Families, Education, Preschool and Promise Levy, he knew it was an opportunity he couldn't let pass him by. With his father's help, he applied to the program this spring, choosing to continue his education at the maritime academy, located in Ballard.

Dubinsky is one of 2,100 seniors — more than 50% of Seat-

tle Public Schools' class of 2021 — who applied to the Promise program this year, reflecting a 19% increase from last year, according to state data. Of those, about 66% were students of color, said Melody McMillan, executive director of the Seattle Promise program.

The numbers are much higher than the program's pandemic-era enrollment projections, which Promise staff thought might be affected by the nationwide hit on community college enrollment numbers; community colleges saw about a 13.1% drop in enrollment in the fall of 2020, according to Inside Higher Ed.

At Seattle Colleges — which is made up of three Seattle community colleges: North, South and Central — general student enrollment was down about 11%, said Chancellor Shouan Pan.

"It feels really real that the Promise program gave students structure," said Kurt Buttleman, vice-chancellor of academic and student success at Seattle Colleges. "It gave them hope for the future ... and it gave students joy. For many families, this was one of the few positives at different points in the last year that really helped."

While it's difficult to know how large a role the pandemic played in Seattle Promise's fall 2021 application numbers, McMillan said students who watched past seniors lose an in-person final year of high school might have realized they didn't know what the upcoming fall would look like — and that the Promise program offered

See > COLLEGE, A9

**"It gave them hope for the future ... and it gave students joy. For many families, this was one of the few positives at different points in the last year that really helped."**

KURT BUTTLEMAN

vice-chancellor of academic and student success at Seattle Colleges

# NORTHWEST

## < College

FROM A7

postsecondary stability that might not be guaranteed otherwise.

“Plans can change in an instant,” McMillan said. “... With students experiencing economic impacts in different ways [during the pandemic], Seattle Promise offers a fiscally responsible option for families who might have been impacted.”

Though application numbers were higher than last year’s, the outreach process was difficult this year because students were taking classes remotely, she said. Promise staffers worked with the district to schedule an appointment with all seniors to discuss their postsecondary options, and sent frequent reminders to make sure they didn’t miss it.

The program also offered several application workshops — interpreted in multiple languages — in an attempt to make the process more accessible, McMillan said.

Building relationships with students, however, was still tricky during a pandemic school year. Promise staffers are currently working to help students complete their financial aid applications, which are required in order to first see how much federal aid a student qualifies for. Staffers are also thinking of ways to prepare the incoming freshmen and eliminate any learning gaps before

they step onto campus in the fall, Buttleman said.

Ted Dubinsky, Manny’s father, said he’s looking forward to seeing his son get a hands-on learning experience through the academy.

“It provides a lot of relief to have a plan of where he’s going to go that will end up employing him,” he said. He added that his son has already gotten a job offer, contingent on his graduation from the academy.

“I would certainly encourage a lot of kids to do this,” he said.

The Promise program launched in 2018, after Seattle voters overwhelmingly approved the Families, Education, Preschool and Promise Levy, which grew the College Promise and gave the city’s public high school graduates two years’ of free postsecondary education. It started as a smaller initiative based at six Seattle high schools, called the 13th Year Scholarship, which used private donations to cover a year of tuition.

The program is mainly funded by the levy, with some help from private and public partnerships through the Seattle Colleges Foundation.

The free college Promise model has been praised by education experts and has grown in popularity throughout the country, including in New York, California, Michigan and Oregon.

“More coordinated efforts between high schools and

colleges for students making the transition to postsecondary is really critical,” said Nicole Yohalem, opportunity youth director at the Community Center for Education Results, a nonprofit that works to close educational opportunity and achievement gaps in South King County.

In a 2019 CCER survey of more than 7,000 South King County and South Seattle students, 96% said they want to continue their education after high school, even though less than a third were earning a college degree or career credential by their mid-20s.

The same survey conducted this year found similar results, despite indications that the pandemic might have an impact on college choices. This year, about 95% of students surveyed said they wanted to pursue postsecondary options, which can include a four-year degree, a two-year degree, an apprenticeship or some college degree.

“Our students know that a postsecondary education is becoming a requirement for careers they want to aspire to ... or to a stable income,” said Alejandra Pérez, the college and career manager at CCER. “Who has been allowed to access what, who has been protected and who isn’t — it shows a massive amount of inequity based on race and class in our community. And a lot of our students come from families who have been directly

### About the series

Education Lab is a Seattle Times project that spotlights promising approaches to persistent challenges in public education. The Seattle Foundation serves as fiscal sponsor for Education Lab, which is supported by grants from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Amazon and City University of Seattle. For more, go to [seattletimes.com/education-lab](http://seattletimes.com/education-lab)

affected by this.”

Programs like Seattle Promise are critical in reminding parents and community members not only to encourage students’ aspirations, Pérez said, but also “actually believe them when they say they want to go to college.”

“It’s literally a promise,” she said. “Our students are able to have a path after high school even if they don’t know what they want to do. It can either be a safety net, or it can be a path you want to pursue. And those are just as valuable.”

In the past, critics have raised concerns that the program is limited to students in Seattle, though many lower-income students have moved south. Although the Seattle Promise program is limited to the city’s public-school students, a King County Promise is in the works to increase equity in the county’s historically underserved areas.

It’s not identical to the Seattle Promise and doesn’t offer a free-tuition guarantee, but the staff of the King County Promise program is searching for partners that could increase schools’ capacity to offer student advising around postsecondary

success, said Kyla Lackie, director of the Puget Sound College and Career Network.

The application process for possible partners will be built out later this year, Lackie said. Hopefully, she said, the partnerships will officially launch in the fall of 2022.

“The model is that school districts, colleges and community organizations who are interested in forming a Promise partnership will join up and apply,” she said. “... We’ve been thoughtful and intentional about, ‘How do we make it so Seattle Promise or another Promise program doesn’t stop at the Seattle city limits but is actually something more students around King County have access to?’”

In addition, the county’s program isn’t limited only to students who have just graduated from high school.

“Young people who have left high school but want to continue education can be part of it,” Lackie said.

She added, “With King County Promise, we’ve always been really [focused on] looking with an eye toward systems changes that will increase equity and practices and strategies that will support students. Many

of these strategies feel like they’re right on time.”

In Seattle, Promise leaders are constantly fine-tuning their model.

For example, Barbara Childs, executive director of communications and recruitment, said the team is currently looking at potentially expanding its equity scholarships, which currently offer \$500 per quarter to eligible students for non-tuition expenses, such as books, child care and housing. Officials are also discussing the idea of completion scholarships for students — for those who might need more than 90 credits to complete a degree — and expanded mentoring for students of color, she said.

“We want these students, all 2,100 of them, to see for themselves how smart and brilliant and incredible they are, and help them uncover for themselves the potential they have,” Childs said.

Dubinsky, who plans to start classes at Seattle Maritime Academy either this summer or fall, said he’s looking forward to learning more about an industry he’s never had a chance to explore.

“I’m really grateful to have [the Promise program],” he said. “... There’s going to be a whole lot more to learn about next year ... but I just know this is a big opportunity and I’m going to try and make the most of it.”

Elise Takahama: 206-464-2241 or [etakahama@seattletimes.com](mailto:etakahama@seattletimes.com); on Twitter: @elisetakahama.