

RETENTION OUTCOMES FOR TWO-YEAR COLLEGE GRANT-ELIGIBLE STUDENTS: SERVED AND NOT SERVED BY THE WASHINGTON STATE NEED GRANT IN 2017-18

The State Need Grant (SNG) has been Washington state's largest need-based financial aid program for low-income students. The year 2007-08 was the last year in which it was funded sufficiently to serve nearly all (98 percent) of eligible students. From 2010-2018, up to 30 percent of eligible students were unserved. In 2013, we first studied the differences in student persistence impacted by the unmet financial need between served and unserved students who enrolled in community and technical colleges in 2012ⁱ. This research brief updates our first report for 36,600 SNG eligible students enrolled in 2018ⁱⁱ. Seventy-eight (78) percent of these students were served and 22 percent were unserved. Our key findings are consistent with our first report in that served students have more of their total financial need met, therefore reducing hardship and subsequently resulting in higher fall-to-spring quarter retention compared to unserved students.

The 2019 State Legislature established the Washington College Grant (WCG) program to replace the State Need Grant. The WCG secures funding for all eligible students. In light of this support, we go back to the last year in which students were nearly fully served, which was 2007-08. We identify a key difference for fall quarter enrollment (as much as 19 percentage

points in a given year) between first-year and second-year year students. Addressing this difference for even more first-year/first-time college students could benefit college completion. Students who start in fall quarter and not later in the year have as much as 9 percentage points higher completion for all students and 15 percentage point higher completion for transfer students.

The State Need Grant substantially lessens financial hardship for served versus unserved students.

Student financial need is calculated based upon college tuition and books and other living expenses compared to income. Federal and state grants are the primary means for meeting unmet need for aid-eligible students. In our first report, we studied students who were full-time for the full year in the served and unserved groups. We found that the State Need grant met 17 percent of students' financial need and that served students had a substantially higher percent of their total need met by this additional state aid. In 2018, our most recent year, we had a similar finding as the SNG met 19 percent of need for full-time, full-year served students compared to unserved (see Table 1).

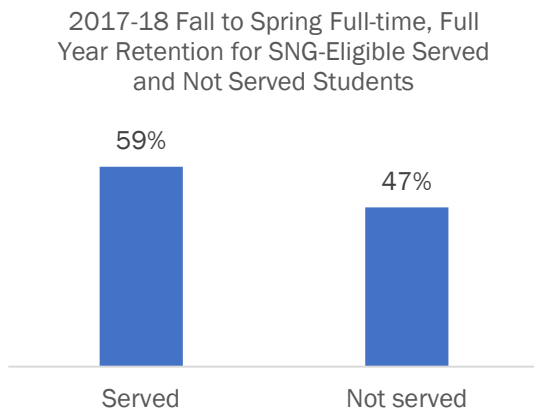
Table 1.

Served vs Unserved	Average Student Need	Average total financial aid	Average total SNG	% of need met by total aid	% of need met by SNG
No	\$16,200	\$8,800	0	54%	0%
Yes	\$17,100	\$12,200	\$3290	71%	19%

Eligible students served versus not served have substantially higher fall to spring retention.

In our first report we looked at fall to spring retention/completion and found it was 12 percentage points higher for full-time, full-year served versus unserved students. We repeated our analysis for 2018 and discovered similar findings (see Figure 1).

Figure 1.



SNG-eligible students, first-year students are less likely to begin in fall and more likely to start later in the year than second-year students.

In our analysis we use fall-to-spring retention as a key performance indicator during the academic year for measuring students on track and on time to complete. We reviewed 2007, the last year in which the SNG was nearly fully able to serve all eligible community and technical college students to look for similar patterns. Seventy-nine (79) percent of all students served started in fall term. Of those, the vast majority (80 percent) enroll full-time.

Disaggregating these served students by first or second year, we see that the share of all served students that started in fall term is substantially lower for all first-year students (70 percent

compared to 89 percent for all second-year students). For both first-year and second-year students enrolled in fall, the percent enrolled full-time is close to 80 percent.

Coming forward to our most recent year, we find a far higher share of all students who start in fall (89 percent), but still see a substantial difference between first-year and second-year students in shares that start in fall (82 percent vs 94 percent, respectively).

First-year, first-time students who start in fall have higher completion rates than students who start later in the year. The overall difference in certificate or degree completion within four years can be as much as 9 percentage points for all students (26 percent vs. 17 percent) and for transfer students' degree completion as much as 15 percentage points (26 percent versus 12 percent).

College practices in onboarding first-year students may be a bigger reason than student characteristics or external factors for increasing the likelihood a student will start in the fall and thereby increase the number of students retained.

These differences between first-year and second-year students' likelihood for enrolling in fall are relatively the same for students regardless of their family aid status (dependent and independent), or other characteristics. Differences persist year after year through different circumstances in the economy, the largest external factor on college enrollment. Therefore, this suggests that something other than student characteristics, or external factors are at play for the difference in share of all first-year versus all second-year students who enroll in fall.

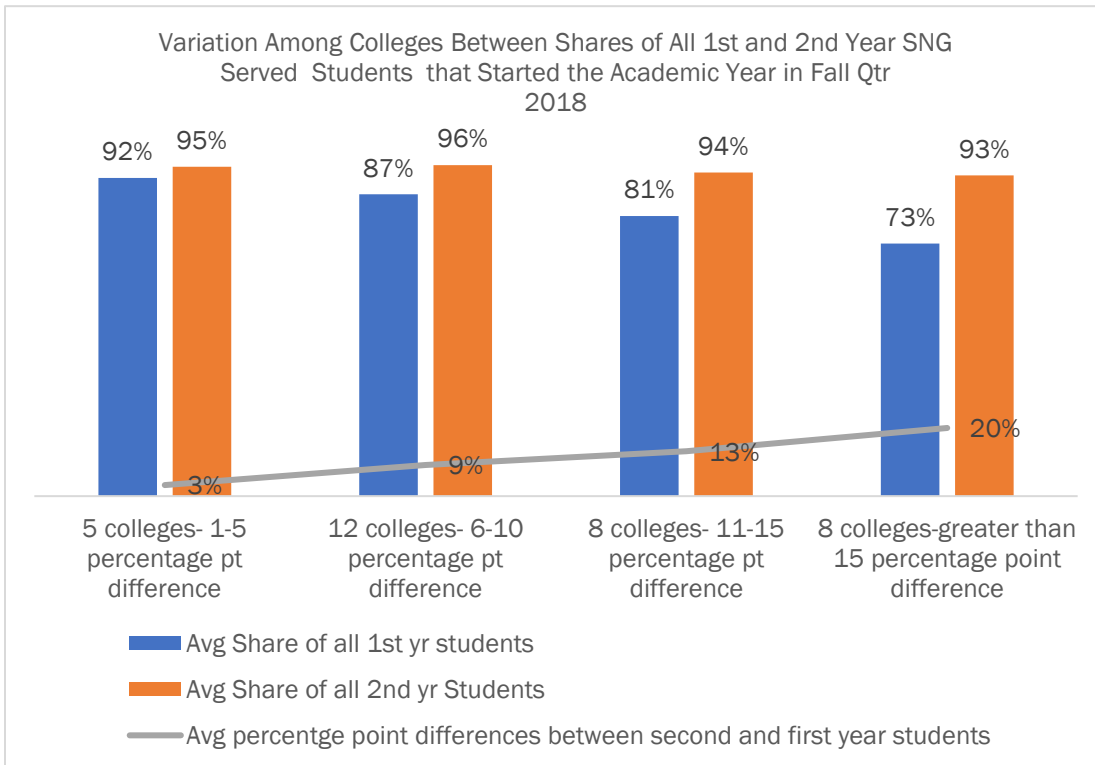
Individual differences among colleges in percentage point spreads between their shares of

first-year and second-year students starting in fall suggest that colleges' internal practices may be a factor. For 2018, among colleges, the percentage point difference between each colleges' second and first-year share of students that enroll in fall ranges from virtually no difference (1 percentage point) to a very large difference (as much as 25 percentage points) (see Figure 2). No college in any year over a twelve-year period exhibited a higher fall start enrollment share for first-year students compared to second-year. We also observed within the same college the differences in fall start can vary substantially from year to year, suggesting that practice may not be being consistently implemented within a college.

What next- pay attention to fall start metric for first year students.

The new Washington College Grant removes a significant hurdle to serving grant eligible students. Taking advantage and demonstrating effectiveness will depend on completing more students. As colleges look to both increase completions and manage enrollments, more predictable course and program schedules for students will be an important tool and fall starts will undoubtedly be a primary focus.

Better managing fall starts for first-year students can reduce attrition and increase the number of students retained through to completion. Percentage of first-time, first-year students who start in fall is an important metric for colleges to track- year to year within a college.



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ⁱ https://www.sbctc.edu/resources/documents/colleges-staff/research/financial-aid-research/resh_rpt_13_1_need_grant_eligible_students.pdf

ⁱⁱ Our dataset for this brief was graciously provided by the Washington Student Achievement Council using the State Need Grant Eligibility file. The same data source was provided for the earlier report. One difference however, is that the earlier dataset allowed us to match back to our own completion files. Therefore in that brief, we measure fall to spring retention and completion. The recent dataset was completely de-identified, limiting our metric to fall to spring retention.